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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 31 October 2022

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to today's business, I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in expressing our horror at the attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Paul is a stalwart support for Speaker Pelosi and I enjoyed getting to know him at the G7 Speakers' conference in Chorley. All our thoughts and prayers are with Speaker Pelosi, Paul and their family. The incident demonstrates once again that we can never rest in our mission to keep parliamentarians, their families and their staff safe.

I can now announce the arrangements for the elections of the Chairs of the Education and Transport Committees—I think they have already started. Nominations for both elections will close at noon on Tuesday 15 November. Nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, Table Office and Public Bill Office. Following the House's decision of 16 January 2020, only Members of the Conservative party may be candidates in either election. If there is more than one candidate for either election, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 16 November between 11 am and 2.30 pm in the Aye Lobby.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cold Weather Payments

1. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the criteria for cold weather payments. [901910]

Mr Speaker: Welcome, Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also associate myself with your remarks regarding Paul Pelosi and the Speaker in the United States. Our thoughts are with them both.

It is a huge honour to stand here as the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. In so doing, I pay tribute to all those who have preceded me, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who was an outstanding Secretary of State and also an outstanding Minister of State for disabled people.

The cold weather payment's design ensures that support reaches those most vulnerable. The energy price guarantee is supporting millions of households with energy costs from now until April 2023. This is on top of the cost of living support worth more than £37 billion for around 8 million households on means-tested benefits.

Nick Smith: Mr Speaker, may I associate myself with your remarks about the Pelosi family?

I congratulate the right hon. Member on his appointment. The £25 cold weather payment rate has not been updated since 2008. In today's money, it should be worth £37. Parts of Blaenau Gwent are more than 1,000 feet above sea level, and the constituency itself is one of the most deprived in the UK. Will the Secretary of State look again at the criteria for this scheme? Surely areas with bad weather, higher energy costs and lower incomes should get a fairer deal.

Mel Stride: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question, because these are very important payments. They are automatic, as he will know. Typically, they are received within 14 days and they are targeted at those who are most vulnerable. His point about the particular local conditions and the elevation of parts of his constituency are well made and I would be very happy to have further discussions with him about that. I should point out though that I believe there are 72 different weather stations to serve as reference points for different temperatures, so it may be that there is one very close to the area he describes.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. Will he tell the House what progress his Department is making to increase the uptake of pension credit, which means that more vulnerable elderly people will be eligible for cold weather payments?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right to raise this very important benefit, pension credit. He will be aware that the Department has been fully engaged in encouraging pensioners who will qualify to take up this benefit, and it is important that they do, because it is worth more than £3,000 a year and it is a gateway benefit for other benefits in turn. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who has done a great deal to push greater uptake, including a week of effort back in June when the uptake increased by 275% in that week.

Economically Inactive People

2. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce the number of people who are economically inactive. [901911]

3. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the level of economic inactivity in the labour market. [901912]

19. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce the number of people who are economically inactive. [901928]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The labour market has recovered strongly since 2020, with payroll employment up on the pre-pandemic level in all 12 regions of the United Kingdom. We have comprehensive support in place to help people to find, progress and stay in work, with additional support for groups we know are more likely to be inactive, such as those aged 50-plus and people with a disability.

Sally-Ann Hart: Work is the best route out of poverty, and it is concerning that claimants of, and public spending on, working-age benefits have increased significantly since 2019. There is more that the Government can do beyond the conditionality regime, so can the Secretary of State confirm that implementing universal support, which is designed to help those facing barriers to work and to overcome the complex challenges holding them back, will be considered?

Mel Stride: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that work is the best route out of poverty, and in that regard I commend her for her private Member's Bill, which the Department is pleased to support. Our low unemployment rate demonstrates our extensive support for those moving into work; universal support has been replaced, as she may know, by Help to Claim, which provides tailored support to individuals making a universal credit claim across England, Scotland and Wales.

Daniel Zeichner: The economy is plagued by labour shortages, from care to hospitality. On Saturday, 200 bus services in Cambridge were cancelled because of a lack of drivers, leaving health workers unable to get to and from their places of work. After a decade of zero-hours and short-term contracts, it is no surprise that people want out—they do not want to be at work because it is too tough. Is it not time for the Government to recognise that good workplace rights are not just good for workers, but good for employers and good for us all?

Mel Stride: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. He is right to raise the issue of economic activity. That will be a major focus of mine as Secretary of State: we have 9 million people who are economically inactive, and we desperately need to get as many as we can into the workforce, not least because under this Government we have very low unemployment, very high levels of employment and 1.25 million vacancies in the economy.

Stephen Crabb: I congratulate my right hon. Friend and send him my best wishes for his time in this important job. May I suggest that he has a look at some research published earlier this year by the Prince's Trust, which found that there are hundreds of thousands of young people not in education, employment or training, many of whom are economically active? They want to work, but many of them are living with physical or mental disabilities. Does he agree that the right support would enable them to stay in touch with the labour market and prevent patterns of worklessness from setting in at a very young age?

Mel Stride: I recognise the great work that my right hon. Friend did as a Secretary of State. There are 820,000 young people out of work and not in full-time education, and he is right that there are many things

this Government can do, and indeed are doing, with our youth offer. That includes our youth employment programme, youth employability coaches and 150 youth hubs across Great Britain.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman, who is one of my neighbours, to his new post and congratulate him on his appointment. What estimate has he made of the number of people who would like to work but currently cannot do so, because they are among the hundreds of thousands waiting on record-long NHS waiting lists?

Mel Stride: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his warm words. That is a question that would probably be best answered by the Department of Health and Social Care, and I would be happy to look into that for him. We know that there is a long tail of people who would otherwise like to work but who are long-term sick—some 2.5 million in total—and, to go back to my earlier answer, it will be a prime focus for our Department, working with the Health Department, to see how we can assist and support them back into the workplace.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I wish my right hon. Friend and his team every success in leading this vital mission in Government, helping people into work and protecting the most vulnerable. As he says, with more vacancies than people unemployed, and with 9 million people—and rising—economically inactive, does he agree with British business that labour shortage is one of its greatest obstacles? What is his plan to unlock the talents of those who have not recently looked for work?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend's analysis is entirely right. We have an overheated labour market and a high number of vacancies, and the key issue that businesses up and down the country constantly raise is a lack of staff to be taken on. Broadly speaking, economic inactivity breaks down into several sectors, although I will not go through all of them; we have already touched on the 2.5 million long-term sick, and we have 900 disability employment advisers within the Department for Work and Pensions. We also have 1.2 million people who retired early, for whom we do have some schemes, but we need to give further attention to coming up with new ways forward for that group.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): At last week's Work and Pensions Committee meeting on the plan for jobs and employment support, Tony Wilson from the Institute for Employment Studies highlighted the role of Scotland's local employability partnerships in providing tailored support that reflects local circumstances. In the light of recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showing that health-related economic inactivity in the working-age population has had its largest increase since the end of 2019, will the UK Government consider following Scotland's approach of providing more customised support and helping people into work, instead of the Department's punitive sanctions regime?

Mel Stride: We already have a local skills improvement plan, but I would be delighted to listen to the hon. Lady's thoughts; we are always happy to share best practice, and to learn from her experience and that of the devolved Administration in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State and all the new Ministers to their positions. We have heard Conservative Ministers, not least the many Prime Ministers we have had in recent months, crowing about low unemployment, but the new Secretary of State will know from his time chairing the Treasury Committee that sometimes it is important to look at the figures yourself. There are 1.2 million people unemployed in our country, but also 1.8 million inactive people who say they want a job. Taken together, that is a disaster for our country. I want to know what it is about years and years of Tory misrule that always leaves 3 million people on the scrapheap.

Mel Stride: I have taken a personal vow not to engage in too much Punch and Judy politics with the hon. Lady during Question Time, so I will not talk about what happens to unemployment when different parties get into power; I will leave that for another day. She is absolutely right about the key challenge around economic inactivity. That is why the Department doubled the number of new work coaches in the last two years; there are an additional 13,500 people working to support the exact people whom she rightly identified as needing that assistance to get into work. As I said, I intend to put considerably more energy into the whole issue of economic inactivity, and to bring announcements on the subject to the House in due course.

Universal Credit Sanctions

4. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of changes in the level of the sanction rate for universal credit between November 2021 and May 2022. [901913]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): No assessment has been made. Emergency measures brought in during covid meant that the sanctions rate was artificially low. We always expected the rate to increase when we reintroduced face-to-face appointments and conditionality in order to help fill record numbers of job vacancies.

Dan Carden: I am disappointed with that answer. The current high rate of universal credit sanctions is unprecedented. Right now, twice as many people on universal credit are being sanctioned and having their benefits cut as did before the pandemic, three years ago. At this very moment, families face the reality of hunger and freezing homes because of soaring food prices and energy bills, as well as rising rents. Instead of making things harder for those who are struggling, and punishing those on the lowest incomes, will the Minister commit to raising social security in line with inflation and end the sanctions regime, which will only inflict more hardship and homelessness this winter on those in areas such as mine?

Mims Davies: I am afraid that I do not agree. People are sanctioned only if they fail to attend appointments without good reason, and fail to meet the requirements that they have agreed to meet. Conditionality is an important part of a fair and effective welfare system. It is right that there should be a system to encourage claimants to take reasonable steps to prepare for and move into work. I reiterate that claimants with severe mental health or wellbeing conditions are not subject to work-related requirements or sanctions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Karen Buck.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has indicated that there will be a difference in tone in the Department. There is a way that he can demonstrate that. The Department conducted an examination of the effect of sanctions and conditionality that his predecessor refused to publish. He has the opportunity to allow us to have an informed debate in the Chamber on the effectiveness of sanctions. Will he now publish that report?

Mims Davies: Sanctions are incredibly important to support the work coach in doing their job. This really matters, because engaging with the work coach is important where there can be underlying issues—if an individual is a care leaver or there is something going on at home. Sanctions do not apply to all claimants. As I said earlier, if an individual has limited capability to work or there are issues around how they can work, work coaches will use their full discretion to ensure that people are supported, but not engaging is not the right option.

Cost of Living Payments: Isle of Wight

5. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the number of Isle of Wight residents who will receive the second cost of living payment. [901914]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Tom Pursglove): We published an impact analysis for the Social Security (Additional Payments) Bill, which estimated that, in the Isle of Wight constituency, 18,300 families are eligible for the means-tested benefit cost of living payment and 17,300 individuals are eligible for the disability cost of living payment.

Bob Seely: I congratulate all the Ministers on their new roles and thank the Minister for that information. Regarding the cost of living, what reassurances can the ministerial team give me that pensioners on the Isle of Wight, and indeed throughout Britain, will be looked after this winter, considering that they are on fixed incomes?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is always a passionate advocate for people on the Isle of Wight, raising the issues and concerns that are relevant to them. We have a Prime Minister who has consistently demonstrated that he is on the side of vulnerable people and hard-working people across the country. That will continue to be the case. We have put in place a £37 billion package of support to help with these cost of living pressures, and of course we always keep the appropriateness of that under review.

Jobseekers and People on Low Incomes: Skills

6. **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure jobseekers and people on low incomes develop the skills required for highly skilled and well-paid jobs. [901915]

15. **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure jobseekers and people on low incomes develop the skills required for highly skilled and well-paid jobs. [901924]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Our dedicated work coaches engage with claimants to determine what additional support they may need to enter or progress in work. Where skills gaps are identified, claimants will be encouraged to access skills-related employment programmes such as sector-based work academies, skills boot camps or appropriate local training provision.

Simon Baynes: My constituent in Clwyd South, Kerry Mackay, recently wrote to me saying:

“There’s lots of talk about getting people back into work and those on low incomes finding a better job, but I think the government is missing a trick by not highlighting how much they will help people, single mothers and mature students like me, to get a decent education and ultimately pull themselves out of poverty for good.”

Will the Minister advertise as effectively as possible how universal credit can support people like Kerry to study for their degrees?

Guy Opperman: We want to support our constituents like Kerry, and I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I suggest that he writes to me with the specific details, but I can assure him and Kerry that recipients of UC can take part in training without compromising their benefit entitlement. Generally, there are great efforts being made to ensure that people who want to get into work can do so.

Anna Firth: I welcome the new Secretary of State to his place, and the whole of his new Front-Bench team. I am sure that we can expect great things. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that apprenticeships and further education are a key way of upskilling our young people? Will he visit Southend West soon and meet some of our successful apprentices, such as Holly at Guardian Exhibition and Display in Eastwood, and Ipeco in Southend, which also offers fantastic apprenticeships?

Guy Opperman: All roads lead to Southend as far as I am concerned. My hon. Friend is proving to be a fantastic champion and successor of our good friend Sir David Amess. I would be delighted to visit. I welcome the great work of the companies she mentioned and believe very strongly that we need to improve skills through the package that we are taking forward.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): May I start by sending my condolences and thoughts to all those who were tragically killed in Seoul, South Korea, at the weekend? I am sure that we will all be thinking of them at this time.

Education, formal and informal, is vital to developing a highly skilled workforce. Adults with neurodivergences such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder may require personalised support with their learning. What assessment has the Minister made of the efficacy of the support currently in place, and what steps are the Government taking to improve it?

Guy Opperman: Skills and education are a devolved matter. I echo the hon. Lady’s worthwhile words about South Korea. Obviously, great work is being done in youth hubs in particular, which I recommend to her.

Universal Credit: Food Insecurity

7. **Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the impact of the level of universal credit on food insecurity. [901916]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): I begin by recognising the important work that the right hon. Gentleman carries out as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee and thank him for the co-operation that he showed me when I was a fellow Chair of a Select Committee. I look forward to appearing before his Committee before too long.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, universal credit is but one factor in addressing food insecurity. The Government have provided significant support with the £37 billion cost of living package.

Sir Stephen Timms: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment and warmly welcome him. We already have a date in the diary for him to come before the Committee and we look forward to that.

Current large-scale food bank dependence is shameful. It was up by 46% in August and September on a year previously, according to the Trussell Trust, and it is reported in the press today that hospitals are seeing a big rise in malnutrition cases. The family resources survey also says that food insecurity among universal credit claimants fell from 43% to 27% after the £20 a week uplift was introduced. Does not all that show how crucial it is that the Prime Minister keeps the promise he made as Chancellor to uprate benefits next April by 10.1%?

Mel Stride: I am not going to pre-empt my decision on the uprating of benefits or indeed the triple lock. We will need to wait until at least 17 November when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will come to the House with his autumn statement and those details will be known at that point.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the family resources survey. One statistic that caught my eye was that the percentage of households with UC claimants who are in food security rose from 57% in 2019-20 to 73% in 2020-21. Any element of food insecurity is too much—I recognise that—which is why this Government and this Prime Minister are absolutely determined to use whatever we have at our disposal to work on those figures and to improve them. That includes the various interventions that we have already discussed during these questions.

Cost of Living: Social Security Payments

8. **Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of social security payments in meeting the cost of living. [901917]

23. **Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of benefits in meeting increases in the cost of living. [901932]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): We have already taken decisive action to make work pay by cutting the universal credit taper rate to 55% and increasing UC work allowances,

which mean that on average low-income households have about an extra £1,000 a year. In addition to that, two cost of living payments, which total £650, are being paid to more than 8 million low-income households on UC, tax credits, pension credits and legacy benefits. There has also been extra help for pensioners and those on disability benefits. That totals more than £37 billion this year.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful for the Minister's answer, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned that if social security does not get uprated with inflation, it will be the

"largest permanent deliberate real-terms cut"

to the basic rate of social security by a British Government in history. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, that would push 200,000 children into poverty. Even the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights warns that it will mean that "lives will be lost". What will the Minister do to stop that?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I note that he will be visiting his Dumbarton Jobcentre Plus shortly, which I am sure will help him to see the range of interventions in jobcentres, as well as the benefits calculator and the cost of living interventions on gov.uk. I remind him that the Scottish Government have a range of powers, including the ability to provide their own welfare benefits to people in Scotland using existing reserved benefits. The Scottish Government can see how they would like to use their powers and budget themselves.

Alison Thewliss: Happy Hallowe'en, Mr Speaker. Many of my constituents have found social security payments inadequate, because they have not kept pace with the cost of living. For William Thompson and Anne McCurley, however, it is even more frustrating because they narrowly miss out on pension credits and all the passported benefits—Anne misses out by only £3 a week. Will the Minister review the cut-off so that as many people as possible can access the support that they badly need this winter?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for the point, and I have mentioned two particular websites that I think are incredibly important for people to make sure they get every single bit of help they need. There is always a cut-off point, which is very challenging. I understand there is a huge amount of work going on in her own community to support people, including getting people into work and progressing them, and working with local employers. Of course, the pensions issue is something that the Secretary of State has just answered and will be further updated on 17 November.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the answers she has already given for those people meeting the costs of living on social security payments. A big concern many of my constituents have is about the cost of energy over the course of the winter, and the Government have a plan for the next six months to support people. Can my hon. Friend give my constituents reassurance that that plan, when it comes towards its end, will be under review to see what ongoing support could be offered, if required?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter. I worked with the Prime Minister on the plan for jobs, and he has been very clear that he wants to protect the most vulnerable, which is why we are providing families with direct payments worth at least £1,200 over the winter. We will all look with interest at what the Chancellor does on the 17th.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Too many disabled people have been disproportionately hit by the cost of living crisis, with extra costs of over £600 a year. Sadly, we have seen too many unable to cope with this. The Information Commissioner ruled that the DWP unlawfully prevented the release of over 20 reports into the deaths of benefit claimants. We must be able to scrutinise whether the actions taken by the DWP were sufficient or timely enough to prevent the harms identified from happening again. So will the new Secretary of State agree to publish these and all other secret reports—and a yes or no would actually suffice?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I understand the Opposition have an interest in such reports. However, my role at the DWP is about people—helping people up and down the land—and that is what we are doing for people with disabilities. With the extra costs part of the disability payment, about 6 million will be helped by the extra one-off payment of £150, ensuring that we all across the DWP are focused on the most vulnerable.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I welcome the new ministerial team to their place. I hope to meet the new Secretary of State in early course; it was quite difficult to secure a meeting with some of his predecessors, unfortunately. The new Prime Minister spoke of the difficult decisions that will have to be made, but the real difficult decisions are those being forced on our constituents—people on low incomes struggling to afford the basics, pay their bills, heat their homes or feed their children. Let us not forget the reality of the tragic human cost of over a decade of Tory austerity, which urgently needs to end. Does the Minister agree that uprating benefits in line with inflation is not a difficult decision, but is instead the only moral course of action?

Mims Davies: That is not a matter for me, but I would like to reiterate at the Dispatch Box that the Government fully understand the pressures we are all facing. We all have constituents facing these matters, and it is absolutely right that we take that decisive action to support people with their bills. Members are talking as if we are not supporting people, but there is £37 billion of help with the cost of living, including the £400 of non-repayable discounts to eligible households provided by the energy bills support scheme. In addition to the benefits calculator and the cost of living webpage on gov.uk, I would ask people please to reach out to their councils. Members are talking this afternoon as if there is no help, and it is important that our constituents know that that is far from the case.

Women's State Pension Age: Additional Support

9. **John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): If he will take steps to provide additional support during winter 2022-23 to women affected by the rise in state pension age. [901918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): A wide range of support is available to those of state pension age and for those on low income who are entitled to pensioner benefits.

John McDonnell: Members across the House will have appreciated the sense of grievance and injustice from women born in the 1950s who were not given proper notice of the rise in the state pension age. The ombudsman has recognised this as maladministration, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), when he was the Prime Minister and leading the campaign in the 2019 general election, said he would address this matter. Since then, more of those women are now living in poverty and 200,000 of them have died, yet not a single Minister has met them since 2016. Is the Minister willing to meet a delegation from the WASPI campaign to talk about their plight and find a way forward?

Laura Trott: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and understand where he is coming from, but there is an ongoing investigation so it would be inappropriate for me to meet people at this stage.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister knows that in July 2021 the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found the DWP guilty of maladministration regarding state pension age increases. The PHSO also suggested that the Department could consider being proactive in remedying the injustice suffered by 3.8 million women, rather than waiting for its final conclusions. Given the ongoing cost of living crisis, does the Minister agree that now is the time for the Government to step up to the plate and agree fair and swift compensation for the women suffering that injustice?

Laura Trott: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman but I must repeat that I cannot comment where there is an ongoing investigation.

Pension Credit Claimants

10. **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What recent estimate he has made of the number of pension credit claimants. [901919]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): As of the latest public data of February 2022 there were 1.38 million pension credit claimants.

Rob Roberts: I welcome the new Minister to her place and hope she can continue the excellent work done by the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) in this area. Despite all that excellent work, however, take-up is still relatively low, and my constituency has 20% more

over-65s than the UK average. Will the new Minister meet me to discuss how we might be able to make pension credit at least in part an automatic benefit so that struggling pensioners can get the money they are rightly entitled to?

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point but it is difficult to enrol people automatically on pension credit given the data the Government hold. I am, however, keen to see how increased data sharing could be used to produce a larger number of claims.

Cost of Living Crisis: Support for Pensioners

12. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What support his Department is providing to pensioners during the cost of living crisis. [901921]

14. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What support his Department is providing to pensioners during the cost of living crisis. [901923]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): This winter more than 8 million pensioner households will receive an increased winter fuel payment; in addition, those eligible for pension credit will receive an extra £650. This Government will always support the most vulnerable.

Gerald Jones: Earlier this month I contacted approximately 6,000 people in my constituency who may have been eligible for pension credit, and about 200 people attended a local action day organised with my local citizens advice bureaux. Citizens Advice informs me that as of last week at least £200,000 has been accessed in take-up of pension credit and other benefits as a result of contacts on that day. So far the Department's action has been limited and half-hearted; the Government should put their money where their mouth is and pay pensioners what they are entitled to. With the information and data the Government have at their disposal, what further action will they take to increase pension credit take-up?

Laura Trott: I applaud the hon. Gentleman for the work he is doing in his constituency. This is an incredibly important matter; seven out of 10 people who are entitled to pension credit claim it and we want to drive that rate up. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) has done a huge amount of work on this and I intend to continue that in the Department.

Mr Dhesi: Irresponsible Conservative policies have meant pension funds needed three emergency bail-outs to the tune of billions of pounds, while the spiralling prices of energy, food and other essential items have meant millions of people will be facing a very difficult winter. Statistics from earlier this year, before the cost of living crisis worsened even further, showed that 20%, or well over 2 million, pensioners already lived in poverty, a dramatic increase from a decade ago. Why should pensioners trust this Government to help them through this mess when the reckless behaviour of Conservative Ministers has worsened their plight?

Laura Trott: I point the hon. Gentleman to our record: absolute pensioner poverty has gone down; real incomes have gone up. This Government are on the side of pensioners.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box and I welcome the work that the Government are doing to support pensioners, particularly on winter fuel costs in difficult times. However, many of my pensioners in Aldridge-Brownhills are anxious about the continuous rise in the cost of living. When can we have some clarity regarding the triple lock?

Laura Trott: I completely understand my right hon. Friend's question. However, that is a matter for the autumn statement, and I would not want to pre-empt that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I welcome the new Minister to her place. The last few weeks have been difficult and, at times, chaotic. The Government have crashed the economy and there has been a revolving door in Downing Street and Government Departments. After all that confusion, will the Minister take the opportunity to reassure the House that the Government are truly committed to the triple lock? Will she apologise to pensioners for the stress and uncertainty that the Government have caused through their repeated attempts to wriggle out of their manifesto commitment?

Laura Trott: I do understand the uncertainty, but we must wait for 17 November. However, the average state pension is £185 a week, which is about double what it was in 2010 when we took over.

Uprating of Benefits

13. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues, (b) the devolved Administrations and (c) other relevant stakeholders on uprating benefits in line with inflation. [901922]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (**Mel Stride**): I am currently conducting my statutory annual review of state pensions and benefit rates. The outcome of that review will be announced in due course.

Kenny MacAskill: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The Trussell Trust is reporting that 40% of universal credit claimants are skipping meals due to budgetary constraints. Does he accept that with the full energy crisis costs yet impacting them and, indeed, with winter still to arrive, it would be perverse if bankers' bonuses were to be uncapped while pension benefits were not to increase at least in line with inflation?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the various answers given from the Dispatch Box about the support that the Government are giving, particularly to those who are most vulnerable, across winter. In respect of food and food banks, that is pertinent. However, I am afraid that he will receive the same answer about when the House will come to know of the uprating that may be applied to pensions and benefits more generally,

and the pensions triple lock. That is a decision for me as Secretary of State, of course in conjunction with discussions with the Treasury, and those figures will be available at the time of the autumn statement on 17 November.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's commitment that compassion will be at the heart of Government. It is so important that we support the most vulnerable in society. With that in mind, does my right hon. Friend agree that we can show that compassion and support by uprating benefits in line with inflation?

Mel Stride: I am afraid that, unfortunately, I need to refer my hon. Friend to my previous reply.

Universal Credit: Housing Element

16. **Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): If he will review the calculation of the housing element of universal credit. [901925]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (**Guy Opperman**): In April 2020, the local housing allowance rate in Epsom and Ewell increased to the 30th percentile of local market rents. The Government further boosted LHA rates by £1 billion.

Chris Grayling: I congratulate the new ministerial team on their appointment. The challenge in a constituency such as mine in the south-east and inside the M25 is that, even when the Government are spending a substantial amount of money on housing support, the local housing allowance simply does not enable people to get into private rented accommodation. Will my hon. Friend and his colleagues look again at how local housing allowance is structured and allocated across the country to try to ensure that it works everywhere?

Guy Opperman: My right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on this issue. He will be aware, though, that it cannot be looked at in isolation and that we must look at the additional support available such as discretionary housing payments through the local authority—they are worth up to £1.5 billion overall across all local authorities—as well as the cost of living support package of £37 billion-plus and the household support fund, which again is administered by local authorities.

Supporting People into Work

17. **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support more people into work. [901926]

25. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to help more people enter the workforce. [901934]

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (**Guy Opperman**): Unemployment is at 3.5%. That is the lowest in nearly 50 years. We have recruited an extra 13,000-plus job coaches and are taking specific action to ensure that we are rolling out our new in-work progression offer.

Jane Hunt: Loughborough jobcentre is doing a great job in supporting new and fledging business owners to become gainfully self-employed. What steps is the Department for Work and Pensions taking across the country to help support small business owners and to support the growth and development of the self-employed across the UK?

Guy Opperman: I thank the staff at Loughborough jobcentre. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: they are doing an outstanding job and I know they usually hold a very successful jobs fair. On the self-employed nationwide, universal credit gives them a 12-month start-up period to grow their earnings to a sustainable level. We believe that is the way forward.

Mr Robertson: To try to help fill the very many vacancies that exist in a number of industries, will the Minister have discussions with fellow Ministers in the Treasury to see if more changes to the tax system can be brought in to really make sure that work does pay?

Guy Opperman: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. It is absolutely the case that we are working on that. I highlight in particular the taper rate, which was reduced from 63% to 55%, but also the additional work we are putting into job coaches, the sector-based work academy and the increased work allowance, which makes sure that individuals get an extra £1,000.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of the things preventing people from getting back into work is waiting for operations, thanks to the massive NHS backlog. One thing making that even worse is that lots of doctors are retiring early because they are worried about the pension cap issue. When will the Government rectify that issue, so that more doctors can stay in the profession, more people can get their operations quickly and more people can get back into work?

Guy Opperman: I appreciate that this is a genuine issue. The Treasury is looking specifically at the high earners pension situation. I am sure the Treasury will get back on that very shortly.

Topical Questions

T2. [901936] **Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): I am honoured to have been appointed as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. I can inform the House that I have two early key missions: to focus on those who are economically inactive, as I have been suggesting already at the Dispatch Box; and to pursue with vigour the Prime Minister's personal commitment to us being a compassionate, caring Department supporting the most vulnerable, which, at the end of the day, is a hallmark of a civilised society.

Luke Pollard: I welcome the Secretary of State, a fellow Devon MP, to his position. Will he agree to meet me and Barnardo's to discuss the concerns of care leavers from Devon, whom I recently hosted in Westminster,

who without a rent guarantor cannot afford a deposit on a rental property of their own. Will he consider a pilot to help those young people get a better start in life?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend—I will call him an hon. Friend, certainly—and colleague from Devon for his question. I know of the excellent work he has been carrying out with Barnardo's in that area. I would be delighted to meet him and Barnardo's, and whoever else he feels appropriate, to discuss those issues.

T5. [901940] **Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** We heard earlier about those who are economically inactive. Figures show that in the west midlands, including in my constituency of Rugby and Bulkington, over-50s have been less likely to return to the workplace after covid than their younger counterparts. Businesses in all sectors tell me just how badly those workers are needed. What initiatives is the Department working on to get more older people back into work? Will the Minister join me in coming along to an over-50s fair we are holding in Rugby in the new year?

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I would, of course, be delighted to go to Rugby and I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend is holding an over-50s fair. He will be aware that the Department is rolling out 50 PLUS: Choices and the mid-life MOT to ensure that those matters are addressed.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his post. I also welcome the new Ministers and welcome back returning Ministers. I listened carefully to the Secretary of State saying that he wants a compassionate approach, so may I press him further on the point that numerous Members have put to him? He will know that not sticking to the triple lock for pensioners will mean a real-terms cut in their pension of hundreds of pounds. He will know that not inflation-proofing universal credit will mean an average household will lose £450 and that a household with a disabled person in it will lose over £550. Why does he no longer agree with himself when he said, on 4 October, that this is

“one of those areas where the Government is going to have to think again”?

Mel Stride: I reassure the House that I always agree with myself. That is not the same thing as saying that I am always right, incidentally, but at least I am always consistent in that respect. We will have to wait—sorry, I should say that it is a pleasure to serve opposite the right hon. Gentleman and that I look forward to many months of constructive engagement with him.

It is very important that we do not overlook the huge amount that the Government are doing to target assistance at the most vulnerable. In the cost of living support package alone, there is £650 for 8 million of the most vulnerable households, £300 for pensioners on pension credit and £150 for those who have disabilities. That is very important.

Jonathan Ashworth: The Prime Minister tells us that we do not need a general election because the 2019 manifesto gives him and the Conservative party a mandate. Given that that manifesto committed to the triple lock, why can he not give pensioners the reassurance that they deserve? Let me ask him about a second point: can

he give a categorical assurance that, in the autumn statement, he will rule out means-testing personal independence payments, carer's allowance, attendance allowance and disability living allowance for children?

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman is inviting me, in a whole host of areas, to break with what has been a very long-standing and quite correct convention that Ministers simply do not provide a running commentary about what may or may not be in a major fiscal event. However, he has my personal assurance that when and as it is appropriate to pass him information of that kind, he will be the first to know.

T6. [901941] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Now then: last week in Parliament, I met a young lady called Florence who has Down's syndrome. She told me that she has five paid jobs and three voluntary jobs, because she is trying to get into the workplace, and she is coming across lots of barriers. Does the Minister agree that we should do more to help people with special educational needs, like Florence, to get into the workplace? What better place to start than right here in Parliament?

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Tom Pursglove): I strongly agree. Programmes such as the Access to Work scheme have supported the Government in meeting five years early their commitment to see a million more disabled people in work in the decade to 2027. We want to create more of those opportunities—in which spirit, I commend Florence for her determination. As a Government, we are determined to help her to succeed.

T3. [901938] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): Since I came to this place in 2019, I have worked with and fought the corner of all the women in Newport West who face discrimination due to their gender and age. Those WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—have shown incredible perseverance and tenacity over the years. Will the Minister set out the steps that are being taken to address this issue? If she cannot meet the women because of the ongoing investigation, will she meet me to discuss this important issue at the earliest opportunity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott): I am happy to meet the hon. Lady. I point out, however, that the state pension system corrects some of the historical inequalities of the previous system, producing considerably higher outcomes for women.

T8. [901943] **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): At Runnymede and Spelthorne citizens advice bureau, I recently met and was incredibly impressed by Becky and her superb team of staff and volunteers and the crucial support that they give to Runnymede and Weybridge residents, working alongside the Department for Work and Pensions. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking Becky and her fantastic team for the work that they do?

Guy Opperman: I echo and support what my hon. Friend says, and he is right to laud what Becky and her team are doing. He will be aware that over the past few years, Citizens Advice in England, Scotland, Wales and

Northern Ireland has done fantastic work and plays a hugely valuable role in rolling out the Help to Claim scheme across the United Kingdom.

T4. [901939] **Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment and welcome his team of Ministers on to the Treasury Bench. He will understand that lots of people, including many, many people in east Hull, work incredibly hard and incredibly long hours, but despite all their efforts still rely on benefits. Does he agree that it would be incredibly mean if the Chancellor of the Exchequer was now to row back on the commitment of uprating benefits in line with inflation?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has been in the Chamber during questions for long enough to know that I cannot comment on the uprating or otherwise of benefits. However, he should take into account the numerous positive tax changes that there have been over the years for the hard-working constituents he refers to—not least the very significant increase in the personal allowance since 2010 and the change to the taper under universal credit, which makes a difference to many millions of people up and down the land.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): My constituent suffered months of worry and stress because his employer failed to pay any pension contributions into his workplace scheme. Raising it with his boss made him fear for his job. The regulator gives no feedback on investigations, so will the Secretary of State consider whether the current £400 statutory penalty notice and regulatory powers are sufficient to ensure that employers fulfil their pension contributions duties?

Laura Trott: The independent Pensions Regulator has robust powers in place to investigate compliance and issue fines; I urge my hon. Friend's constituent to report his concerns to it in confidence. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Harry, my 11-year-old constituent, has cerebral palsy. He was previously awarded the higher rate mobility component of the disability living allowance, until it was downgraded. It took nearly two months for a mandatory reconsideration to uphold the decision, which his family are now appealing. There is currently no tribunal date, which means that the family face a prolonged period of uncertainty and anxiety. Will the Minister look at the detail of Harry's case with a view to expediting a date for the tribunal?

Tom Pursglove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which he has approached the issue. I will be very happy to contact him if he shares the details of the case with me. What I can say, which I hope will give some reassurance, is that 400 extra people are dedicated to mandatory reconsideration work and waiting times are dropping. We need to sustain that performance as well as getting things right the first time.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I have no doubt that this fine ministerial team will be pleased to know that my recent jobs fair perfectly complemented the employment and skills pathfinder programme. Will a Minister come to Willenhall jobcentre to meet its excellent policy and partnership staff and discuss what more we can do together to help people to progress in employment?

Guy Opperman: I am fantastically pleased to hear about my hon. Friend's jobs fair. He is a doughty champion for Walsall. Either I or our much more illustrious Secretary of State would be delighted to come to Walsall and see the great work being done there.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Saturday was World Stroke Day. I simply ask if this Government will uprate benefits in line with inflation, which would particularly help the growing population who are living with a disability. I know that I will not get an answer or a commitment today, but I ask them to consider it for the autumn statement.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for making that argument. As my colleagues and I have said consistently at the Dispatch Box, we will not provide a running commentary ahead of the autumn statement on 17 November, in which the Chancellor will set out the situation in the normal way.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): A few weeks ago, at Paul's Sports and Social Club, I met my constituent Nigel Seaman, who is a veteran, to discuss his work with Combat2Coffee to get veterans who may be homeless or struggling with the transition to civilian life into work and employment. Will the Minister meet me and Nigel to discuss what more can be done to support excellent veterans' charities such as Combat2Coffee with helping veterans into work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I am very pleased that I am wearing my Help for Heroes band today. I am delighted to hear about the work of the charity that my hon. Friend mentions. We are working with our champions in jobcentres to get people who have been service leaders into work, and we have work coaches who are dedicated to that. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to find out more about the charity and tell him more about what we do in jobcentres.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It appears that the Government's plan to clear up the economic disaster that they created is to implement austerity 2.0. Nearly 1.5 million people, including many of my constituents, have now been pushed into poverty as a result of their policies: the cuts to the social security net, the benefit cap and the cuts to support for disabled people, as well as the cruel and inhumane conditionality and sanctions regime. What discussions is the new Secretary of State having with the Chancellor to ensure that those in low-income households will not have to face any further cuts to social security to help to clear up this mess created by his Government?

Mims Davies: The benefit cap is important because it restores fairness to the balance between those on working-age benefits and taxpayers in employment. Along with changes in the taper rate, this means that moving people into work wherever possible is the best way out of poverty.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Last year an estimated 1 million people of working age were receiving carer's allowance. A constituent of mine, after three and a half years of caring for his father full time—his father

passed away recently—is now unable to access jobseeker's allowance because he is not considered to have been employed. What is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State doing to rectify the position?

Guy Opperman: If my hon. Friend writes to me giving the specific details, I will ensure that the ministerial team and the civil servants involved look into it as a matter of urgency.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the new Secretary of State—whom I welcome to his place—still agree with his statement that cutting maternity rights will be good for business?

Mel Stride: Given that I never made that statement, I do not agree with it, no.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—sorry, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I will not be called next time, will I?

The Government have done a great deal to help people with their cost of living challenges, but elderly residents in my constituency are troubled by reports in the newspapers suggesting that we may not meet our manifesto commitment to retain the pensions triple lock. Pensioners face a triple whammy of dwindling savings value due to low interest rates, rising costs due to inflation and, owing to their age, an inability to go out and earn any more. Will my right hon. Friend please confirm that we will increase pensions in line with inflation?

Mel Stride: I admire my hon. Friend's persistence on this matter, but I am afraid I must give her the same response that I have given on numerous occasions this afternoon, namely, that we will have to wait until at least 17 November for an answer. I understand the particular pressure that pensioners are under because they are often unable to change their economic circumstances, as others within the labour force can; but we will have to wait.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): A number of my constituents who work for the DWP have told me that they are not being given the enhanced holiday pay that they were promised in return for working overtime consistently. In response to my inquiry, the DWP has told me that current legislation provides no definition of regularity. Will the Minister please address this issue?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter; I shall be happy to look into it if he writes to me with the details.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I have written to the DWP twice about the relocation of back-office staff from Crossgate House in Doncaster city centre to Sheffield, but have received only negative replies. This is not what the staff want and, with many council offices empty owing to the new model of hybrid working, Doncaster is losing much-needed footfall. Will the Minister meet me so that we can establish whether the decision can be reversed?

Mims Davies: This is an issue that I was already looking into. I am aware of my hon. Friend's concern, and I shall be happy to meet him and be given an update on the situation.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Along with many other Members who are present today, I have received a number of emails from concerned pensioners, including one who wrote that if the triple lock is not maintained:

“myself and many others will have to pare our spending even more. Occasional meet-ups with friends will be the next to go and then more and more people will become isolated and depressed.”

Does the Secretary of State agree that maintaining the triple lock will improve the health and wellbeing of our pensioners as we go into the winter?

Laura Trott: I completely understand those concerns, but that is why we have provided a package of support—now—which is worth more than £850 for everyone receiving a state pension and £1,500 for those receiving pension credit.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Last week we celebrated the 10th anniversary of automatic pension enrolment. This is, genuinely, an amazing cross-party policy achievement which has transformed the saving culture across our country. As we look back on that success, will the Ministers consider expanding the system to 18-to-22-year-olds?

Guy Opperman: In my former life I was very much looking at that specific policy and I am quite sure that the Government will address it shortly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This morning I attended the York cost of living summit and heard about the impact that food poverty, heating poverty and housing poverty are having on my constituents. One issue is the rate at which the benefits cap is set. By 2027, it will not have been reviewed for 11 years, so will the Secretary of State make representations to the Chancellor to ensure that it is reviewed before 17 November?

Mel Stride: I am in the process of reviewing just that matter and many of the others that we have discussed, so we will have to wait, but it is one of the matters that is under review.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We look forward to the Secretary of State appearing before the Work and Pensions Committee. Can he give us an assurance before he does so that the Department will publish the systematic evidence-based review of food bank use that it promised to publish and place in the Commons Library two years ago, so that we can debate the policy issues required to eliminate hunger across these islands?

Mel Stride: I look forward to appearing before the hon. Gentleman and his fellow members of the Committee. He raises a specific point, and I will look into it and come back to him.

Royal Navy: Conduct towards Women

3.36 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on conduct towards women in the Royal Navy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Andrew Murrison): I thank my right hon. Friend for his timely question. Before I get going, I would like to declare my interest as entered in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a serving reservist and, more particularly for this particular urgent question, I have two daughters who are currently serving in the armed forces.

I was concerned by the recent reports in the media that have prompted this UQ, little knowing that I would be answering it this afternoon. Allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual assault in the Submarine Service are and will be taken extremely seriously. Any activity that falls short of the highest standards in the Royal Navy is totally unacceptable and not a true reflection of what life should be. Sexual assault and harassment have no place in the Royal Navy and will not be tolerated.

The First Sea Lord has directed a formal investigation into these allegations, and this commenced on 24 October. This independent investigating team, led by a senior female officer, will thoroughly examine the allegations and report back very soon. It is understood that the named individual has agreed to meet the investigation team to provide her account. While this investigation will review specific allegations, Defence will also review the culture of the submarine community and report to Ministers in due course. The House will understand that it would be premature to offer any further comment or debate until those investigations are complete. However, anyone who is found culpable will be held accountable for their actions regardless of their rank or status.

While some of the incidents referred to in the media are historical, it is important to note the large-scale policy changes that were introduced across Defence in the past year. As a result, Defence will deal with incidents and allegations of sexual abuse better. The new policies will ensure zero tolerance of unacceptable sexual behaviour or of sexual exploitation and abuse within Defence. All allegations of sexual offences will be responded to, victims will be given greater support and there will be a presumption of discharge for anyone found to be engaging in this kind of behaviour.

These policies will ensure that Defence will deal with these types of incidents differently. They will build trust and confidence in Defence's ability to deal with unacceptable behaviour and demonstrate that supporting people who are victims of unacceptable sexual behaviour is a top priority. The House should be reassured that the Royal Navy has taken and is continuing to take decisive action to address the allegations that have been brought to light and will report to Ministers when the investigations are complete, at which point I feel sure that there will be a further opportunity to explore the detail.

Mr Ellwood: Britain can be immensely proud of its Royal Navy, which over the centuries has helped to define who we are as a nation. Today it is globally recognised

as arguably the best-trained, best-motivated and best-disciplined maritime force in the world. It is therefore deeply concerning to see more reports emerging of inappropriate behaviour against women, this time on the very submarines that provide our nuclear deterrent.

I welcome the statement and the First Sea Lord's promise of another investigation. Only three years ago, the Ministry of Defence was obliged to commission its own study, the Wigston review, which admitted "an unacceptable level of...behaviour and a sub-optimal system for dealing with it".

The Defence Committee carried out a study last year, and over 4,000 female personnel replied to our survey run by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). Sixty-four per cent. of respondents said they had endured bullying, harassment, intimidation, discrimination or sexual abuse, and few had any faith in the mechanism through which these concerns could be addressed.

My Committee made two clear recommendations: first, the establishment of a central defence authority to provide a reporting system outside the chain of command and, secondly, the removal of the chain of command entirely from complaints of a sexual nature. Will the MOD now implement these recommendations and encourage others, both serving and retired, to share their concerns on safety?

Women have proudly served in our armed forces for over a century, and all roles are now open to women. To be fair, the majority leave with a positive view of their time in uniform. This is about a few personnel who bring the Submarine Service into disrepute. It is about a systemic failure of the chain of command, and the MOD must now accept its role and prioritise putting this right.

Dr Murrison: I thank my right hon. Friend again. He is correct to put matters in these terms. He has been robust and forthright, which I respect.

My right hon. Friend will know that the great majority of women serving in our armed forces today respond positively when asked about their experiences and say they would recommend the services to others. He will also be aware of the work done this year in response to his Committee's report. I would like to say I have read it from cover to cover, but I have been in post for only a few hours, so he will forgive me for not doing so. I get the gist of it, and I will study it extremely carefully.

My right hon. Friend will know that the MOD has already accepted the great majority of the report. He and I have been around a long time, and I cannot think of a Select Committee report in recent times that has had so many of its recommendations accepted and carried out. He will be familiar with "Tackling Sexual Offending in Defence" and the two pieces of work on a zero-tolerance approach that have been published this year.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) and their Committee. The great majority of the recommendations are being carried out or will be carried out.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Luke Pollard.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Minister to his position. Those who serve in our armed forces should expect the

highest standards of professionalism and personal conduct, which must be supported and reinforced by the Government. As the son of a Royal Navy submariner, I know that the Submarine Service is on the frontline of our national defence. Every submariner must be confident that the people they serve alongside in the Royal Navy have their back. These claims of abuse are extremely serious and must be thoroughly investigated, and those responsible must be held accountable.

These reports lift the lid on a culture of abuse and cover-up in our armed forces. In far too many cases, victims are unable to raise their experiences within the chain of command. Women account for 11% of our forces personnel but, between 2019 and last year, 81% of victims of sexual assault in the military were women, and almost half of them were at the start of their military career. Behind these statistics are hundreds of women who have been let down. This cannot be allowed to continue. Victims of sexual abuse serving in our armed forces must have confidence in the processes that allow them to report their experiences, and they must know that robust action will be taken.

I suggest that the Minister reads the Defence Committee's report before coming back to the House to tell us how he will implement all of it. Will he make the investigation he has just announced a public investigation so we can see what action is needed? Can he explain why the Government continue to resist Labour's proposal that the most serious cases, including murder, manslaughter and rape, should be tried in civilian courts instead of military courts? What progress has been made on the RAF's review of allegations of sexual assault, which was announced in August? Will those findings be made public?

Our armed forces are the very best in the world, and they deserve the very best, too. The Government must step up and protect those who protect us.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his points. I agree with him about external scrutiny. That is why the investigation that has been set up, which will report soon, to which I referred, will include an individual from outside Defence, who is currently being selected for his or her independence, probity and integrity, who will be alongside that investigation. I do not know where this is going to go. I suspect it is going to be complicated and may take a while. I want it to report quickly, but I do not want to put a time limit on it necessarily.

However, it is going to report "soon"—that wonderful, plastic term. It will have within it an independent individual—the hon. Gentleman will understand that that is a divergence from the norm—because I am absolutely clear that there needs to be oversight of this that is outside the process. He will know full well that these investigations are conducted properly always—I have been involved with a number myself—but there has to be the appearance also of their being transparent. I hope that that will give him some reassurance.

The hon. Gentleman refers to the Henriques report, most of which of course was accepted. He may also be aware of the joint protocol that will be drawn up for the very serious offences that he cites between the civilian and the service prosecuting authorities. I hope that that goes some way to addressing that outstanding concern that I know he has.

A parallel strand of work is being set up by the commander of the submarine flotilla to look into conduct and culture. That will be headed by Colonel Tony de Reya from the Royal Marines. That will report, I hope, by the end of the year. It is separate from the investigation on the specific that I have cited in my opening remarks, but, obviously, it will touch on much of the same material. I look forward to returning to the House to discuss that once Ministers have had a chance to examine its findings and conclusions.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It must not come down to one brave woman being prepared to speak out; there have to be processes in place where every woman and man serving in our armed forces has the confidence to come forward. I say gently to my right hon. Friend that we cannot simply be looking at the culture in the submarine community. This happens across our armed forces and we need to have processes that are swift and give redress to those victims, so that they come forward with confidence. I have a constituent who is not at the start of her military career—she is a lieutenant colonel—who waited 10 years before the Ministry of Defence took her complaint seriously. We have to have faster justice for the women who have been victims of this sort of culture.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. This is my 42nd year in Defence as a regular and reservist, and over that time things have changed dramatically—I am happy to say that is the case—particularly in the past few years. I accept all of her comments. There is no room for complacency. With two daughters in the armed forces, I am certainly not complacent. However, I have to refer to some of the objective data that we have, some of which is to do with the sexual harassment surveys that each of the three services conduct and that show a positive trend. We can argue as to whether that is fast enough, and certainly it should not be the antidote to complacency. Nevertheless, it is positive in terms of the experience of people feeling supported and feeling that their complaints will be dealt with outside the chain of command, where appropriate, with action taken. That is very positive, but she is right to say that there is no room for any complacency and a single complaint is one too many.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Brendan O'Hara.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think we are all agreed that the reports that emerged over the weekend are truly shocking, and I pay tribute to the women who have spoken out about the abuse they suffered, including Sophie Brook, the former Royal Navy lieutenant, who described her abuse as being "constant". She said that it came from the top down, confirming what Emma Norton, from the Centre for Military Justice, said about there being a culture of

"Nasty, pernicious, endemic, sexual harassment", within which people acted with impunity. That must change.

Therefore, I am sceptical about the First Sea Lord's announcement of yet another internal investigation. It is simply not good enough. As the MP for Argyll and Bute, which takes in the naval base at Faslane, I understand that this episode casts a shadow over the entire service. I

[Brendan O'Hara]

am sure that there are thousands of hard-working, thoroughly decent Royal Navy personnel who will demand that those responsible, irrespective of their rank or status, are rooted out and disciplined. They will want a thorough independent investigation, one that can report without fear or favour. So does the Minister agree that that can be achieved only by a fully transparent, truly independent investigation of these facts?

Dr Murrison: It would be nice to have the facts first. That is the point of the investigation that was launched on 24 October, which—let us be clear—was before the publication of the lurid accounts that appeared in the media. I think that gives a signal of intent that Defence is looking at these matters very seriously, as does the inclusion of a non-Defence person in the investigation, which is important. The hon. Member will note the number of senior officers who have been dealt with severely because of transgression in this particular area. That is also an indication of how seriously Defence takes such matters. He is right to push me on this, but I point him to the series of three major reports by Defence during the course of the year that outline what Defence will now do to ensure that the environment is as good as possible for those who have had cause to make serious allegations in the recent past.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The allegations that we have heard are clearly horrifying, and I know that the investigation will have to take its course, but it is equally disturbing that there does not appear to have been a safe, independent route of complaint for the people involved. Whatever the outcome, will the Minister confirm that that at least will be put right?

Dr Murrison: The excellent report by our right hon. Friend's Select Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham in particular, makes some recommendations along those lines, and much of that has been accepted, so the general trajectory of the environment—in particular for women who have found that Defence has in the past not provided the background against which they would want to conduct their careers and lives—will be improved. It is worth underscoring—our right hon. Friend made this point—that the great majority of women serving in our armed forces today have a positive experience that they would recommend to others.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a trustee of the Agnes Wanjiru trust. Agnes Wanjiru was a prostituted woman in Kenya who was murdered on the site where there were military personnel; I will say no more about the case, except that it has not been pushed forward.

The Minister has referred to a number of documents that have been produced since other cases have come to light. There have been a number of documents of progress. One document to which he referred is on sexual exploitation policy, which now disallows Defence forces having sex with sexually exploited people abroad. However, the document specifically says:

“While the policy is not intended to apply in the UK”.

Does the Minister think it is okay that the Department has written into a document that it is fine for British military personnel to sexually exploit people in the UK?

Dr Murrison: Sexual exploitation is unacceptable in the UK and abroad under any circumstances.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister to his place.

The incident we are discussing is horrifying, but the statistics in the Defence Committee report—that over half of women in the armed forces have experienced bullying and harassment in the workplace—are also totally unacceptable. There are simply no excuses for such behaviour. We have had women in the armed forces for many years, but only recently in very senior roles. How many excellent women heading for senior roles does the Minister think have left the armed forces because of the culture of bullying and harassment?

Dr Murrison: Bullying and harassment of women is particularly appalling, but we have to understand and be honest with ourselves that it has historically been a feature of service life more generally. I suspect the behaviour that my hon. Friend has just described has been a feature of the retention issue for many years. It is wasteful, it is wrong, and it has to stop. We hope that 30% of our service personnel will be women by 2030, so the issue is quite a big deal in terms of the whole force. Although we are dealing with the issue in relation specifically to women in the armed forces today, it is applicable right across Defence. It is wrong for the organisation, and it is wrong for the individuals and their families.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Minister, this has to stop. As the Chair of the Defence Committee said, we have had the Wigston report and the report from the House of Commons Select Committee, ably chaired by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). May I say that her sacking does not fill me with a great deal of confidence that these things are going to be taken seriously? What evidence does the Ministry of Defence need for change? Without an independent process, either in investigations or prosecutions, which the MOD resisted fiercely in the Armed Forces Bill, things will not change, Minister.

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman is correct to put me on the spot on this. I would, however, cite some of the evidence. I mentioned earlier the sexual harassment survey, which is an important survey. It is conducted rigorously, it has been conducted longer for the Army than for the other two forces, but its conclusions are fairly clear: while there are no grounds for complacency at all in this, things are improving. As to what is being done, tackling sexual offending in Defence was the biggest part of the response to the report, to which we referred earlier. The great majority of its recommendations have been accepted and they are being rolled out at pace. The survey was published only in summer 2021 and already in summer this year we have had this major contribution that accepts most of the report and says how it is being rolled out.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on rejoining the Defence ministerial team. With his experience of professional service

in the Royal Navy, he will be aware of the vital role of commanding officers of naval units in terms of discipline. I am surprised therefore that not more is being made of the fact that commanding officers ought perhaps to have it brought to their attention that their own careers will not progress well if they allow not only incidents, but a culture of sexual exploitation, insult or abuse in their units. What does he have to say about that?

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his kind remarks and for his question. He will know that a significant number of very senior officers' careers have been brought to an end in these matters. That is an indication of how Defence views commanding officers who fail to grip this. I also point out that, in the event that the commanding officers fail in the eyes of the ombudsman, their annual appraisal will be annotated accordingly, which has very severe implications for their hopes of future preferment. In those ways, we can inculcate into the senior cadre that this is their responsibility and they need to grip it. He will also know that we have taken some of this outside the chain of command completely, so that people can have confidence that they can report allegations and have them dealt with appropriately and seriously without the fear of retribution. There is, if you like, a double lock there, which gives me great hope for the future.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I welcome the Minister to his place. These reports are despicable. We repeatedly hear about situations such as this happening within our armed forces. Research shows that female recruits under the age of 18 face substantially elevated risk of sexual violence. Last year, more than one in 10 girls serving in the armed forces aged under 18 were victims of a sexual offence, according to records of military police investigations. I know from my own time serving with soldiers and with young recruits how pervasive this behaviour can be. Will the Minister commit to taking a meaningful step by shifting responsibility for serious charges, including rape and sexual assault, from military courts to the civilian justice system, so that we can better protect young service personnel?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman knows from his own background the importance of these matters, and I welcome the expertise he is able to bring to the House. People who are in positions of responsibility must not abuse those who are potentially subject to their predations. The teaching profession has implemented changes in recent years to the relationship between teachers and children, and Defence is taking note of that. He refers to recruits under the age of 18, who are minors and are in a similar position, so he can be assured that we are closely considering how we can emulate the situation that now pertains to civilian education, so that it properly applies in a defence setting. He also touched on the Henriques report: the bulk of those recommendations were carried out, although I suspect we could have a debate about the three most serious offences, but Defence's position remains that they should be a matter for the service justice system.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister to his place. As the Chair of the recent Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, a regular officer for 26 years and now a senior veteran, I can tell

the House with some authority that our armed forces are full of brilliant people at all ranks and levels. In the interest of balance, and noting how far the MOD has come in recent decades in dealing with such sordid behaviour, I urge the Minister to maintain a sense of pragmatism and proportionality. Rather than saying that the forces have an endemic problem, I think this is indicative of individual poor behaviour and the inquiry must look accordingly.

Dr Murrison: I think I touched on that subject when I referred to the Select Committee's report and the positive comments it made about the experience of most women in our armed forces. We must not put people off joining our armed forces unduly, but equally we must take these allegations very seriously.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) for her report; when I was on the armed forces parliamentary scheme last year, many in senior positions referred to that report, and it should not be cast aside. We in the Labour party have long argued that the more serious cases, including sexual assault and rape, should be tried in civilian courts rather than through the military justice services. I was also on the Bill Committee for the Armed Forces Bill, so I ask the Minister to explain why the Government continue to resist that move? Sexual assault cases need to be in civilian courts.

Dr Murrison: Henriques dealt with the three most serious offences, although he could have chosen other offences as well. The judgment has been made that the status quo is probably appropriate, but with the design of a joint protocol between civilian and service to ensure that practice is the same. I hope the hon. Lady will accept that.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. I want to raise the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton). Her review mattered because, for the first time, women in the armed forces were no longer gagged. They believed that that meant they would be listened to and that change would come. My concern is that the sexual violence policy that the MOD has just introduced has a five-year vision. Five years is too long. Surely my right hon. Friend the Minister can agree that no military commander would accept a five-year deadline to deliver any effect within the MOD, so why are we accepting it for sexual policies?

Dr Murrison: I would not say that we are not doing anything to deal with the situation—I have outlined a number of ways that we are doing exactly that, and referred to the sexual harassment survey, with respect to my hon. Friend, which gives some evidential basis to say that matters are improving. That is not to say that we are in any way complacent, and I want to see changes rolled out as soon as possible, but I think she should give credit to Defence for working hard on this matter and taking it seriously at the highest level.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I have spoken to Dr Shonagh Dillon, the founder and chief executive of the charity Aurora New Dawn, which works with women survivors of abuse in the military. She is very clear what is required to give women sufficient

[Joanna Cherry]

courage to remain within the services in the face of what, according to the evidence, appears to be a culture of such difficulties. She says that what is needed are fully independent investigations into such allegations. When will the Ministry of Defence look into having fully independent investigations, given the advice of the Wigston review and subsequent recommendations to that effect?

Dr Murrison: I hope it reassures the hon. and learned Lady to learn that in my few hours in post, I have made sure that the investigation to which I referred has significant independent involvement. That is not a given in Defence—it is something of a departure—but it is important that someone completely independent of Defence be heavily involved, both for transparency, and so that people ultimately accept what the investigation comes up with. That may give her an indication of how I view these matters.

The hon. and learned Lady is absolutely right about victims. She will be aware, I hope, of the victim and witness care unit, which is about to be set up in the defence serious crime unit. That will give added support to the victims of these horrendous offences.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has suggested that the future of the Royal Navy may well be in subsea vessels, but we cannot expect to staff a fleet, or to recruit, when reports of misogyny and absolutely terrible abuse hang over the submarine service, so will my right hon. Friend confirm the Government's view that this behaviour is completely unacceptable? Will he work towards ensuring that people can have faith in the system of training, reporting and redress, so that we make sure that the incidents reported in the press are the last of their type?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right. The case in question relates to the submarine flotilla, but I think that the lessons will be more generally applicable. I agree entirely that this kind of behaviour has no place in our Royal Navy, or in defence more generally.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The north-east is proud to send so many young men and women into the armed forces—more than any other region. As a consequence, we have many veterans living in our region. A 2019 report from the north-east charity Forward Assist, “No Man's Land”, highlighted the experience of women veterans, and in particular the unacceptable sexual harassment that they had to deal with. It also highlighted the lack of mental health support for them when they left the armed services, and particularly the lack of online support for those feeling isolated. What will the Minister do to ensure that women veterans have the mental health support that they need and deserve after their service?

Dr Murrison: I hesitate ever so slightly because I have been professionally involved in this area. A set of rules that take my name apply; they govern how servicemen and women who leave the armed forces for medical reasons are managed in civilian life, and help them to transition. The great majority of veterans transition to civilian life very well. The hon. Lady will be aware of that. In fact, there is good evidence to suggest that they

do better than the civilian cohort. However, it is important that we continue to support their mental health. Over the past five years, matters have improved dramatically, not least as regards career transition and veterans' ability to continue to access support through the services.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was angry over the weekend, not just because of this dreadful case of sexual harassment and bullying in the Navy, and not just because I have three daughters and five grand-daughters, and another due on Thursday, but because it is the inalienable right of women to be free from this sort of treatment, yet everywhere I have worked, it is still there—in the manufacturing sector; in the universities, where I spent 13 years; here in the House; and in Whitehall. This behaviour is still everywhere, and we have to do something about it fast.

Dr Murrison: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; there is no question about that. I speak specifically about defence, of course, but what he says goes for society more generally, too.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What will Ministers do to ensure that no female officer brave enough to come forward and report abuse will experience professional discrimination, such as having promotion opportunities withheld from them?

Dr Murrison: I hope that I explained in my previous remarks the importance that Defence assigns to this, particularly when it comes to senior officers who may be complicit in some of the behaviour that we are discussing. This is very important: if someone's career is on the line, it does affect their thinking fairly dramatically. I would also commend to the hon. Member the victim and witness care unit that will be established by December for the most serious offences, which will give people much-needed support that was previously lacking.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I welcome the Minister back to his post. Will he join me in noting the amazing achievement of Private Carter, who just last week became the first woman soldier to pass the all-arms pre-parachute selection course, P Company? It is a timely reminder of the outstanding contribution that women make to our armed forces. Does the Minister agree with me that every woman who steps forward to serve, whether in the Royal Navy or whichever bit of defence it might be, deserves nothing less than complete and total respect at all times?

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is no mean feat even these days to join the armed forces as a woman. The challenges remain enormous, although I hope they are becoming less. I am particularly proud of my two daughters who are serving in the armed forces. Respect to them and strength to their arm.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is highly disturbing to hear of a woman in the armed forces being sexually assaulted and violently abused. Last year the Defence Committee's report “Women in the Armed Forces” uncovered shocking levels of abuse and identified bullying, harassment, intimidation and discrimination in the armed forces. This stops women fulfilling their potential, and

in many instances the abusers are promoted and rise through the ranks. This is unacceptable. Women in the armed forces really do need to be protected, so will the Minister confirm how many of the Committee's recommendations have been implemented to date?

Dr Murrison: If the hon. Lady is referring to the House of Commons' Defence Committee's report, as I said earlier, the great majority of those recommendations were accepted or partially accepted, which is pretty much unprecedented in my experience, so my congratulations to the Chair of the Committee, who is in his place. Let me be clear: the behaviour that this touches upon is wholly and completely unacceptable. It is unacceptable in the armed forces, it is unacceptable in society in general, and it needs to be stamped out.

Ukraine

4.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the situation in Ukraine.

This morning, Russian missiles again struck Kyiv and other cities, destroying critical national infrastructure and depriving Ukrainians of water and electricity. Earlier today I spoke to our ambassador in Kyiv, and I heard again of the extraordinary resilience of Ukraine's people in the face of Russian aggression.

At the weekend, Russia suspended its participation in the Black sea grain initiative, which has allowed the exportation of 100,000 tonnes of food every day, including to some of the least developed countries in the world. Putin is exacting vengeance for his military failures on the civilians of Ukraine by cutting off their power and water supply, and on the poorest people in the world by threatening their food supplies. Over 60% of the wheat exported under the Black sea grain initiative has gone to low and middle-income countries, including Ethiopia, Yemen and Afghanistan. It would be unconscionable for those lands to be made to suffer because of Putin's setbacks on the battlefield in Ukraine. I urge Russia to stop impeding this vital initiative, which is helping to feed the hungry across the world, and to agree to its extension.

Meanwhile, Russia's suicide drones and cruise missiles are killing Ukrainian civilians, obliterating their homes and even destroying a children's playground. A third of the country's power stations were put out of operation in a single week. None of this achieves any military purpose. Putin's only aim is to spread terror and to deprive Ukrainian families of shelter, light and heat as harsh winter approaches. I am sure the House will join me in condemning his breaches of international humanitarian law.

I am also sure that every right hon. and hon. Member will share my conviction that Putin will never break the spirit of the Ukrainian people, and my incredulity at the glaring contradictions in his thinking. He claims that Ukraine is part of Russia and that Ukrainians are Russians, but at the same time he calls them Nazis who must be bombed without mercy.

When Putin launched his invasion, he convinced himself that Russian forces would be welcomed into Kyiv and that Ukrainians would support him or be too craven to stand in his way. He could not have been more wrong. The last eight months have shown the scale of his miscalculation and the barbarity of his onslaught, including the mass rape committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine. The UK's campaign to prevent sexual violence in conflict is more urgent now than ever and I will host a conference on that vital subject next month. The Kremlin is now resorting to peddling false claims and churning out invented stories that say more about the fractures within the Russian Government than they do about us.

It is reprehensible that Iran should have supplied Russia with the Shahed drones that are bringing destruction to Ukraine, in violation of UN resolution 2231. On 20 October, the Government imposed sanctions on three Iranian commanders involved in supplying weaponry to Russia, along with the company that manufactures Shahed drones.

[James Cleverly]

Earlier, on 30 September, Putin announced that Russia had annexed four regions of Ukraine spanning 40,000 square miles—the biggest land grab in Europe since the second world war. Once again, this exposes his self-delusion. He has declared the annexation of territory that he has not captured, and what he had managed to seize he is in the process of losing.

On 12 October, 143 countries—three quarters of the entire membership of the United Nations—voted in the General Assembly to condemn the annexations. Russia had just four supporters: Syria, Belarus, Nicaragua and North Korea. When those regimes are a country's only friends, they really know that they are isolated. When 141 countries denounced Putin's invasion in March, some speculated that that was the ceiling of international support for Ukraine. The latest vote showed that even more nations are now ready to condemn Russia, but Putin still thinks that by forcing up food and energy prices, we will lose our resolve. Our task is to prove him wrong.

We will not waver in our support for Ukraine's right to self-defence. I delivered that emphatic message when I spoke to my Ukrainian counterpart on Tuesday, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said the same to President Zelensky when they spoke on the phone—the first foreign leader who he called on his appointment as Prime Minister. On Thursday I will attend a meeting of G7 Foreign Ministers in Germany, where I will send a unified signal of our shared determination. This year, Britain gave Ukraine £2.3 billion of military support—more than any country in the world apart from the United States of America. We will provide Ukraine with more support to repair its energy infrastructure and we have committed £220 million of humanitarian aid.

The House will have noted Putin's irresponsible talk about nuclear weapons and an absurd claim that Ukraine plans to detonate a radiological dirty bomb on its own territory. No other country is talking about nuclear use; no country is threatening Russia or President Putin. He should be clear that, for the UK and our allies, any use at all of nuclear weapons would fundamentally change the nature of this conflict. There would be severe consequences for Russia. How counterproductive would it be for Russia to break a norm against nuclear use that has held since 1945 and has underpinned global security?

Nothing will alter our conviction that the Ukrainians have a right to live in peace and freedom in their own lands. If Putin were to succeed, every expansionist tyrant would be emboldened to do their worst and no country would be safe. That is why we stand, and will continue to stand, alongside our Ukrainian friends until the day comes—as it inevitably will—that they prevail. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.20 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The war in Ukraine is at a critical new stage, with increasing missile and drone attacks, and the senseless withdrawal from the grain export deal, which will lead to increasing hunger around the world. As we enter the winter months, Putin's rhetoric is becoming increasingly irresponsible,

including his references to nuclear weapons and dangerous fabrications around a so-called dirty bomb, and I support the Foreign Secretary's words on that matter. This is a sign of Putin's desperation, but it does not mean that an end is near; this will be a long and protracted conflict.

This morning, more than 50 missiles were launched by Russian forces against Ukrainian energy and water systems over the course of just a few hours. This is not an isolated attack, but a deliberate and callous Russian strategy to target civilian infrastructure ahead of the winter. Some estimates claim almost a third of Ukraine's power stations and other energy facilities have been hit, and 80% of Kyiv has been left without water after these latest attacks. The Foreign Secretary mentioned his discussions with our ambassador on the ground, and I am sure that the whole House is grateful to the embassy team for their continuing work in very challenging conditions.

Can the Foreign Secretary set out today how many electricity generators the UK has already sent to Ukraine, and how we will strengthen Ukraine's energy supply at this time? Some of these attacks have been conducted using Iranian-supplied drones. We welcome the sanctions already announced against the Iranian regime. What further measures are the Government considering to prevent Iran's material support to Russia's invasion? Over the past week, we have also seen Russia engage in baseless, ridiculous accusations that the United Kingdom was involved in the destruction of part of the Nord Stream pipeline. What are the Government doing to tackle the dangerous disinformation being spread by Putin?

The UN-backed agreement on grain exports has been vital in reducing global food prices. President Putin's unjustifiable decision to pull out of this deal will have catastrophic consequences. It comes at a time when many countries are already food-insecure, including Somalia, where an imminent famine is feared. This decision should be seen by the world for what it is: the Kremlin's cruel and transparent use of hunger to blackmail. Any spike in world food prices will be the responsibility of the Russian Government. An agreement must be restored. Can the Foreign Secretary outline what conversations he has had with counterparts, including in Turkey, on the potential for restoring grain flows, and what steps the UK is considering to mitigate the worst consequences for the developing world if those efforts fail?

Since the end of August, Ukraine has been conducting successful counter-offensive operations in the south and east of Ukraine, liberating around 12,000 sq km, but Russia continues to attempt to make progress in Donbas around Bakhmut. Winter is coming, any counter-offensives could soon slow and an operational stalemate is likely for the next couple of months. It is day 249 of the invasion, and the Ministry of Defence has not even signed a contract to replenish the NLAW anti-tank missiles, which have been vital to the Ukrainian army. Will the Government restock and resupply Ukraine, and the British armed forces, with essential military assistance? Over 20 NATO countries have now rebooted defence plans since the invasion began, but the UK Government have still not done so. Will the Foreign Secretary update the integrated review of foreign and defence policy, and will he continue with what was indicated by the last Prime Minister now that we are on our third in just three months?

Last month at the United Nations more countries than ever voted to condemn Russia in its illegal and unjustifiable annexations of Ukrainian territory. The world saw through the sham referendums and recognised Russia's actions as a flagrant violation of the UN charter. We must sustain and grow the diplomatic coalition against Putin, because the outcome of this war will depend on who is more resilient: Putin's Russia, or Ukraine and its supporters in the west and beyond. Labour is clear that we will not let our support for Ukraine falter.

Our duty now is to make sure Ukraine wins; this means providing the diplomatic and military support required but also moving beyond ad hoc announcements and laying out a long-term strategy for military, economic and diplomatic assistance through 2023 and beyond. We have to reinforce the message to Putin that continuing this barbaric war will make it worse, not better, for Russia.

James Cleverly: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, my opposite number, for the points that he has made, and for echoing from the Opposition Front Bench the support for the Ukrainian people in their work to eject Russia from their homeland. It is noticed that although we sometimes disagree on the detail, our collective response is to support the Ukrainian people; that will be noted, and they will be incredibly grateful for it. He raised a number of points, which I will attempt to cover in my response.

On the energy needs of the Ukrainian people going into the winter, the UK has pledged £100 million to support Ukraine's energy security and to reform, and £74 million in fiscal grants to support Ukraine through the World Bank. I will seek to get more details on the right hon. Gentleman's specific question about the number of generators and share them with him at an appropriate point in the future.

On Iran, the right hon. Gentleman noted that we have already sanctioned a number of people—a point I made in my statement. He will know that we do not discuss future sanctions designations, but I can assure him that we will be keeping a close eye on the actions of Iran, and indeed any other countries, in providing arms for Russia, and we will take appropriate actions to dissuade them from doing so and to react if they do.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the situation with regard to disinformation. Increasingly desperate statements have been coming out of the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Kremlin. Those claims are designed to distract the Russian people, and indeed the wider international community, from the truth, and the truth is that the Ukrainians are pushing Russian forces back on the battlefield. We must not be distracted from that truth, and the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we must work with our international allies to make sure Russia's disinformation campaign does not influence global support for the Ukrainian people.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned grain exports, and I have spoken with my Turkish counterparts in the past expressing our gratitude for the work they have done in securing that grain export deal. We have also reinforced the need for that to be extended and for Russia to lift the pause on its engagement on that. This is about ensuring that the global poor—those who are already suffering from hunger—are not drawn into a

conflict not of their choosing. We must not let Vladimir Putin use global hunger as leverage to undermine support for the Ukrainians in the defence of their homelands.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the supply of anti-tank missile systems. We are committed to matching our support next year, as we have done for this year. We will ensure the Ukrainians are supplied with the arms most relevant to their needs at the time. In the initial phases of the conflict, NLAWs and other anti-tank missile systems were incredibly important to them. The battlefield has now evolved, and ground-to-air and air-to-air missile systems have increased in importance. We will make sure our support for Ukraine matches its needs, but we will also ensure that we do not denude our own armed forces of requirements, and action has been taken to stimulate the supply chain for critical and military equipment. We will always ensure that we adapt to the circumstances on the ground and on the battlefield and that we do not denude ourselves of our ability to defend this country as well as our friends and allies.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Over the next month, war on the ground will be most difficult for Putin to wage, so he is weaponising famine, information, sexual violence and even Ukraine's children. What conversations is my right hon. Friend having with abstentionist countries who are most likely to suffer from famine in order that they encourage Russia to return to the Black sea grain deal?

On the kidnapping of Ukrainian children, which is a form of genocide, no meaningful international action appears to be taking place. Will my right hon. Friend reassure us on that front? Finally, Bellingcat has identified 33 individuals whose sole job is to target civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. Will he reassure us that sanctions are being considered against those individuals whose sole job is to terrorise the Ukrainian public?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for those points. She is absolutely right that it is important that we engage with those countries who have thus far abstained in votes at the United Nations, to remind them that Russia's attack on Ukraine—the invasion of Ukraine—is not just a European issue. It is about the UN charter, territorial integrity and the rule of law, and any and all countries who value those things should show solidarity in their condemnation of Russia's involvement.

My hon. Friend asked about individuals who may be involved in the targeting of civilian infrastructure. She will understand that, of course, we do not discuss intelligence matters and we do not go into detail about future sanctions designations. However, I assure her that we think and act carefully in terms of our response to deter as well as to respond to the issues that she raised. We will of course keep a very close eye on the actions of Russia where it is targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as critical national infrastructure. That will always be an important part of the work that we do.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The renewed cruise missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure this morning were appalling, but, tragically, they are now part of Putin's almost daily arsenal. By attacking residential areas, electricity infrastructure and water supplies, Putin is ordering his troops to carry out war crimes on a daily basis. As an international community, we cannot allow that to happen. Will the Foreign Secretary give the House details about what is being done to assist diplomats on the ground in Ukraine—including UK diplomats—to document war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Russian military so that those incidents can be escalated to the International Criminal Court?

As the war morphs into a protracted conflict, there is an increasing danger of Ukraine fatigue creeping into the UK public. Statistics published recently show that amid hiked UK energy prices, the UK public's support for continuing economic sanctions against Russia has fallen from 73% in March to 41% this month. What are the UK Government doing to militate against Ukraine fatigue? Will they commit to a public campaign to remind the electorate why we are supporting Ukraine and what they can continue doing to help?

Food security is also of grave concern. Twelve grain export ships have left Ukraine today, despite Russia pulling out of the Turkey and UN-brokered grain deal. The need for reliable grain supplies is acute, particularly in regions such as the horn of Africa. Russia, as the aggressor in the war, has already made itself an international pariah, and it cannot continue to do so by actively restricting food supplies to famine and drought-affected regions of the world. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore outline the steps that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is taking alongside international allies to get Russian officials back into talks for the deal? Will he confirm whether UK officials are assisting their Turkish counterparts in their efforts to secure the grain deal?

Finally, will the Foreign Secretary update the House on sanctions on Iran, given that it has supplied drones to Russia that have targeted civilians in Ukraine? He rightly said to the shadow Foreign Secretary that he would not give detail, but will he commit to giving regular updates to the House?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady raises a number of very important points. On Iran, I can assure her that we constantly review our sanctions designations. We will ensure that we respond to any further breaches of the UN Security Council resolution on supplying arms to the conflict.

The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point about the documentation of war crimes. I had meetings with Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, with regard to the documentation of war crimes to ensure that perpetrators know they will be held to account for the actions they have taken.

We recognise that this winter will be tough for people in the UK—our energy support package is designed to alleviate some of the pressure, but we recognise that it will be tough. However, I think the British people instinctively understand that if we slip back from our support of the Ukrainians in this incredibly difficult time, globally, the costs in lives, in food supplies, in energy supplies and to families in the UK will be huge.

As difficult as it is—and I recognise it is difficult for everyone at this time—it is essential that we continue our support for Ukraine, because the costs of inaction will be so much higher.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Tens of thousands of people have been affected by this war directly and thousands of innocent Ukrainian civilians have lost their lives. It is absolutely right that the UK remains steadfast and unwavering in its support for the people of Ukraine. We will be with them for as long as they need us. Globally, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, many millions of the world's most vulnerable have been pushed deeper into hunger, starvation and even famine by Putin's war on food. I was very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend remind us of the fact that the majority of the grain that has come out of the Black sea has gone to low and middle-income countries, because Russian misinformation is trying to tell the world the opposite. May I urge my right hon. Friend and his team of excellent Ministers to use all diplomatic tools to try to get the Black sea grain initiative not only back up and running but extended, and to continue to call out Russian misinformation on that point?

James Cleverly: I put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend for the work she did in her time at the FCDO and for the huge energy she brought to the role. She is absolutely right that we are witnessing the perverse situation where Vladimir Putin is trying to impose even greater hunger on people who are already suffering food insecurity and, in some instances, famine. It is absolutely wrong that he does so, and we call on Russia to resume the Black sea grain deal and to extend it. It is deeply, deeply wrong that the world's poor are forced to suffer even more because Russia has been and is being unsuccessful on the battlefield. I assure her that we will continue to work with Turkey and others to get the deal back in place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): One of the most depressing, upsetting things that I have seen in the past few days is Russian conscripts in floods of tears, saying, "I don't want to be cannon fodder; I'm just going to be cannon fodder." This is a crime against the Russian people as well. I want to ask about the sanctions regime in the UK, because it seems a bit of an own goal and counterproductive if significant people who are being sanctioned by the UK are allowed to have £60,000 a month and £1.5 million to spend on luxurious lifestyles here. And will the Foreign Secretary update us on what has happened to the £3.5 billion from Abramovich's sale of Chelsea, which was meant to have gone to the reconstruction of Ukraine by now?

James Cleverly: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to work with our international counterparts to make sure that our sanctions are as effective as they can be and to continue to put pressure on the people who are funding Russia's illegal and unprovoked war in Ukraine. I will seek to get further details on the specific points that he raised on sanctions. He is absolutely right that, in addition to the terrible suffering that Ukrainians are experiencing because of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russians are also suffering. Mothers who thought that their sons were going to a training exercise have now found out that those soldiers have been killed on the battlefield. Putin has blood on his hands—Ukrainian blood, Russian blood. It is down to him and almost no one else.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the emphasis that Putin is putting on attacking infrastructure, and without in any way asking the Foreign Secretary to be specific, will he reassure the House that our armed forces are paying enough attention to protecting undersea pipelines and internet cables? Between now and the autumn statement, will he have a quiet word with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to say that now is not the right time to be rowing back from a long overdue promise to increase expenditure on defence?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend tempts me to go beyond my brief at the Dispatch Box. All I can say is that I always listen to his advice carefully, and I have no doubt that the Secretary of State for Defence, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will all have listened carefully to the points that he put forward.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is right to make the point about protecting the infrastructure in Ukraine, because we know that, at the moment, the campaign is about weakening the morale of the Ukrainian people. In that context, is he satisfied that there is the international co-ordination to ensure that British efforts and the efforts of other international partners deliver the support that Ukraine needs?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Vladimir Putin clearly went into this conflict believing that the pressure that he asserted on Ukraine would create fragmentation in the Ukrainian political system—it did not. He was expecting that it would create tension in NATO—it did not. He thought that it would split up the EU—it did not. He thought that it would break up the G7—it did not. On every single strategic aim, he has failed. Indeed, he is now looking at a stronger and larger NATO because of his actions. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the international community, if anything, has been brought closer together through our co-ordinated response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and our support to the Ukrainians.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make it clear that if, indeed, any attack did take place on the Russian Black sea fleet, the UK had absolutely no involvement in it? Will he confirm that despite the withdrawal of Russia from the agreement, ships bearing grain have nevertheless left Odesa today, and will he say whether he expects that to continue?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the Black sea grain deal, which is helping to feed people who need international support now more than ever. The claims of the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defence are becoming increasingly detached from reality; as I have said, they are designed to distract the Russian people from the reality of Russian failures on the battlefield. We will continue to shine a light on those failures, and we will continue to support Ukraine in defending itself against that aggression.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): In the announcement that it was pulling out of the deal, Russia said that it would be “risky” for Ukraine to continue to export grain via the Black sea. The only possible risk to ships comes from Russia itself. Further to the question that the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) asked,

if ships are moving out of Odesa, and with reports that the United Nations, Turkey and Ukraine have reached some agreement about ships currently in Turkish waters, does the Foreign Secretary think that there is any prospect that President Putin's bluff will be called, that the ships will continue to be inspected by other parties to the agreement and that they can carry on helping to feed the world?

James Cleverly: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about where the only credible threat to international shipping would come from. If grain ships were attacked or the export of grain were prevented, the world would see who was ultimately responsible for imposing even more hunger on the world, on people in the global south and on people who are already suffering because of food insecurity and famine. The world would see who was truly to blame for imposing greater hardship on people who are already suffering.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I absolutely endorse the support that Ministers are giving to Ukraine, but we have entered a darker chapter: as Putin is up against the wall, he is resorting to non-conventional means. Bearing in mind the escalatory ladder, I suggest that our support therefore needs to move from the battlefield to Ukraine's infrastructure. Odesa is a critical port and the grain ships are not getting out at the scale necessary to feed the world. I suggest that the Foreign Secretary go to the United Nations General Assembly and secure a resolution to create a safe haven around the port, so that Britain can lead the international community in a maritime flotilla to support the grain ships departing from and entering the port.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point about the significance of grain exports from the Black sea, and I have listened to his proposal. Russia needs to immediately reverse its pause on its involvement in Black sea exports. We will look at any options that increase the flow of food to the global south and to the people who need that food more than ever. I take my right hon. Friend's suggestion seriously. Ultimately, we want to do whatever we can to increase grain exports immediately.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I recognise the answers that he has already given about sanctions on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; I encourage him to recognise that there will be support across the House should he deem it fit to take further action, as I would encourage him to.

It is encouraging to hear that the United Nations is standing by ship movements today, but will he elaborate from a diplomatic perspective on the avenues available through the United Nations to increase international support, bearing in mind the veto that Russia continues to have in the P5?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the in-built limitations of the United Nations because of Russia's abuse of its veto. Across the world, 143 countries have voted in condemnation of annexation and 141 have voted in condemnation of the attack. We know that the United Nations is still an incredibly important institution, but Russia's veto limits to some

[James Cleverly]

extent what it can do. We will continue to work with the UN and with Turkey and others to maximise the grain exports through the Black sea so that we can alleviate the hunger felt by the global south.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I am sure that everyone in the House today will share my horror and revulsion at the continual targeting by Russia of non-combatants, and also the lobbing of missiles into civilian areas. Noting the limitations indirectly posed by article 5, can the Foreign Secretary tell us whether any consideration has been given to the deployment of an Iron Dome or Patriot-type system to protect the Ukrainians?

James Cleverly: The UK and our international allies have provided Ukraine with both ground-to-air and air-to-air defence systems. We will continue to assess its defence needs and adjust our support accordingly.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): At the Council of Europe, of which I am a member, President Zelensky suggested that Ukraine had only about 10% of the air defences that it needed to respond to the current onslaught. Much of that onslaught comes from Iranian drones. Given that Iran is in a condition of social unrest, what efforts are the UK Government making to ensure that people in Iran know that the focus of their Government is to send weapons of mass destruction to be used against innocent people—rather than feeding them bread and giving them human rights—so that we can choke off, over time, the supply of these deadly weapons?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman has made a good point. We will continue to take action to discourage the supply to Russia of weapons that might be used in Ukraine, and we will keep under constant review our sanctions packages to choke off the supply of weapons such as drones.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My right hon. Friend has explained what he is doing to urge allies and other countries to provide extra support for Ukraine, but can he now tell us what more we can do in respect of the training of those brave Ukrainians who are fighting in their homeland, perhaps working with our NATO allies?

James Cleverly: I am proud to have been joined on the Front Bench by the Minister for the Armed Forces and Veterans, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey). I am incredibly proud of the work that the British armed forces have done in training members of the Ukrainian armed forces, and we are being joined by an increasingly large number of international allies who are doing likewise. I think it is being demonstrated on the battlefield that what has been decisive is not just the equipment we have supplied or the inherent resolve of the Ukrainian forces, but the technical improvement that our training of those forces has helped to bring about, and I have no doubt that that will continue.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his words. I particularly agreed with his statement that we would not allow Putin to use hunger as global leverage, because doing so is barbaric and condemns to death thousands more than he has already killed.

Given that backdrop, does the Foreign Secretary share my concern that we are now spending only 0.3% of gross national income on aid across the world? We found that out over the weekend. All of us here have campaigned on manifestos specifying 0.7%. Surely the answer now is for us to step up again and ensure that what Putin wants to do cannot be done, because we will be there to ensure that his barbaric act will not have the effect for which he hopes.

James Cleverly: I do not agree with the figures that the hon. Lady has used, but the broader fact is that we continue to support countries in the global south and poor countries around the world—directly, but also by ensuring that grain exports continue; we are helping Ukraine through the Black sea grain initiative—and I can assure her and the House that we will continue to do both. It is important that we re-establish the principle that powerful neighbours cannot invade another country with impunity, and that territorial integrity must be preserved. It is the very people in other parts of the world to whom the hon. Lady referred who will suffer if the message is sent to potential aggressors that we will stand idly by and watch them brutalise their neighbours. We will never do that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we proceed, let me point out that a great many Members still wish to participate in this session, and we have already been under way for 42 minutes. There is plenty of other business that the House has to transact during the rest of today, so may I make a plea for short questions, which will then allow the Foreign Secretary to give short answers?

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating President Zelensky on engaging directly with parliamentarians such as myself at the Council of Europe, where he spoke openly about his needs? It was in answer to a question of mine that he said he had only 10% of what he needed for missile defence systems.

James Cleverly: I congratulate President Zelensky on his engagement with partners, both bilaterally and multilaterally, and I would like to put on record my thanks for the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) does to ensure that these issues are brought to people's attention and for the huge amount of effort he puts into the UK's position on the Council of Europe.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary's statement mentioned Syria as one of the countries at the United Nations that had given Russia comfort, but it is not Syrian civilians who have taken that stance. In fact, they are the very people who know, equally to anyone in the world, about Putin's violence. What is the Foreign Secretary doing at the United Nations or elsewhere to widen the consensus that all civilians in our world deserve protection from Putin's violence, including Syrian civilians?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. We have seen the leadership in Russia and Putin bringing pain and harm on Russian people, and we have seen Assad bringing pain and harm on

Syrian people. We know that this is not being done in their name or with their say-so, and she is right to say that civilians around the world are suffering because of the poor decisions of their brutal leadership, both in Moscow and in Syria.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place; I am delighted to see that he is still there.

I understand that we hear an awful lot about what we and the Americans are giving in direct help to the Ukrainians, but can he clarify to the House the exact scale of what other NATO countries such as Germany and France are giving to Ukraine?

James Cleverly: Time prevents me from going into the level of detail that my hon. Friend has asked for, but I can reassure the House that, while the UK is second only to the United States of America in giving direct military support, other countries around the world and around Europe are very much providing support to Ukraine and have responded with alacrity to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both through NATO and through institutions including the G7, we have become closer as allies, and I am sure that we will continue to stand in solidarity in our support for the Ukrainians in the defence of their homeland.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): My constituent Georgii and many of the refugees supported by the Homes for Ukraine scheme arrived in the UK with their Ukrainian cars and hope to return home as soon as it is safe to do so. Will the Foreign Secretary speak to his colleagues in the Department for Transport about urgently dropping or extending the requirement to exchange Ukrainian number plates for UK plates beyond the current six-month period, which is causing unnecessary stress for those affected?

James Cleverly: I will take note of the point the hon. Gentleman has made, as I am sure my colleagues in the Department for Transport will also have done.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary impose sanctions on Ivan Ryabov, a Russian security official who was shown to have abused Russian females protesting against Ukraine? Would this not show that our sanctions can reach even junior Russians who abuse Russian protesters like that?

James Cleverly: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be unsurprised to hear that we do not discuss future sanctions designations, but the House and my Department will have heard the name he has mentioned and the circumstances in which that sanction might be considered.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. He mentioned the NLAW—the next-generation light anti-tank weapon—which has been tremendously effective in Ukraine. However, it is also a fact that we have not yet put in a contract for its renewal not only in the stocks of the UK Army but for any future use in Ukraine. Why is that, and when will the contract be signed?

James Cleverly: My understanding is that we have given letters of comfort to the NLAW supply chain to stimulate future production. We will, of course, always take action to ensure not only that we are able to

support Ukraine in the defence of its homeland but that we do so without detriment to our ability to defend ourselves.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): UN estimates suggest that the Black sea grain initiative has indirectly saved 100 million people from falling into extreme poverty. When my right hon. Friend goes to the G7 meeting on Thursday, will he raise this topic to see how we can support our key partner, Turkey, in trying to make sure Russia reverses its suspension of this deal?

James Cleverly: I regularly speak to my Turkish counterpart on this issue and others. Turkey is very committed to ensuring that the grain exports continue, and I will continue discussing with Turkey how we can ensure that they continue beyond the lifetime of this agreement.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Russian missile strikes in Kyiv have reportedly left much of the city without water. What more will the Government do, through both expertise and funding, to ensure that Ukrainians have access to clean water?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point about the ability to repair infrastructure. I spoke to His Majesty's ambassador to Kyiv this afternoon about the remarkable speed with which Ukrainian municipal workers are repairing that infrastructure.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) asked about humanitarian assistance, and it will include 856 portable generators to support power for essential public services in Ukraine.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I pay tribute to the extraordinary achievements of the Ukrainian air force in the current circumstances. Can the Foreign Secretary assure me that he will consider what support we can give so that the aerial dimension is not forgotten?

James Cleverly: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will consider that. I am very proud that we have supplied a number of AMRAAM missiles specifically to help the Ukrainians defend themselves against attack from the air. We will keep that under constant review.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In a statement issued in March, the Government said they had created an electricity network support taskforce for Ukraine, bringing together UK commercial suppliers and the Energy Networks Association. The then Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), said:

“We will keep the lights on in Ukraine.”

I thank the Foreign Secretary for mentioning the 856 mobile generators, but will he update the House on the role of the electricity network support taskforce in honouring the former Foreign Secretary's pledge?

James Cleverly: We continue to work with the Ukrainians to help them keep the lights on and the water going, not just in the here and now but into the future. This will help their energy resilience. We will ensure that our support to Ukraine adapts to account for its changing needs and circumstances.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Should not Putin's weaponisation of food be a wake-up call to those African countries, many of them Commonwealth countries, that have perhaps inadvertently bought into Putin's false narrative on the war and recently abstained rather than voting for the UN resolution? They should understand that Russia and Putin are an unreliable partner for Africa.

James Cleverly: The whole world, including the Commonwealth nations and our friends in Africa and other parts of the global south, should recognise that Vladimir Putin is no friend of theirs. He is using their hunger as leverage in his war against Ukraine, and they should be able to see what is happening. We will continue helping to get grain out of Ukraine, to help them put food on their tables.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and answers, and I particularly thank him for the £220 million of humanitarian aid, which is incredibly important. With specific reference to the passage of humanitarian aid, can he confirm that there are still corridors for medical supplies and goods to reach the innocent people caught in the midst of Putin's despicable criminal attacks?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. As well as putting the money on the table, we have to make sure that our support gets to the people who need it. We will constantly look at ways of ensuring that is the case. He will understand that I will refrain from going into details about the aid corridors currently in place.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As the Foreign Secretary will know, the attack in February was not the first invasion of Ukraine by Russia; it has been illegally occupying territory, including Crimea, for the past eight years. Therefore, is he clear that any strike on Crimean territory, particularly on the Sevastopol naval facilities, is a strike on Ukrainian territory, not on Russian territory?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point: this conflict did not start in February. The most recent phase of it started in February, but Ukrainians have been attacked, abused, and occupied by Russian forces for many, many years before that. We must never lose sight of that fact.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): My right hon. Friend spoke about Iran supplying drones to Russia to attack Ukrainians. Will he say a bit more about the implications that has for the nuclear deal the world has with Iran?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend raises an important point, but this is fundamentally a separate issue. Our resolve, and the international resolve, to prevent further nuclear proliferation remains unchanged. We will continue working with our allies to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon, but we will also ensure that we prevent Iran, and indeed anyone else, from exporting arms to Russia that are being used in this conflict in Ukraine.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): It is incredibly worrying that Iran is undermining the Ukrainian defence and putting Ukrainian civilians at risk by supplying Russia with Shahed drones. I understand that we have sanctioned three Iranian commanders, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that he and the Prime Minister are willing to go further if needed and that he will be raising the issue when he meets his counterparts in the G7 this Thursday?

James Cleverly: I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to keep our sanctions package under review. We will respond to any further breaches of the United Nations Security Council resolutions and we will ensure that the message is sent that those people and companies that are supplying arms to Russia in breach of UN Security Council resolutions will be responded to.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): May I say how truly astounded I am at the bravery of the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who have stepped up to defend their homeland? Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the UK is doing all it can, with its allies, to make sure that the Ukrainians receive the necessary training for them to be able to do their jobs?

James Cleverly: At the beginning of the year, at the UN, I said that the Ukrainians would defend their homeland ferociously, and they have done exactly that. My respect for those people—both the professional soldiers, air personnel and sailors in the Ukrainian armed forces before the invasion, and those teachers, builders, catwalk models and former politicians who have taken up arms to defend their country—is enormous. They have the most enormous respect from across the world. I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to support them as they defend themselves against this illegal, unprovoked and barbaric invasion.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. That concludes the statement from the Foreign Secretary. I am pausing for a moment to allow Members who intend to leave the Chamber to do so swiftly and quietly, in order that we can proceed to our next item of business and that we give the dramatis personae the opportunity to be in place.

Western Jet Foil and Manston Asylum Processing Centres

5.9 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Let us make it clear from the beginning that this is a very serious statement on a serious matter that is affecting a lot of people. The Home Secretary will be heard, with dignity.

Suella Braverman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. With permission, I would like to make a statement about asylum processing at Manston and the incident in Dover yesterday.

At around 11.20 am on Sunday, police were called to Western Jet Foil. Officers established that two to three incendiary devices had been thrown at the Home Office premises. The suspect was identified, quickly located at a nearby petrol station, and confirmed dead. The explosive ordnance disposal unit attended to ensure there were no further threats. Kent police are not currently treating this as a terrorist incident. Fortunately, there were only two minor injuries, but it is a shocking incident and my thoughts are with all those affected.

I have received regular updates from the police. Although I understand the desire for answers, investigators must have the necessary space to work. I know the whole House will join me in paying tribute to everyone involved in the response, including the emergency services, the military, Border Force, immigration enforcement, and the asylum intake unit.

My priority remains the safety and wellbeing of our teams and contractors, as well as the people in our care. Several hundred migrants were relocated to Manston yesterday to ensure their safety. Western Jet Foil is now fully operational again. I can also inform the House that the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), visited the Manston site yesterday and that I will visit shortly. My right hon. Friend was reassured by the dedication of staff as they work to make the site safe and secure while suitable onward accommodation is found.

As Members will be aware, we need to meet our statutory duties around detention, and fulfil legal duties to provide accommodation for those who would otherwise be destitute. We also have a duty to the wider public to ensure that anyone who has entered our country illegally undergoes essential security checks and is not, with no fixed abode, immediately free to wander around local communities.

When we face so many arrivals so quickly, it is practically impossible to procure more than 1,000 beds at short notice. Consequently, we have recently expanded the site and are working tirelessly to improve facilities. There are, of course, competing and heavy demands for housing stock, including for Ukrainians and Afghans, and for social housing. We are negotiating with accommodation providers. I continue to look at all available options to overcome the challenges we face with supply. This is an urgent matter, which I will continue to oversee personally.

I turn to our immigration and asylum system more widely. Let me be clear: this is a global migration crisis. We have seen an unprecedented number of attempts to illegally cross the channel in small boats. Some 40,000 people have crossed this year alone—more than double the number of arrivals by the same point last year. Not only is this unnecessary, because many people have come from another safe country, but it is lethally dangerous. We must stop it.

It is vital that we dismantle the international crime gangs behind this phenomenon. Co-operation with the French has stopped more than 29,000 illegal crossings since the start of the year—twice as many as last year—and destroyed over 1,000 boats. Our UK-France joint intelligence cell has dismantled 55 organised crime groups since it was established in 2020. The National Crime Agency is at the forefront of this fight. Indeed, NCA officers recently joined what is believed to be the biggest ever international operation targeting smuggling networks.

This year has seen a surge in the number of Albanian arrivals, many of them, I am afraid to say, abusing our modern slavery laws. We are working to ensure that Albanian cases are processed and that individuals are removed as swiftly as possible—sometimes within days.

The Rwanda partnership will further disrupt the business model of the smuggling gangs and deter migrants from putting their lives at risk. I am committed to making that partnership work. Labour wants to cancel it. Although we will continue to support the vulnerable via safe and legal routes, people coming here illegally from safe countries are not welcome and should not expect to stay. Where it is necessary to change the law, we will not hesitate to do so.

I share the sentiment that has been expressed by Members from across the House who want to see cases in the UK dealt with swiftly. Our asylum transformation programme will help bring down the backlog. It is already having an impact. A pilot in Leeds reduced interview times by over a third and has seen productivity almost double. We are also determined to address the wholly unacceptable situation which has left taxpayers with a bill of £6.8 million a day for hotel accommodation.

Let me set out to the House the situation that I found at the Home Office when I arrived as Home Secretary in September. I was appalled to learn that there were more than 35,000 migrants staying in hotel accommodation around the country, at exorbitant cost to the taxpayer. I instigated an urgent review. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Suella Braverman: I pushed officials to identify accommodation options that would be more cost-effective and delivered swiftly while meeting our legal obligation to migrants. I have held regular operational meetings with frontline officials and have been energetically seeking alternative sites, but I have to be honest: this takes time and there are many hurdles.

I foresaw the concerns at Manston in September and deployed additional resource and personnel to deliver a rapid increase in emergency accommodation. To be clear, like the majority of the British people, I am very concerned about hotels, but I have never blocked their usage. Indeed, since I took over, 12,000 people have arrived, 9,500 people have been transferred out of Manston or Western Jet

[*Suella Braverman*]

Foil, many of them into hotels, and I have never ignored legal advice. As a former Attorney General, I know the importance of taking legal advice into account. At every point, I have worked hard to find alternative accommodation to relieve the pressure at Manston.

What I have refused to do is to prematurely release thousands of people into local communities without having anywhere for them to stay. That is not just the wrong thing to do—that would be the worst thing to do for the local community in Kent, for the safety of those under our care and for the integrity of our borders. The Government are resolute in our determination to make illegal entry to the UK unviable. It is unnecessary, lethally dangerous, unfair on migrants who play by the rules and unfair on the law-abiding patriotic majority of British people. It is also ruinously expensive and it makes all of us less safe.

As Home Secretary, I have a plan to bring about the change that is so urgently needed to deliver an immigration system that works in the interests of the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

5.18 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Yesterday's petrol bomb attack on the Western Jet Foil Centre was truly appalling. I am sure the whole House will condemn it in the strongest possible terms. I echo the Home Secretary's tribute to the emergency services and Border Force staff who responded. However, I must ask her: can she tell me whether counter-terror police and counter-extremism units are involved in the investigation? It does not make sense for them not to be, so why are they not?

I turn to the dreadful conditions at Manston. Four thousand people are now on a site designed to accommodate 1,600 people, with some families there for weeks. Conditions there have been described as inhumane, with risks of fire, disorder and infection, there are confirmed diphtheria outbreaks, reports of scabies and MRSA outbreaks, outbreaks of violence and untrained staff. The Home Secretary said nothing about what she was doing to address those immediate public health crises or the issues of untrained staff.

Behind those problems are deeper failures in the Government's policies on asylum and channel crossings. Decision making has collapsed: the Home Office has taken just 14,000 initial asylum decisions in the past 12 months, compared with 28,000 six years ago. Some 96% of the small boat arrivals last year have still not had a decision and initial decisions alone are taking more than 400 days on this Conservative Government's watch. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and changes to immigration rules have added further bureaucracy and delays, leading to tens of thousands more people waiting in asylum accommodation and more than £100 million extra on asylum accommodation bills because the Government's policies are pushing up the use of hotels and the increase in delays?

There has also been a total failure to prevent a huge proliferation of gangs in the channel. Why has the Home Secretary refused our calls for a major new National

Crime Agency unit with hundreds of additional specialist officers to work with Europol and others to crack down on the gangs, as well as the urgent work needed with France to get a proper agreement in place?

On the Rwanda plan, can the Home Secretary confirm that she has spent an extra £20 million, on top of the £120 million already spent on a policy that she has herself described as "failing" and that her officials have described as "unenforceable" and having a "high risk of fraud"? Is it not now time to drop that unethical and unworkable scheme and to put the money into tackling the backlogs and the criminal gangs instead?

Let me ask the Home Secretary about her own decisions. There are very serious allegations now being reported that the Home Secretary was warned by officials and other Ministers that she was acting outside the law by failing to provide alternative accommodation. Can she confirm that she turned down contingency plans that she was offered that would have reduced overcrowding, as the reports say? There are also legal obligations, including under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2018. Can the Home Secretary confirm that she was advised repeatedly that she was breaking the law by failing to agree to those plans?

One of the meetings on Manston was on 19 October. Can the Home Secretary confirm that she refused those proposals on that date—the same day that she broke sections 2.3 and 1.4 of the ministerial code? Can she tell us whether, in fact, she breached the ministerial code, which provides for Ministers' abiding by the law, three times in a single day? How is anyone supposed to have confidence in her as a Home Secretary given those serious issues?

The Home Secretary referred in her statement to security checks. Those are very important, but her statement is undermined by her own disregard for security. Her letter today makes it clear that the incident over which she resigned was not a one-off and that, contrary to her previous claims that she reported the breach "rapidly" as soon as she realised, she instead had to be challenged several times by one of her colleagues. She has also not answered the crucial questions about security breaches while she was Attorney General. Can she tell us whether she was involved in a leak to *The Daily Telegraph*, reported in that paper on 21 January, on information about Attorney General action on a case involving the security service? Has she sent any other Government documents by WhatsApp, Telegram or other social media?

It has been less than a week since the Home Secretary was reappointed and less than a fortnight since she was first forced to resign for breaching the ministerial code, and every day since her reappointment there have been more stories about possible security or ministerial code breaches. How is anybody supposed to have confidence in her, given the serious responsibilities of the Home Secretary to stand up for our national security, for security standards and for public safety?

The Prime Minister promised that this would be a Government of "integrity, professionalism and accountability". Is the Home Secretary not letting everyone down and failing on all those counts?

Suella Braverman: I will pick up on some of the right hon. Lady's points, but I will not comment on any details relating to the case in question or to the individual under consideration. There has been clear work afoot with the National Crime Agency and all partners to try to tackle the problem of illegal migration. I am very encouraged by the relationship that we have built with the French, and I am grateful to the French authorities for their real commitment to, and work on, tackling this problem.

As I made clear in my statement, on no occasion did I block hotels or veto advice to procure extra and emergency accommodation. The data and the facts are that, on my watch, since 6 September, over 30 new hotels were agreed, which will bring into use over 4,500 additional hotel bed spaces. Since the start of October, it has been agreed that over 13 new hotels will provide over 1,800 additional hotel bed spaces. Also since 6 September, 9,000 migrants have left Manston, many of them heading towards hotel accommodation. Those are the facts; I encourage the right hon. Lady to stick to the facts, and not fantasy. *[Interruption.]*

The right hon. Lady raised other points. My letter to the Home Affairs Committee, sent today, transparently and comprehensively addresses all the matters that she has just raised. I have been clear that I made an error of judgment. I apologised for that error; I took responsibility for it; and I resigned. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Does the House want to hear what the Home Secretary has to say?

Suella Braverman: I apologised for the error, I took responsibility, and I resigned for the error, but let us be clear about what is really going on here. The British people deserve to know which party is serious about stopping the invasion on our southern coast, and which party is not. Some 40,000 people have arrived on the south coast this year alone. For many of them, that was facilitated by criminal gangs; some of them are actual members of criminal gangs, so let us stop pretending that they are all refugees in distress. The whole country knows that that is not true. It is only Opposition Members who pretend otherwise.

We need to be straight with the public. The system is broken. *[Interruption.]* Illegal migration is out of control, and too many people are more interested in playing political parlour games and covering up the truth than solving the problem. I am utterly serious about ending the scourge of illegal migration, and I am determined to do whatever it takes to break the criminal gangs and fix our hopelessly lax asylum system. That is why I am in government, and why there are some people who would prefer to be rid of me. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I can hear who is making the noise, and it will be a long time before they are called to ask a question.

Suella Braverman: Let them try. I know that I speak for the decent, law-abiding, patriotic majority of British people from every background who want safe and secure borders. Labour is running scared of the fact that this party might just deliver them.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, will you allow me first to express my condolences to the families of those affected by the incident at Dover, particularly the family of the man who was responsible, who had very severe mental health difficulties? I think our thoughts ought to be with all of them.

May I also thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration for taking the trouble and the time yesterday to come and see the facilities at Manston for himself and to better understand the problems that we have been facing? May I thank the staff at Manston for the incredible dedication they have shown under very difficult circumstances? They are doing a superb job, and I hope everybody understands that.

The asylum-processing facility at Manston was opened in January to take 1,500 people and to process them daily in not more than 48 hours, but mainly in 24 hours. The facility operated absolutely magnificently and very efficiently indeed, until five weeks ago, when I am afraid the Home Secretary took the policy decision not to commission further accommodation. It is that which has led to the crisis at Manston. Will my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary now give the House an assurance, first, that adequate accommodation will be provided to enable the Manston facility to return to its previous work? Will she honour the undertaking given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who have indicated that this would be a temporary facility, handling only 1,500 people per day, and that it would not be a permanent residence? Will she give a further undertaking that under no circumstances will Manston be turned into a permanent refugee camp?

Suella Braverman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his commitment to safeguarding the people who are at Manston and for representing his local constituents in the area. I was very pleased to meet him a few weeks ago, to hear from him about the situation at Manston. I must gently correct him, however: on no occasion have I blocked the procurement of hotels or alternative accommodation to ease the pressure on Manston. I am afraid that simply is not true. I will repeat it again, but since 6 September, when I was appointed, over 30 new hotels have been agreed to. They would provide over 4,500 additional hotel bed spaces, many of those available to the people in Manston. Also since 6 September, over 9,000 people have left Manston, many of those heading towards hotels, so on no occasion have I blocked the use of hotels.

I gently refer Members of the House who seem to be labouring under that misapprehension to the Home Affairs Committee session last week, when officials and the various frontline professionals who have been working with me on this issue confirmed that we have been working energetically to procure alternative accommodation urgently for several weeks now. There are procedural and resource difficulties and challenges in doing that quickly. I would very much like to get alternative accommodation delivered more quickly, but we are working at pace to deliver contingency accommodation to deal with this acute problem.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and join the whole House in condemning

[Stuart C. McDonald]

the frightening attack at Western Jet Foil and in sending our sympathy to all those who are impacted and, indeed, our thanks to all who responded so professionally.

But responsibility for the disaster and dysfunction at Manston and for the unlawful detention conditions there lies squarely with the Home Secretary herself and her predecessor. She and they knew what was happening, including the numbers arriving, and she was provided with advice that by all accounts she did not act on. She has very carefully said that she did not block hotel use, but did she at any point avoid supporting new procurement? If not, why have we heard that her successor—or predecessor, depending on which way we look at it—had to intervene? Ultimately, what was a functioning facility in the summer is now totally unsafe, and that was on her watch.

Looking to the future, what now? Unfortunately, the Home Secretary offers only the same old failed soundbites, discredited policies and nasty rhetoric. What we need is an expansion of safe legal routes, at a minimum reversing the loss of the routes under the Dublin convention, instead of spending £120 million on a disgraceful Rwanda “dream”. That could have trebled the number of asylum caseworkers working to clear the backlog. Why not fast-track claims from the 1,600 Syrians and Afghans, half of whom have been waiting for more than six months? If we make decisions about their cases quickly—95% or more will get asylum—they can move on and we can free up accommodation.

On the Home Secretary’s letter today, last week she resigned and claimed that she accepted responsibility, but the facts suggest that she tried to dodge it and got caught. Why else did she find time to request that the accidental email recipient delete and forget it, yet notified senior officials and the Prime Minister only after being confronted? Those excuses will not wash.

Ultimately, how can one so-called misjudgment last week be a resignation offence, yet the Home Secretary can stay this week after admitting to six of the same misjudgments? She has said that no documents were top secret, but how many were marked official and sensitive? Did she do similar as Attorney General? How do we know?

The Home Secretary’s return so quickly after an admitted ministerial code breach is a farce. It reflects poorly on her and on the Prime Minister. Both should think again so that someone else can get on with the real work.

Suella Braverman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the letter that I sent today to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I have been up front about the details of my diary on 19 October and co-operative with any review that has taken place. I have apologised; I have taken responsibility; and that is why I resigned.

I hope that the House will see that I am willing to apologise without hesitation for what I have done and any mistakes that I have made, but what I will not do under any circumstances is apologise for things that I have not done. It has been said that I sent a top secret document. That is wrong. It has been said that I sent a document about cyber-security. That is wrong. It has

been said that I sent a document about the intelligence agencies that would compromise national security. That is wrong, wrong, wrong. What is also wrong and worrying is that, without compunction, these assertions have been repeated as fact by politicians and journalists. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to clarify the record today.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I put on record my thanks to all the first responders to the horrific incidents that happened at Dover yesterday. Constituents working at the Dover facility have raised concerns about the current safety at the site. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that type of facility has no place in a busy open port such as Dover and will she look at moving it to a more appropriate secure location immediately? Does she also agree that we cannot keep doing more of the same? We cannot keep paying millions of pounds to the French but seeing ever-increasing numbers of illegal arrivals. It is now time for a new approach with the French to stop the boats leaving French beaches—a joint channel security zone to tackle the issue and bring an end to this illegal immigration activity once and for all.

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for her indefatigable campaigning on the issue. I have been grateful for her direct input on it. This is incredibly difficult; I do not want to sugar-coat the problem. There are multifaceted challenges that we have to deal with. When it comes to Manston, I am concerned, as she is, about the conditions there and have been for several weeks, which is why I have taken urgent action to stand up an operational team to increase the emergency accommodation on the site on a temporary and emergency basis. I was not willing to release hundreds of migrants into the local community—I will not do that.

I will do everything I can to find cost-effective and practical alternatives. We need to find many more sites for accommodation and beds. We are looking at all instances, whether that is hotels or land owned by other agencies, such as the Ministry of Defence or other Government Departments, and we are looking at dispersal around the country. We have to look exhaustively, but it is not easy.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary to her place. I look forward to her attending the Home Affairs Committee on 23 November, as we have not seen a Home Secretary since February. The Committee heard evidence last week that Manston was at breaking point. We were also told by the Home Office’s director general, customer services capability that three hotels were approved a week ago when the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) was Home Secretary. Can this Home Secretary confirm exactly how many hotels or alternative accommodation options she was personally invited by her officials to approve for use during her first tenure as Home Secretary, and how many hotels or alternative accommodation options she actually did grant approval and permission for during her time? Finally, perhaps the Home Secretary might wish to join the Home Affairs Committee when we visit Manston again, for the second time, this week?

Suella Braverman: I read with interest the session that the right hon. Lady conducted last week at her Select Committee, and I just want to put on record my immense

thanks to the officials. The officials she heard evidence from are brilliant—simply the best in the business—and they work day in, day out to try to get the best service. I note that, from questions 67 to 78 approximately, there was a lot of discussion about my involvement and my grip of the situation, and I encourage all Members to read that section of the transcript, which confirms—on the record, by officials with whom I have been working directly—that there has been active procurement of hotels, and there has been a huge amount of work. [HON. MEMBERS: “How many?”] How many? I will repeat myself again: since 6 September, over 30 new hotels have been agreed, providing over 4,500 additional hotel bed spaces. That has been under my watch. That has been when I have been in charge of the Home Office. I am very grateful to all those officials, and I must put on record my thanks to the now departed Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who has been instrumental in assisting in dealing with this problem.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend mentioned Albanians in her statement, and I hear that two thirds of those at Manston are Albanians. Does she have an absolute figure for that? Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that Germany and Sweden, which work to the same immigration accords as we do, allow zero applicants from Albania? Surely, it stands to reason that as an EU-applicant country, a NATO country, a country in the Council of Europe and one that is patently not a war zone, we should not be accepting claims for refugee status from such a country. What is she going to do about that aspect of this problem?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend again raises a very important feature that has emerged over the last six to nine months about the prominence of Albanian migrants arriving on our shores, and he is right. Albania is not a war-torn country, and it is very difficult to see how claims for asylum really can be legitimate claims for asylum. I would also note that we see a large number of Albanian migrants arriving here and claiming to be victims of modern slavery. Again, I really am circumspect about those claims, because Albania is, of course, a signatory to the European convention against trafficking—the original convention that underlies our modern slavery laws—and if those people are genuinely victims of modern slavery, they should be claiming that protection in Albania.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware that one of the problems with the asylum system is the unacceptably long time it takes to process claims. The Home Affairs Committee heard evidence from the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, and he told us that currently caseworkers or decision makers are making 1.3 decisions a week. The Leeds pilot, which has been referred to, has put the number of decisions up to 2.7 decisions a week. Does the Home Secretary not understand that that is far too slow, and what is she going to do about it? Is it not the case that if she spent less time playing to the gallery on immigration and more time dealing with the practical problems, this would be to the benefit of the taxpayer, the Home Office staff who work so hard and the asylum seekers themselves?

Suella Braverman: It is not often that I say this, but I agree with a lot of what the right hon. Lady has just said. She is right; when I arrived at the Home Office in September, I was dismayed to find that, as set out at the Select Committee last week, only 4% of claims waiting in the system have been processed so far, so we have a very slow-moving system. That is unacceptable and it is a big part of the problem, and part of our plan to solve the problem is to speed up asylum processing. We are putting more resources and technology behind it, and we are trying to identify how we can be more efficient. So yes, this is a big feature that is clogging up the system, and we see the pressure playing out at Manston.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Clearly the situation at Manston has become unsustainable because of the record numbers crossing the channel—40,000, and November last year was the month with the highest figures, so we have not seen the end of it. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) said, there are a record number of Albanians: 12,000, up from just 50 two years ago. Following on from his question, what exactly is the arrangement with the Albanian Government about returns? What arrangements is my right hon. and learned Friend looking at to fast-track Albanians, potentially in separate processing centres, helped by those Albanian officials we have allowed to come here to assist? How many Albanians have so far been returned in the last 12 months? How many of them have taken voluntary return payments to return, and of those how many have come back to the UK again?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right to mention the returns agreement, and we want to maximise the deployment of the terms of that agreement. That is a brilliant starting point for trying to accelerate some of the processing, and ultimately the removals, of Albanian nationals. Albanian nationals are received in the same way as other small-boat arrivals. However, due to the excellent relationship built with my Albanian counterpart, we are able to expedite the removal of Albanians who have no reason to be in the UK. We want to maximise that—we want to push forward with it and do so faster.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I would like to read to the Home Secretary a text message that a colleague of mine received this afternoon from an immigration expert:

“Just had a call with Ukraine that has reduced our team to tears—people are facing losing their lives in Kyiv or watching their children freeze in the countryside purely because of delays in processing their visas.

UK Home Office paper pushing and unnecessary waits are costing people their lives in Ukraine.”

That is about Ukraine, not Albania. Is that what the Home Secretary means when she says this Government are taking asylum seriously?

Suella Braverman: I dispute the right hon. Gentleman’s version of events, with respect. Since 2015, the UK has offered a place to over 380,000 men, women and children seeking safety, including from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, as well as many family members of refugees.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly support all that the Home Secretary said in her opening statement: she spoke for the nation in saying we need to control this problem, and she spoke for all those caught up in these tragic events. I hope that all men and women of good will get behind her, and that the Home Office fully supports her in making sure we can speed up processing and return all illegal economic migrants to the safe countries they came from.

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend speaks a lot of sense, as always, and he is right; the British people have had enough of an out-of-control borders system. It is incumbent upon this Government to address that, and I know for a fact that this Prime Minister takes the problem extremely seriously, and I know he will leave no stone unturned until it is fixed.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): There is nothing patriotic about making children suffer, but that is exactly what is happening as a direct result of this Home Secretary's failure to get to grips with processing asylum. She talks as if the hotels are somehow a better option. In my constituency there is one with 150 children squeezed alongside another 350 adults, seven or eight to a room—no notice to the local authority that they would be placed there; no cooking facilities; no school places for these primary school-aged children; no clothes for most of them, especially for the winter weather; no play facilities, if they are allowed out at all from these prisons; no safeguarding as far as any of us can see. If the Home Secretary is so confident that that is meeting her duty of care on behalf of the country, will she publish the contract requirements for how children are housed in hotels and the precise details of the services that they should expect and which we should be proud of as a country dealing with those seeking asylum?

Suella Braverman: We are currently accommodating unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels with a maximum occupancy of 353, and additional available accommodation is coming on stream. I would say to the hon. Lady that it is a fallacy to suggest that we are somehow cutting corners. When I arrived at the Home Office, I was frankly dismayed and appalled to find that we are spending, on average, £150 per person per night—by my standard, that is quite a nice hotel—to accommodate people in hotels. On my review and closer scrutiny of how that decision making was taking place, I identified several four-star hotels around the country that were being procured for the purpose. That, for me, is not an acceptable use of taxpayers' money.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Unsolicited economic migration to the UK via illegal trafficking must be stopped. We must use our limited resources to support valid asylum cases that have not come from a safe country. What steps is the Home Office taking to return illegal immigrants now to their home countries in cases of countries who will accept them?

Suella Braverman: We take removals seriously. Actually, part of the plan to solve the problem is about trying to accelerate the turnaround and processing of people arriving illegally. We have recently had some success in removing people back to Albania within quite a short period of time, but we need to go further and faster.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I gently remind the Home Secretary that it is not illegal to seek asylum? What is illegal is to detain people without a proper basis in law. Will she confirm that she has ignored legal advice that keeping asylum seekers at Manston for more than 24 hours could be illegal detention? Has she been advised that what is happening at Manston may amount to unlawful deprivation of liberty in terms of article 5 of the European convention on human rights, and inhuman and degrading treatment in terms of article 3? Despite her best efforts, we are still bound to comply with the convention by virtue of domestic law. What will she do about all of this? Even if she does not care about the human rights of the people detained at Manston, does she understand that her failure to obey the law may end up costing taxpayers vast amount of money in court fees and damages?

Suella Braverman: I confirm that I have not ever ignored legal advice. The Law Officers' convention, which I still take seriously, means that I will not comment on the contents of legal advice that I may have seen. What I will say is this: I am not prepared to release migrants prematurely into the local community in Kent to no fixed abode. That, to me, is an unacceptable option.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): In the Secretary of State's statement, she spoke of the successes of the UK-French joint alliance cell stopping 29,000 illegal immigrants from crossing. What are her thoughts on doubling those resources and finally eliminating these dangerous crossings?

Suella Braverman: Part of our plan for tackling this issue is about increasing our resources and manpower in order to detect and intercept the organised criminal gangs upstream. That is what part of the work with the French entails, and that is why I have been very encouraged by the discussions I have had with my French counterpart, Minister Darmanin, on how we can work better and more closely together, with our intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies, jointly upstream to try to intercept early on.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is it still explained to incoming Ministers, as it was to me more than 21 years ago, how easily one's mobile phone can be compromised by organised criminals and hostile foreign powers? If so, how was her mobile phone and that of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), compromised in security breaches?

Suella Braverman: I set out those details in the letter today and I have made it clear that there were no issues about national security being compromised.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her dedication and the work that she is doing. What are the prospects of securing an alternative airline carrier to make the Rwanda plan a reality?

Suella Braverman: I am committed to delivering the Rwanda plan, which took a huge amount of work and commitment by my right hon. Friend the Member for

Witham (Priti Patel) and the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and is crucial to our multifaceted approach to the problem. We can look at the Australian experience of tackling a similar problem, and they would say that one very powerful tool was had from the moment at which they could return people or move them out of the territory to Papua New Guinea or Nauru. That had a massive deterrent effect, and that is what we want to deploy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The conditions at Manston are clearly unsafe and inhumane. We know of the suffering that people have experienced there after 12 years under the Government's shameful watch. However, we also understand that there is a lack of accommodation across the country. Why will the Home Secretary not open up a "homes for refugees" scheme so that people can be supported properly in our own communities?

Suella Braverman: While the issue at Manston is indisputably concerning, I do not want us to create alarm unnecessarily. I therefore gently urge the hon. Member not to use inflammatory language. We are aware, for example, of a very small number of cases of diphtheria reported at Manston, but it has very good medical facilities and all protocols have been followed. People are being fed, clothed and sheltered. There are very high numbers—unprecedented numbers—at Manston and we are working at pace to alleviate that pressure and to get people out. We anticipate—hopefully—300 people leaving this evening, and so on throughout the week. We are working urgently to solve the problem.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that it seems virtually impossible to stop large numbers of people landing illegally, does the Home Secretary think that it will be possible to enable those who have landed illegally and have a poor case to be removed promptly without a change in the law? If she thinks that the law has to be changed, which law is it?

Suella Braverman: One of the other plans that we have been working on is to change the law, because unfortunately our laws have too low a threshold—that is why our modern slavery laws are being abused by illegitimate claimants. We also need to take action to accelerate the process and prevent the exploitation of our laws. People are coming here and claiming asylum unfairly and unjustifiably. They are claiming under modern slavery laws and abusing our human rights laws and other protections. Frankly, they are taking advantage of the generosity of the British people.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Manston is supposed to be a short-term holding facility. People are not supposed to be there for more than 48 hours. That means people are being detained illegally in these conditions. Will the Home Secretary tell us how many people have been detained for more than 48 hours as well as how many claims for unlawful detention she is expecting, and at what cost?

Suella Braverman: We are aware that people have been detained, and we have very high numbers at Manston. That is why we are taking really exhaustive steps to ensure

that we can procure alternative sites. We are looking at the dispersal mechanism and at sites in other local authorities around the country. We are looking at hotels—unfortunately, we have no other choice at the moment—and we are looking at other immigration detention or removal centres. So we are looking at a wide range of alternative places at which we can safely accommodate migrants.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement. Importantly, she says that everybody who arrives illegally undergoes essential security checks before they are released. Can she confirm that that applies not just to those who claim asylum, but also to those who land and do not claim asylum and are, in effect, arriving without a visa and are therefore eligible for temporary release from which they may not return?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend is right. The processing is as follows: people arrive and go first to Western Jet Foil where they get dry clothes and are looked after on their immediate arrival on to the territory. They are then taken to Manston for the biosecurity and security checks of the type he has just talked about.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Home Secretary says the system is broken. Well, yes, it is broken when we see the number of people taking dangerous trips across the channel rise year on year on year. Yes, it is broken when it takes longer and longer to deal with individual claims, so it is of greater cost to the British taxpayer. Yes, it is broken when we have thousands of people in completely inappropriate accommodation, which is probably breaking the law and they may end up having to seek compensation against the Government, again threatening the taxpayer. Yes, it is broken when a Home Secretary breaches the ministerial code six times and thinks that she has to step aside for only six days. I believe in the rehabilitation of offenders, but do you not have to serve the time first? Or is there one rule for everybody else and a completely different one for her?

Suella Braverman: I gently refer the hon. Gentleman to the letter I sent today to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, which is clear about the timeline of my actions and decisions. I apologised, I took responsibility and that is why I resigned. This political witch hunt is all about ignoring the facts of the problem, which is the slow processing of asylum claims. That is why we are taking immediate action to bring the asylum backlog down. We have a pilot that is being rolled out. We are putting more resources and decision makers on to the frontline, and we have a different system to assess claims to try to speed up the time that people are waiting for a decision.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I commend my right hon. and learned Friend very strongly for her statement. Does she agree that we must make a clear legal and enforceable distinction in statute law between genuine refugees and illegal economic migrants, and deal with this problem once and for all?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is spot on. We have to tell the truth to the British people. These people are not all refugees fleeing war and persecution, having suffered human rights violations. They are coming here

[*Suella Braverman*]

often at their own will, and often having paid tens of thousands of pounds to procure a dangerous and lethal journey illegally across the channel, because they know that our laws are not fit for purpose and they can get away with a spurious claim.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It has been widely reported that children are being detained at the Manston site. Can the Home Secretary confirm—her Minister could not confirm it last week—how many children are on site right now?

Suella Braverman: We do not routinely detain children or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children at Manston, but a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were accommodated, not detained, for a brief period this summer while accommodation was identified. Of course, people were evacuated to Manston yesterday, including children.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If people do not want to go to Manston, they can stay in France. We all know what is really behind these unpleasant personal attacks. This Home Secretary is the only one with the guts, determination and legal knowledge to reform our ridiculous human rights law, and detain these people and send them back. That is the only way we are going to deal with this issue. Those who constantly make these personal attacks on somebody who has made just one mistake and apologised should remember the old motto: understand and judge not. Has she the determination to amend our ridiculous laws?

Suella Braverman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to change the law. There are too many people coming here and making spurious human rights claims, protracting the asylum application system. They know they can put in appeal after appeal. They can challenge decisions and spend a lot of time here in full knowledge of the fact that they are not genuine asylum seekers.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee report, “Channel crossings, migration and asylum” showed that it takes on average 550 days to process unaccompanied children. The report also illustrated that some unaccompanied children go missing from their hotels, sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. What is the Home Secretary doing to find those children and to protect them from criminal or sexual exploitation?

Suella Braverman: Well, of course, it is very serious when a child goes missing, particularly in those circumstances. When it happens, we work very closely with local authorities and the police to operate a robust missing persons protocol. We have also changed the national transfer scheme so that all local authorities with children’s services must support young people. We need to identify and ensure proper risk assessments so that we have the proper protections in place to ensure this does not happen.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I declare an interest as a member of the RAMP Project. Returning to the issue of children, we have seen terrible accounts of children sleeping on mats at Manston.

Can the Home Secretary reassure the House that no children are being kept at Manston for longer than 48 hours and that proper safeguarding procedures are in place? Will she let us know what work is being done with Kent County Council to make sure that the children who are there are being safeguarded? Will she please urge the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) to come to the Women and Equalities Committee, where we are doing an inquiry into the asylum system? He is not available this Wednesday, but can he make it as soon as possible please?

Suella Braverman: We take extremely seriously our duty of care towards children and young people who are in the system. As I said, there are delays in the system because of the extortionate amount of cases due to be processed. We are working to prioritise applications from children and young people where possible. We want to increase overall decision making, numbers and capacity, so that children are processed far more quickly than others.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Home Secretary has come to the House today and announced to us that the immigration system is broken. Can she tell us who has been in power for the last 12 years?

Suella Braverman: I tell you what the British people need to know. They need to know that it was the Labour Government who oversaw mass migration and, effectively, a de facto open borders policy with record levels of immigration to this country. The Labour party would continue to allow uncontrolled borders. It would cancel the Rwanda scheme. It would not take any action to stop illegal migration and it would make a mockery of our borders.

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of concerns I have raised recently about the lack of joined-up planning between the Home Office, Serco and local authorities regarding asylum accommodation, and the specific concerns I have raised regarding the use of a hotel in my constituency. Will she meet me and the Staffordshire Leaders Board, who are keen to ensure a joined-up approach to asylum dispersal through improved communication between local authorities, Serco and the Home Office?

Suella Braverman: Coming into the Home Office in September has shown me how the decision-making process behind choosing hotels goes on. I have heard from several colleagues their concerns about the use of hotels. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and her colleagues to hear about concerns in her local area. We need to make them much more evenly distributed. We need to make sure that areas are taking their fair share. Ultimately, we need to ensure that people have a bed and a room to stay in, because that is where the problem originates.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): You may remain seated, if you wish, to ask your question, Allan. I call Allan Dorans.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Good evening. I am sure all Members will join me in thanking the staff undertaking the difficult task of keeping everyone safe in these challenging circumstances. Will the Home Secretary give firm assurances today that members of the Prison Officers Association and other staff working at Manston will remain free from personal liability for any illegal decisions by the Government around extending detention?

Suella Braverman: We are always concerned about the personal responsibility and safety of the staff at Manston. Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to every single person who has been working on the frontline, particularly over the past few days when the issues have been quite chronic, quite acute and incredibly tough for them. They are doing a brilliant job and we will do everything to ensure that their professional positions are safeguarded.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): We need to change the definition of “asylum”. Many people in these centres and hotels are illegal migrants. Many of them are economic migrants who are taking a chance by crossing the English channel. If people come here illegally, why can we not just deport them?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend raises an important point and he is absolutely right. Other European countries take a very different approach to the consideration and processing of asylum claims. The reality is that once someone makes an asylum claim, we are duty-bound to consider it. What is very good about the Rwanda scheme is that it means that the asylum claim will be considered in Rwanda, so we will be able to physically remove people before that long delay takes place.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): There have consistently been 1,500 asylum seekers in hotels in my constituency—I think that is the largest number in any constituency—and I welcome them. I congratulate the local agencies, the local voluntary sector and the local churches, gurdwaras and mosques for all the support that they have given to those people because of the experiences that they have gone through. Many of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. However, the situation was meant to be resolved by relocation and the fast processing of cases. When they are processed, the bulk of people are, I believe, accepted as genuine asylum seekers. We are now into our second year and beyond and there is a need to review the resources that go into local areas such as mine, particularly to support the local NHS, local schools, the local authority and the local voluntary sector. Will the Home Secretary initiate that review as rapidly as possible? We want to do all we can to assist such people, but we need the local resources to do that.

Suella Braverman: As I have set out, there are challenges in securing the sufficient accommodation, full stop—whether that means hotels or dispersal accommodation. That is due to the limited private rental market stock. We work with local authorities to ensure that there is sufficient support for people who arrive in those areas, but there is a definite pressure—financial and otherwise—due to people being accommodated for long periods of time around the country.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Now then. Albanian criminals are leaving Albania, which is a safe country, and the same criminals then set up shop in France. They then leave France, which is a safe country, and come across the channel to the UK. When they get into accommodation, the Opposition parties say that the accommodation is not good enough for them. Does the Home Secretary agree that if the accommodation is not good enough for them, they can get on a dinghy and go straight back to France?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right: the average cost per person per night in a hotel is £150. By my standards, that is quite a nice hotel. Therefore, any complaints that the accommodation is not good enough are, frankly, absolutely indulgent and ungrateful.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Five separate sources told *The Sunday Times* that the Home Secretary was advised that “the legal breach” at Manston “needed to be resolved urgently by rehousing the asylum seekers in alternative accommodation.”
 Are all five lying?

Suella Braverman: As I said, I am very happy to confirm—by reference to the timeline, effectively—that I have been aware of this issue for several weeks. I would love to be able to magic up thousands of beds overnight. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. As a result of my concerns, which I identified several weeks ago, we have put in place a whole operational command to try to increase the capacity of accommodation and ease the pressure on Manston, but it takes time.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is not the reason why Sweden and Germany do not countenance asylum seekers from Albania the fact that those countries do not have laws against modern slavery that are being abused and exploited by Albanian gangs?

Suella Braverman: As I said, Albania is a signatory to the European convention on action against trafficking in human beings. That is the originating international convention, which underlines our modern slavery laws. There is absolutely no reason in law why an Albanian national cannot claim modern slavery protection in Albania.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I do not think that it was unkind of my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) to remind the Home Secretary that the system that she has rubbished time and again today is a product of 12 years of Tory Government.

Staff who are employed at Manston are extremely anxious about their responsibilities and roles and how law-breaking decisions affect them. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that staff will remain free from personal liability for any illegal decisions taken by others, including Ministers, about extended detention?

Suella Braverman: I am very proud of this Government’s track record on helping some of the most vulnerable people come to this country from some of the most dangerous parts of the world. Fifty-five thousand visas have been issued under the Ukraine family scheme and

[*Suella Braverman*]

there have been 138,000 Ukrainian sponsorship scheme visas. Fifteen thousand individuals were evacuated from Afghanistan under Operation Pitting and 5,000 people have arrived in the year since, and 20,000 people will be resettled under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. That is a record of which I am proud.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke are appalled by the number of illegal economic migrants coming across the English channel. Again, Stoke-on-Trent, which currently has more than 800, is being asked to carry the burden, with an attempt to try to place more in the North Stafford Hotel. Will my right hon. and learned Friend immediately stop that abuse of Stoke-on-Trent and instead put illegal economic migrants in places with open border and free movement supporters, such as in the shadow immigration Minister's area?

Suella Braverman: I was grateful for the time that my hon. Friend gave me, with his Stoke colleagues, to explain the exact difficulty in Stoke. I have identified that there is a disproportionate distribution of refugees throughout the country in hotels. We need to make that much more equivalent, much more cost-effective and fair.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In contrast to Labour's commitment to employ 100 extra specialist National Crime Agency officers to tackle the criminal gangs upstream, the Home Secretary's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), asked the NCA to draw up plans for a 40% reduction in staff. Will this Home Secretary explain her plans for staffing and how she intends to improve collaboration with the French on that problem?

Suella Braverman: Working collaboratively with the French is a key component in solving this problem. The simple truth is that we cannot do this alone. That is why I am very pleased that we have a relationship with the French and I am very keen to amplify that. That will involve greater surveillance between the French and British authorities; greater intelligence co-operation and interception upstream between the French and the British authorities; and joint working at all points in the system. That co-operation is vital.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): As I am sure the Home Secretary knows, she has my full support in doing whatever she can to stop illegal migration into this country. We have had several conversations about this issue, but does she share my concerns about putting illegal immigrants in places across the UK that do not have the infrastructure or the expertise to look after them? Also, will she commit to ensuring that she talks to Government Members when illegal migrants might come into their constituencies to make sure that we can represent our constituents properly?

Suella Braverman: Ultimately, we need to bear down on the asylum backlog so that fewer people are in the UK waiting for a decision. We also need to stop the use of hotels at £6 million a night.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): During her first disastrous spell in the role, the Home Secretary ignored legal advice from her officials that explicitly set out the unlawfulness of the inhumane treatment of migrants at the Manston centre. That is not inflammatory language; that is fact. As if that were not bad enough, she has now admitted to breaking the ministerial code on six separate occasions. How on earth can she stand at the Dispatch Box with a straight face and try to defend cruelty towards the most desperate of people? Doesn't she need to take a look in the mirror to see who is a threat to national security and accept that she is totally unfit for the job?

Suella Braverman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the letter I sent today, in which I have been very fulsome in the details of the circumstance of 19 October. I have apologised for the error and taken responsibility, and that is why I resigned.

I have not ignored or dismissed any legal advice with which I have been provided. I cannot go into the details of that legal advice because of the Law Officers' convention. That is part of the decision-making process that all Ministers go through. We have to take into account our legal duties not to leave people destitute; I have to take into account the fact that I do not want to prematurely release hundreds of migrants into the Kent community; I have to take into account value for money; I have to take into account fairness for the British taxpayer.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her place and thank for her all the courageous efforts that she is making to deal with a very difficult problem. Opposition Members' answer is "Let them all in." That is totally, totally unacceptable.

One solution, surely, would be to return these illegal refugees to the countries from whence they came, if indeed that is possible—to Albania, for example. With how many countries is my right hon. Friend negotiating to do so? Has she succeeded in any of those negotiations?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right. The Labour party does not have any solutions to the problem, so it would rather spend airtime on a distraction. That is what this is all about.

Yes, we are having some success with returning people more swiftly to Albania. It is early days and I do not want to overplay it, because it is still very difficult legally, but those agreements with safe countries are vital to ensuring that people who come from a safe country—not from persecution, not fleeing war—can be legitimately returned because they are not here for asylum.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Home Secretary is responsible for national security. If she were made aware of a Government employee—a civil servant—who, despite apologies, had been sacked for sharing Government material several times on their private email or device, would she sanction their re-employment?

Suella Braverman: As I have made clear, I am very willing to apologise for mistakes that I have made, but what I am not willing to do is apologise for things that I have not done. As I have said, it is not right that there has been a breach of national security. It is not right

that there was a document about security matters, intelligence agencies or law enforcement. Those things are simply not true.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): In the words of the Home Secretary, “The system is broken.” After 12 years of Tory Government, the asylum system is broken. If she is saying that we have no solutions, she can press on the Prime Minister the need to call a general election and let the electorate decide who they trust more. The recent revelations—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. All hon. Members can see what time it is. We have five hours of business ahead, plus votes. We need questions, not statements—a question, please, Mr Ali.

Tahir Ali: The recent revelations of conditions at Manston processing centre highlight the complete and utter failure of leadership at the Home Office. Will the Home Secretary do the decent thing once again, as she did on 19 October? Will she resign from her position because of the conditions at Manston?

Suella Braverman: I am very clear about what this Government’s priority is. It is about tackling the scourge of illegal migration, taking a firm line, changing the law where our laws are being abused, working collaboratively with the French, ensuring we are removing people who are not meant to be here and ensuring that the British people can have confidence in their borders.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Many people in my constituency are worried about paying their heating bills, many people in my constituency are concerned about getting GP appointments, and many of my hotels are full up with illegal migrants. Does the Home Secretary appreciate the sense of unfairness that my constituents feel? When will legislation be introduced to resolve the situation?

Suella Braverman: Yes, I appreciate the seriousness of the issue. It has been my No. 1 priority since September. It is unacceptable that we are spending £6 million a day on hotel accommodation for asylum seekers. It is unacceptable that we have 35,000 asylum seekers in hotels distributed around the country. We need to bring that to an end. We need a comprehensive plan of alternative sites, we need to speed up our processing of asylum, we need to remove people from the UK more quickly, and ultimately we need to change our law. We will introduce legislation later this year to ensure that there is no longer any abuse of our laws.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a member of RAMP, the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project.

I have been listening carefully. I would like to ask the Home Secretary again: how many extra hotel rooms has she personally procured in her position? In her letter of resignation, she wrote:

“Pretending we haven’t made mistakes, carrying on as if everyone can’t see that we have made them, and hoping that things will magically come right is not serious politics.”

Does she agree that she has made yet another mistake, that she should accept responsibility, and that she should resign?

Suella Braverman: I am very pleased to repeat for the record that since 6 September, under my watch, over 30 new hotels have been agreed. They will provide over 4,500 additional bed spaces to be brought into use.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The Prime Minister is six days into his summer pledge to fix this crisis within 100 days, so I hope—and my constituents in Workington hope—that the Home Secretary is getting the support she needs around the Cabinet table. Among those held, what is her assessment of the scale of abuse of our modern slavery laws?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the point. Let me say two things. First, the Prime Minister is absolutely committed to fixing this problem. I have no doubt whatever about his determination to fix it once and for all. I have huge confidence in him and am grateful for his support operationally on this.

With modern slavery laws, it is not just about people coming here on the boats and claiming modern slavery, which effectively buys them a year because it takes 400 days on average for a modern slavery claim to be processed, so they know that they will be accommodated in the UK free of charge. It is even worse than that: there are serious foreign national offenders in this country who have served sentences of several years for sex offences, drug offences or other serious offences. When they finish their sentence and the UK authorities want to deport them, what do they do? They claim to be a victim of modern slavery.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is absolutely essential that the pressures on the Manston centre be relieved as soon as possible. It is also essential that we do not simply replicate its conditions in concentrations of hotels. I have a ward in which so many hotels are being commissioned, including two more this weekend, that the ratio is 800% above Home Office guidelines. The local authority is getting virtually no support to manage it, and no capacity at all is being provided to the health service for the very real health issues that need to be dealt with. Will the Home Secretary ensure that Home Office officials meet me immediately to discuss how we can ensure that, when asylum seekers come into these hotels, they are properly managed and dispersed?

Suella Braverman: I would be very glad for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the issue in detail. My review is looking into the process of identification of hotels around the country. We are seeing a real geographical imbalance in where they are located: there is real pressure in certain places, while other places are not taking people. We need to bring some equivalence to the process, and ultimately we need to bring it to an end. We need to make it more cost-effective, but ultimately we need to be processing people more quickly.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): We have heard yet again today that Opposition Members want to prioritise the welfare of illegal immigrants. My priority and, I believe, the priority of Conservative Members is our constituents who are desperate for social housing or who are sofa surfing. Many of them are women and

[*Marco Longhi*]

children. Is it not an outrage that we are spending £2.5 billion a year when we will soon be asking those very same people to share the burden of further cuts to public services?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. The fact is that we are receiving an unprecedented number of people coming into this country, many of whom are coming illegally. They require accommodation. That is putting excess pressure on our current housing stock, whether it is hotels, the private rented market, or beds in other sorts of building. Ultimately, we do not have enough space for these people and we need to find it quickly. It is very difficult. It will be done, but it will take time.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am trying to get everyone in, but Members are going to have help me. I ask them please to focus on the question rather than a long preface.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her endeavours to deal with a truly difficult and complex situation. May I ask her what steps are in place to ensure that asylum centres are able to provide a basic standard of mental health care for those affected by the disgraceful action that took place at the weekend? Can she ensure that asylum seekers are safe while they are waiting for the determination of their applications, as is the law in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Suella Braverman: As I have said—and I will reiterate it again and again—I am very grateful for the brilliant response from the emergency services, the authorities and everyone at Western Jet Foil and Manston, yesterday and subsequently, in dealing with this incident. We are making sure that they are well supported. We will need more staff because of the increased numbers—I am not going to mislead the hon. Member on that—but we are trying to make arrangements to ensure that they are supported so they are not overburdened.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): May I welcome the Home Secretary back to her rightful place on the Front Bench? She has the support of the millions of Britons who are just hoping that one day we may finally get a grip on the small boats crisis. The Home Affairs Committee has been told that between 1% and 2% of the entire male population of Albania—10,000 men—have arrived in the UK in the past year. Why on earth are we accepting asylum claims from Albania when countries such as Germany and Sweden do not?

Suella Braverman: We have to ensure that our asylum laws are fit for purpose. Some great achievements have been secured by the passage of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and they are going to be operationalised in due course. However, my hon. Friend is right: we need to change our laws to ensure that people are not abusing our legal framework.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Yesterday, in a horrifying attack, a man threw petrol bombs at Tug Haven immigration centre in Dover. Does the Home Secretary consider that to be an act of terrorism? If not, why not—and will she unequivocally condemn all those who promote hatred towards migrants?

Suella Braverman: Of course, I am not going to comment on the particular details of this case. It is a very sad case and a very worrying case, and I am very concerned about the safety and security of the sites at Western Jet Foil and Manston. We evacuated the people from Western Jet Foil to Manston, and they are now back at Western Jet Foil. There has been a huge amount of effort by the authorities and I am very grateful to them.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that anyone listening to these exchanges could only conclude that Opposition Members are more interested in illegal economic migrants than in law-abiding British people?

Suella Braverman: As my hon. Friend will know, one of the promises in the 2019 manifesto was to reduce overall numbers when it came to migration, and also to fix the problem of illegal migration. He and I both campaigned to leave the European Union, and 17 million people voted for control over their borders. That is what this Government will deliver.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The Refugee Council has demanded a taskforce to clear the 120,000 backlog of asylum seekers, most of whom are living in appalling, overcrowded, unsafe and inhumane circumstances, and the cost of those in hotels is, by the Home Secretary's own admission, about £5.6 million. The council has also called for the Government to convene a summit of refugees and migration experts, local authorities and housing providers to examine options for short and long-term suitable accommodation for people seeking asylum. Will the Home Secretary do that?

Suella Braverman: As I have said, I am very concerned about how we accommodate people who are waiting for their asylum claims to be processed. We need to bear down on that backlog so they are not waiting for so long and can get a decision, whether that be to remove them, or for them to be here on a legal basis. We need to ensure that the accommodation is cost-effective, lawful and reasonable.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I make no apology for prioritising the welfare of my constituents who sent me here. I do not wake up every day worrying about the welfare of people who have entered our country illegally and shown scant regard for our laws. It is for those reasons that I am so concerned about the Novotel situation. However, does the Home Secretary agree that it is bad—we should not have illegal immigrants in hotels—but ultimately this will not be nipped in the bud unless we get fully behind Rwanda? On the definition of a refugee, we know so many people who get refugee status are not refugees—they are economic migrants and they should be sent back.

Suella Braverman: I think my hon. Friend is right. We need to call out the misrepresentation of this problem. It is not the case that these are all refugees fleeing persecution, war-torn countries, conflict or human

rights violations. Many of the people arriving here in small boats are actively and willingly procuring those journeys. They are often paying tens of thousands of pounds for those journeys. They are coming here knowingly and willingly, and they are coming here for economic reasons.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary tell us how many, if any, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have been accommodated at Manston or Western Jet Foil, and what arrangements she is making to keep them in safety in hotels, properly supervised and safeguarded?

Suella Braverman: As far as I am aware, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are not routinely detained at Manston, but what I will say is that a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were accommodated—not detained—for a brief period in the summer while accommodation was being identified and of course, overnight people have been evacuated to Manston from Western Jet Foil, and that will have included some children.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The issues that we are discussing this afternoon are symptomatic, in the main, of illegal immigration. First, may I commend the Home Secretary for her stated intention to deal resolutely with the small boats crisis, and secondly, may I ask her exactly what primary legislation we might expect—primary legislation is needed—and when we might expect it?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for his observations. Ultimately, he is right. We need to be straight with people. There is an influx, an unprecedented number of people coming to this country. They are claiming to be modern slaves, they are claiming asylum illegitimately, and they are effectively economic migrants. They are not coming here for humanitarian purposes. We therefore need to change our laws. We need to ensure that there is a limitation on the ability to abuse our asylum laws, and we need to ensure that our modern slavery laws are fit for purpose and cannot be exploited by illegitimate claimants.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. May I remind the Home Secretary to face the microphone? I cannot quite hear everything that is being said, and *Hansard* may have difficulties as well.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary's letter today outlined six breaches. She used a personal device to send official emails, using a personal Gmail address. When I receive emails through Gmail, I assume that they are personal emails. What assurances can the Home Secretary give the House that none of those emails was forwarded to third parties, and what investigations have been made to establish that those personal Gmail emails were not hacked by any foreign powers?

Suella Braverman: I have answered this question, but for repetition's sake, I will say that I set out all the details in the letter of 19 October. None of those emails was forwarded to anyone else. I am here to focus on the task in hand, which is the situation at Manston and how we are going to bear down on our asylum backlog. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman's constituents would be more interested in that, too.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary's robust approach to this issue, which is a matter of fairness that is hugely important to my constituents. Increasingly, young men are arriving in the UK and later claiming to be unaccompanied children. At that point, the local authority has to treat them as looked-after children, and as they are claiming to be 17, we have to look after them until they are 25 years old. The average cost of a looked-after child is over £100,000 a year, and I think my constituents would be horrified to learn that their council tax is being spent on that when it is intended for public services. Can my right hon. and learned Friend commit to looking at these rules and to making sure that these extortionate costs, which are hammering funds intended to support my constituents with public services, can be changed? Does she agree that it will be impossible for the public to trust that our immigration policies are properly robust and fair as long as people can arrive here illegally from a safe country and stay here at the expense of UK taxpayers?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend hits on a really important aspect of the problem, which is people who are coming here and claiming to be children. We have seen this trend over several years. What I would say about Albania is that we are getting many Albanian people coming here and the majority of them are adult single males. They are not, by majority, women, children or elderly people. The claim of being a child is something we are going to clamp down on, and in the new year we will be delivering more robust age assessment procedures so that there will be less abuse of this very problem.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When the Home Secretary said that Indian migrants represented the largest number of visa overstayers in this country, was that based on a Home Office briefing? Would she consider putting some details in the Library so that we can all see the extent of the problem to which she was referring?

Suella Braverman: I am keen to ensure that we honour our manifesto commitment, which is to bring overall migration figures down and clamp down on the scourge of illegal migration. I am keen to support the Government—I see the Minister of State, Department for International Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) here—in their negotiations on a historic deal with India. Great friends, great allies, with whom a great partnership can be forged.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that those who campaigned to take foreign criminals off flights, those who obstruct us from implementing our Rwanda scheme and those who continue to encourage the shameful behaviour of so-called charities and activist lawyers have done nothing but contribute to this criminal activity and to a system now bursting at the seams?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I speak to our heroic Border Force officials on a regular basis and they tell me about their first-hand experience. What they have seen is repeated and vexatious claims. They see people arriving and not making a

[*Suella Braverman*]

claim, then they might see a lawyer and suddenly come up with a claim after they have seen their lawyer. They make repeated and late claims as well, because they know that that is how to game the system. There are real concerns about the practice of some lawyers—not all lawyers, but some—and I encourage the authorities to take action.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): So is the Home Secretary acknowledging that there are human beings at the Manston centre who are being unlawfully detained for long periods? If so, what assessment has her Department provided to her of the prospect of someone issuing a legal challenge against her Department for this unlawful detention?

Suella Braverman: I am very clear that we have too many people at Manston, as of today, as we have done for some time now. That is why we are taking urgent steps to remedy the problem.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The Home Secretary is absolutely right to say that we need to break the business model of the people smugglers and that we need to stop the boats. Does she agree that the Opposition's suggestion of enhancing safe and legal routes is a mirage, because no matter how much we expand them—unless we expand them to unlimited amounts—there will still be people willing to take the journey? So the only way we can stop this is by making sure that the people who take the illegal route do not get to stay in this country.

Suella Braverman: We have already several safe and legal routes through which people who are genuine asylum seekers can make the application. As I have said, I am proud of our record of welcoming people who are genuinely fleeing persecution, war, conflict and human rights violations, but we cannot accept a situation where people are bypassing those routes—jumping the queue, effectively—on illegitimate bases and making fabricated claims to be victims.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary blamed her predecessor for the crisis that she has inherited twice. Indeed, the Home Office's own impact assessment of the Nationality and Borders Bill said that it risked leading more people to taking desperate routes to the UK, as we have seen, so why is she doubling down on the same approach? I have many constituents who have been waiting years for asylum decisions. What is her target for processing claims? When will she clear the backlog? Does she agree that the cost to the taxpayer would be reduced by granting the right to work to those whose claims have not been processed within six months, as is supported on both sides of the House and overwhelmingly by the public?

Suella Braverman: I have to disagree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of what I have just said. I do not criticise my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). She achieved a huge amount during her time as Home Secretary, including passing the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which will take a massive step forward in dealing with the

problem. That is something that the hon. Gentleman voted against. She also secured the Rwanda agreement, a landmark partnership with our friends in Rwanda, to tackle this problem head-on for the first time. I am very grateful for her work and her contribution.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Of course we have moral obligations to asylum seekers, and it may well be the case that conditions at Manston are unacceptable, but what is totally unacceptable is the fact that every month thousands of young men arrive in this country from a safe third country and that many of them have set off from a safe third country in the form of Albania. There have been 40,000 this year alone, which is half the size of the British Army. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend shares the dismay at the situation felt by those on the Government Benches, unlike those on the Opposition Benches, who seem from their questions today to be concerned only to advocate an open border policy and to take pot shots at a Minister who is uniquely committed—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Please, Mr Kruger—a question.

Danny Kruger: My question is: will the Home Secretary assure the House that she will not be deflected from her strategy of deterring the illegal migration that we are seeing?

Suella Braverman: What a great question from my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. What is more, we are identifying, particularly with the young, single men who are coming from Albania, that they are either part of organised criminal gangs and procuring their journey through those nefarious means, or they are coming here and partaking in criminal activity, particularly related to drugs—supply and otherwise. In fact, a few weeks ago I attended a raid with members of the National Crime Agency where they arrested a suspected Albanian people smuggler in Banbury. This is a criminal problem. There are many people coming here with criminal intent and behaving in a criminal way. We need to stop it.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): At the recent Conservative party conference, the Home Secretary said that it was her “dream”, indeed her “obsession”, to see pictures of planes taking off for Rwanda on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*—it had to be the *Telegraph*, of course. Does she appreciate how offensive, disturbing and anti-humanitarian that statement is, particularly when we bear in mind the true perspective that there are more than 80 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world, that the UK takes proportionally fewer refugees than many other European countries, and that the Home Office's own figures from this year show that over 70% of asylum claims are successful, which belies all the propaganda that these are economic migrants?

Suella Braverman: I will tell the hon. Gentleman what I find offensive and disturbing. It is the sight of thousands of people coming to these shores illegally without a valid asylum claim, taking advantage of our generosity, abusing our laws and being accommodated free of charge. It is unfair, it is unacceptable and it is not right.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): So far this year, 12,000 Albanians have entered the United Kingdom through small boat crossings of the channel, and 10,000 of those are adult single males. As commander Dan O'Mahoney told the Home Affairs Committee, the main driver of that activity is the strength of organised Albanian criminal gangs in the north of France and the transfer of that behaviour to the United Kingdom, together with the determination of people to work on the black market. There is no reason for these people to be here. We should follow the route of other European countries and ensure that they are returned immediately to Albania. What discussions has my right hon. and learned Friend had with her Albanian counterpart to address this important issue?

Suella Braverman: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. He identifies exactly the problem we are dealing with, and it needs a multifaceted approach that includes deploying and operationalising our returns agreement with Albania and ensuring we take robust action against the many people coming here from Albania with illegitimate aims.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Home Secretary is a security risk. She said more than once in her letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, that 19 October was the only time she used her personal email to send Home Office documents to people outside Government. Does that include other, non-secure networks such as messaging services? Does it include any insecure communication inside Government? And does it include the time she spent in other Departments, especially her tenure as Attorney General, which lasted over a year compared with the few chaotic weeks she has been Home Secretary?

Suella Braverman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the letter I sent today, which sets out all the details of the actions, the decisions and the rationale behind the events of 19 October. I have apologised for the mistake and taken responsibility, which is why I resigned.

The hon. Gentleman's party has no solutions for the problem we are dealing with. If Labour was in charge, it would be allowing all the Albanian criminals to come to this country. It would be allowing all the small boats to come to the UK, it would open our borders and totally undermine the trust of the British people in controlling our sovereignty.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Can the Home Secretary tell me how many places in alternative accommodation she approved in September? When was the first of those places signed off? When was the first person able to be housed in that accommodation signed off? If she does not have those figures to hand, will she agree to write to me with them at the earliest opportunity?

Suella Braverman: I will not bore the Chamber by repeating my answer to a question that I have now been asked on several occasions. The hon. Gentleman will be able to check the record for the specific number of hotels and beds procured during my tenure. I am very glad that we have taken urgent action to deal with this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and for answering questions for 18 minutes short of two hours.

Points of Order

6.52 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In July, the Prime Minister was recorded saying that, as Chancellor, he had changed funding formulas to benefit better-off communities at the expense of deprived parts of the country. On Sunday, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities told Sky News that this was a direct response to a question from someone from Thanet, one of the most deprived parts of the south-east. It has since become clear that that is not the case. A video emerged yesterday showing that the questioner is a councillor from Tunbridge Wells who did not once mention Thanet, as the Secretary of State claimed.

So far, nobody in Government has come to this House to clarify which funding formulas were changed, with which justification, on whose authority and why the only explanation offered by any member of this Government has now turned out to be false. Mr Deputy Speaker, have you had notice from either the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister of their intention to make a statement to this House? If not, can you advise the House on how to pursue this very serious matter on behalf of communities across the country that have been deprived of funding?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me advance notice of her point of order. I have had no indication of any such statement, but the Government Front Bench will have heard her comments. Of course, comments made outside the House are not a matter for the Chair. She is free to pursue this matter through other means, and I am sure she will.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure you will be aware of the tragedy off the Teesside, County Durham and North Yorkshire coast, where crustaceans and other wildlife have been decimated and have washed up on our beaches. More dead creatures have washed up today and, according to the Government, there is no definitive cause of this devastation, which is effectively killing our sea and polluting our beaches.

Last week, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs took evidence from both the Government and eminent university scientists. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs says it may have been an algae bloom, whereas the scientists believe it to be pollution, likely linked to the dredging of the River Tees. Given this, Mr Deputy Speaker, are you aware of a planned statement from DEFRA Ministers? If not, can you guide me as to how I may secure one?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for advance notice of his point of order. I can confirm that I have had no notice of a statement being made tonight. If that changes, Members will be notified in the usual manner. Ministers, again, will have heard his point of order, and I am sure he will pursue the matter. The Clerks in the Table Office are available to offer advice on how he might do so.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. At the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Dr Gary Caldwell, a marine scientist at Newcastle University, expressed his concern that there is a causal link between the mass die-offs and pyridine. That concern is shared by three scientists from different Government agencies who have written to him asking for the data. They think the capital dredging should be paused while further investigations are carried out. I seek your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how we might secure sight of the letters from those scientists, with an explanation from DEFRA Ministers about why, in these circumstances, capital dredging is justified without further investigation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have nothing to add to my response to Mr Cunningham, but you will be able to pursue the matter through the Clerks in the Table Office.

GENETIC TECHNOLOGY (PRECISION BREEDING) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 15 June 2022 (Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

- (1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
- (2) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
- (3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—
(*Mark Spencer.*)

Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

THE GENETIC TECHNOLOGY AUTHORITY

- “(1) There is to be a body corporate called the Genetic Technology Authority.
- (2) The Authority is to consist of—
- (a) a chairman and deputy chairman, and
 - (b) such number of other members as the Secretary of State appoints.
- (3) Schedule [Genetic Technology Authority: supplementary provisions] to this Act (which deals with the membership of the Authority, etc.) has effect.”—(*Daniel Zeichner.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.56 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Accounts and audit*—

- “(1) The Authority must keep proper accounts and proper records in relation to the accounts and must prepare for each accounting year a statement of accounts.
- (2) The annual statement of accounts must comply with any direction given by the Secretary of State, with the approval of the Treasury, as to the information to be contained in the statement, the way in which the information is to be presented or the methods and principles according to which the statement is to be prepared.
- (3) Not later than five months after the end of an accounting year, the Authority must send a copy of the statement of accounts for that year to the Secretary of State and to the Comptroller and Auditor General.
- (4) The Comptroller and Auditor General must examine, certify and report on every statement of accounts received by him under subsection (3) above and must lay a copy of the statement and of his report before each House of Parliament.
- (5) The Secretary of State and the Comptroller and Auditor General may inspect any records relating to the accounts.
- (6) In this section “accounting year” means the period beginning with the day when the Authority is established and ending with the following 31st March, or any later period of twelve months ending with the 31st March.”

New clause 3—*Reports to Secretary of State*—

- “(1) The Authority must prepare and send to the Secretary of State an annual report as soon as practicable after the end of the period of twelve months for which it is prepared.
- (2) A report prepared under this section for any period must deal with the activities of the Authority in the period and the activities the Authority proposes to undertake in the succeeding period of twelve months.
- (3) The Secretary of State must lay before each House of Parliament a copy of every report received by him under this section.”

New clause 4—*General functions of the Authority*—

- “(1) The Authority must—
- (a) keep under review information about the use of genetic technology in plants and animals and any subsequent development of genetic technology and advise the Secretary of State about those matters,

- (b) publicise the services provided to the public by the Authority or provided in pursuance of release notification requirements or marketing authorisations under this Act,
- (c) provide, to such extent as it considers appropriate, a code of practice, advice and information for persons to whom release notification requirements or marketing authorisations under this Act apply,
- (d) maintain a statement of the general principles which it considers should be followed—
 - (i) in the carrying-on of activities governed by this Act, and
 - (ii) in the carrying-out of its functions in relation to such activities,
- (e) promote, in relation to activities governed by this Act, compliance with—
 - (i) requirements imposed by or under this Act, and
 - (ii) the Authority's code of practice,
- (f) perform such other functions as may be specified in regulations.

(2) The Authority may, if it thinks fit, charge a fee for any advice provided under subsection (1)(c)."

New clause 5—Duties in relation to carrying out its functions—

(1) The Authority must carry out its functions effectively, efficiently and economically.

(2) In carrying out its functions, the Authority must, so far as relevant, have regard to the principles of best regulatory practice (including the principles under which regulatory activities should be transparent, accountable, proportionate, consistent and targeted only at cases in which action is needed)."

New clause 6—Power to delegate and establish committees—

"(1) The Authority may delegate a function to a committee, to a member or to staff.

(2) The Authority may establish such committees or sub-committees as it thinks fit (whether to advise the Authority or to exercise a function delegated to it by the Authority).

(3) The members of the committees or sub-committees may include persons who are not members of the Authority.

(4) Subsection (1) has effect subject to any enactment requiring a decision to be taken by members of the Authority or by a committee consisting of members of the Authority."

New clause 7—Labelling of food or feed produced by precision bred organisms—

"(1) Food or feed produced from a precision bred organism or its progeny that is placed on the market must be labelled to inform prospective purchasers that it has been produced from a precision bred organism or its progeny.

(2) The labelling required under subsection (1) must be in easily visible and clearly legible type and, where packaging is used, it must be placed on the front outer surface of the packaging.

(3) Regulations must lay down the labelling terms to be used to meet the requirements of subsection (1).

(4) Before making regulations under this section, the Secretary of State must—

- (a) consult representatives of—
 - (i) consumers,
 - (ii) citizens and civil society,
 - (iii) food producers,
 - (iv) suppliers,
 - (v) retailers,
 - (vi) growers and farmers,
 - (vii) the organic sector,
 - (viii) other persons likely to be affected by the regulations, and
- (ix) any other persons the Secretary of State considers appropriate; and

- (b) seek the advice of the Food Standards Agency on the information to be required to be provided on labelling.

(5) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to make regulations about the labelling of precision bred organisms and food and feed products made from them and to consult with named stakeholders before doing so.

New clause 8—Labelling of food or feed produced by precision bred animals—

"(1) Food or feed produced from a precision bred animal or its progeny that is placed on the market must be labelled to inform prospective purchasers that it has been produced from a precision bred animal or its progeny.

(2) The labelling required under subsection (1) must be in easily visible and clearly legible type and, where packaging is used, it must be placed on the front outer surface of the packaging.

(3) Regulations must lay down the labelling terms to be used to meet the requirements of subsection (1).

(4) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure."

New clause 9—Power of the Scottish Parliament to legislate on the marketing of precision bred organisms—

"(1) Schedule 1 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 11 insert—

'Marketing of precision bred organisms

11A The United Kingdom market access principles do not apply to (and sections 2(3) and 5(3) do not affect the operation of) any Act of the Scottish Parliament, or any subordinate legislation made under or by virtue of such an Act, relating to the marketing of—

- (a) precision bred organisms, or
- (b) food or feed produced from precision bred organisms.'

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 4, leave out

"or a precision bred animal".

This amendment removes animals from the scope of the Bill.

Amendment 11, page 1, line 14, at end insert—

"(2A) But for the purposes of this Act an organism is not "precision bred" if any feature of its genome results from any technique or process which involves the insertion of exogenous genetic material, whether or not such material is subsequently removed."

This amendment would exclude the use of exogenous genetic material in the creation of precision bred organisms.

Amendment 3, in clause 3, page 3, line 35, at end insert—

"(c) the organism has been developed for or in connection with one or more of the following purposes—

- (i) producing food in a way that protects or enhances a healthy, resilient and biodiverse natural environment;
- (ii) growing and managing plants or animals in a way that mitigates or adapts to climate change;
- (iii) producing food in a way that prevents, reduces or protects from environmental hazards;
- (iv) protecting or improving the health or welfare of animals;
- (v) conserving native animals or genetic resources relating to any such animal;
- (vi) protecting or improving the health of plants;
- (vii) reducing the use of pesticides and artificial fertiliser;
- (viii) conserving plants grown or used in carrying on an agricultural, horticultural or forestry activity, their wild relatives or genetic resources relating to any such plant;
- (ix) protecting or improving the quality of soil;

- (x) supporting or improving human health and well-being;
- (xi) supporting or improving the sustainable use of resources.”

This amendment would require that a precision bred organism has been developed to provide a public benefit, if it is to be released into the environment.

Amendment 4, page 9, line 20, at end insert—

- “(za) that the precision bred traits will not have a direct or indirect adverse effect on the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny,
- (zb) that the relevant animal and its qualifying progeny are not likely to experience pain, suffering or lasting harm arising from or connected with fast growth, high yields or any other increase in productivity,
- (zc) that the precision bred traits will not facilitate the keeping of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny in conditions that are crowded, stressful or otherwise likely to have an adverse effect on animal welfare,
- (zd) that the objective of the precision bred traits could not reasonably have been achieved by means that do not involve modification of the genome of the animal.”

The amendment requires a range of factors to be taken into account by the Secretary of State when deciding whether to issue a precision bred animal marketing authorisation.

Amendment 12, page 9, line 20, at end insert—

- “(za) that the scientific evidence does not indicate that the precision bred traits are likely to have a direct or indirect adverse effect on the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny, and if so”.

This amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from issuing a precision bred animal marketing authorisation if the scientific evidence indicated that the precision bred traits are likely to have a direct or indirect adverse effect on the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny.

Amendment 6, in clause 26, page 16, line 29, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to regulate the placing on the market in England of food and feed produced from precision bred organisms.

Amendment 7, page 16, line 31, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to make regulations prohibiting the marketing of food or feed produced from a precision bred organism on the market in England except in accordance with a marketing authorisation, and imposing requirements for the purpose of securing traceability.

Amendment 8, page 16, line 36, after “traceability”, insert “through supply chain auditing”.

This amendment makes supply chain auditing the method of securing traceability in relation to food or feed produced from precision bred organisms that is placed on the market in England.

Amendment 9, page 17, line 1, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment requires the prescribing of requirements that must be satisfied in order for the Secretary of State to issue a food and feed marketing authorisation in relation to a precision bred organism.

Amendment 10, page 17, line 4, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment prescribes which requirements must be satisfied in order for the Secretary of State to issue a food and feed marketing authorisation in relation to a precision bred organism.

Amendment 5, in clause 43, page 28, line 6, at end insert—

- “(7) No regulations may be made under this Act unless—
- (a) a policy statement on environmental principles has been laid before Parliament under section 18(6) of the Environment Act 2021, and
- (b) section 19 of the Environment Act 2021 is in force.

- (8) Regulations under this Act must be made in accordance with—

- (a) the environmental principles set out in section 17(5) of the Environment Act 2021, and
- (b) Article 391 (Non-regression from levels of protection) of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the one part, and the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the other part, done at Brussels and London on 30 December 2020.”

This amendment would prevent the exercise of any powers granted by the Bill until the Government’s policy statement on environmental principles has been finalised and Ministers are under a statutory duty to have due regard to it.

Amendment 13, in clause 48, page 30, line 20, at end insert—

- “(5A) Regulations may not be made under or by virtue of this section unless a common framework agreement relating to the release and marketing of, and risk assessments relating to, precision bred plants and animals, and the marketing of food and feed produced from such plants and animals, has been agreed between a Minister of the Crown, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government.

- (5B) “Common framework agreement” has the meaning given by section 10(4) of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.”

This amendment would prevent the operative parts of this Bill coming into force until a common framework agreement on the regulation of precision breeding had been agreed between the UK Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments.

New schedule 1—*The Authority: Supplementary Provisions—*

“Status and capacity

- 1 The Authority is not to be regarded as the servant or agent of the Crown, or as enjoying any status, privilege or immunity of the Crown; and its property is not to be regarded as property of, or property held on behalf of, the Crown.
- 2 The Authority has power to do anything which is calculated to facilitate the discharge of its functions, or is incidental or conducive to their discharge, except the power to borrow money.

Expenses

- 3 The Secretary of State may, with the consent of the Treasury, pay the Authority out of money provided by Parliament such sums as he thinks fit towards its expenses.

Appointment of members

- 4 (1) All the members of the Authority (including the chairman and deputy chairman who are to be appointed as such) are to be appointed by the Secretary of State.
- (2) The following persons are disqualified for being appointed as chairman or deputy chairman of the Authority—
 - (a) any person who is, or has been, concerned with the creation, release or marketing of plant or animal organisms, gametes or embryos created using genetic technology, and
 - (b) any person who is, or has been, directly concerned with commissioning or funding any research involving such creation, release or marketing, or who has actively participated in any decision to do so.
- (3) The Secretary of State must secure that at least one-third but fewer than half of the other members of the Authority fall within sub-paragraph (2)(a) or (b), and that at least one member falls within each of paragraphs (a) and (b).

- 5 (1) A person (“P”) is disqualified for being appointed as chairman, deputy chairman, or as any other member of the Authority if—
- P is the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order,
 - in the last five years P has been convicted in the United Kingdom, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man of an offence and has had a qualifying sentence passed on P.
- (2) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (1)(b), the date of conviction is to be taken to be the ordinary date on which the period allowed for making an appeal or application expires or, if an appeal or application is made, the date on which the appeal or application is finally disposed of or abandoned or fails by reason of its non-prosecution.
- (3) In sub-paragraph (1)(b), the reference to a qualifying sentence is to a sentence of imprisonment for a period of not less than three months (whether suspended or not) without the option of a fine.

Tenure of office

- 6 (1) Subject to the following provisions of this paragraph and paragraph 7, a person holds and vacates office as a member of the Authority in accordance with the terms of his appointment.
- A person may not be appointed as a member of the Authority for more than three years at a time.
 - A member may at any time resign his office by giving notice to the Secretary of State.
 - A person who ceases to be a member of the Authority is eligible for re-appointment (whether or not in the same capacity).
 - A person holding office as chairman, deputy chairman or other member of the Authority is to cease to hold that office if the person becomes disqualified for appointment to it.
 - If the Secretary of State is satisfied that a member of the Authority—
 - has been absent from meetings of the Authority for six consecutive months or longer without the permission of the Authority, or
 - is unable or unfit to discharge the person’s functions as chairman, deputy chairman or other member,

the Secretary of State may remove the member from office as chairman, deputy chairman or other member.

- The Secretary of State may suspend a member from office as chairman, deputy chairman or other member of the Authority if it appears to him that one of the conditions in paragraph (6) is or may be satisfied in relation to the member.

7 (1) This paragraph applies where the Secretary of State decides to suspend a member under paragraph 6(7).

- The Secretary of State must give notice to the member of the decision and the suspension takes effect on receipt by the member of the notice.
- A notice under subsection (2) is treated as being received by the member—
 - in a case where it is delivered in person or left at the member’s proper address, at the time at which it is delivered or left;
 - in a case where it is sent by post to the member at that address, on the third day after the day on which it was posted.
- The initial period of suspension must not exceed 6 months.
- The Secretary of State may review the member’s suspension at any time.

- The Secretary of State must review the member’s suspension if requested in writing by the member to do so, but need not carry out a review less than 3 months after the beginning of the initial period of suspension.
- Following a review the Secretary of State may—
 - revoke the suspension, or
 - suspend the member for another period of not more than 6 months from the expiry of the current period.
- The Secretary of State must revoke the suspension if at any time—
 - he decides that neither of the conditions mentioned in paragraph 5(5) is satisfied, or
 - he decides that either of those conditions is satisfied but does not remove the member from office as chairman, deputy chairman or other member of the Authority.

Disqualification of members of Authority for House of Commons and Northern Ireland Assembly

- 8 In Part II of Schedule 1 to the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 and in Part II of Schedule 1 to the Northern Ireland Assembly Disqualification Act 1975 (bodies of which all members are disqualified) the following entry is inserted at the appropriate place in alphabetical order—
“The Genetic Technology Authority”.

Remuneration and pensions of members

- 9 (1) The Authority may—
- pay to the chairman such remuneration, and
 - pay or make provision for paying to or in respect of the chairman or any other member such pensions, allowances, fees, expenses or gratuities,
- as the Secretary of State may, with the approval of the Treasury, determine.
- Where a person ceases to be a member of the Authority otherwise than on the expiry of his term of office and it appears to the Secretary of State that there are special circumstances which make it right for him to receive compensation, the Authority may make to him a payment of such amount as the Secretary of State may, with the consent of the Treasury, determine.

Staff

- 10 (1) The Authority may appoint such employees as it thinks fit, upon such terms and conditions as the Authority, with the approval of the Secretary of State and the consent of the Treasury, may determine.
- The Authority must secure that any employee whose function is, or whose functions include, the inspection of premises is of such character, and is so qualified by training and experience, as to be a suitable person to perform that function.
 - The Authority must, as regards such of its employees as with the approval of the Secretary of State it may determine, pay to or in respect of them such pensions, allowances or gratuities (including pensions, allowances or gratuities by way of compensation for loss of employment), or provide and maintain for them such pension schemes (whether contributory or not), as may be so determined.
 - If an employee of the Authority—
 - is a participant in any pension scheme applicable to that employment, and
 - becomes a member of the Authority,
 he may, if the Secretary of State so determines, be treated for the purposes of the pension scheme as if his service as a member of the Authority were service as employee of the Authority, whether or not any benefits are to be payable to or in respect of him by virtue of paragraph 7 above.

Proceedings

- 11 (1) Subject to any provision of this Act, the Authority may regulate its own proceedings, and make such arrangements as it thinks appropriate for the discharge of its functions.
- (2) The Authority may pay to the members of any committee or sub-committee such fees and allowances as the Secretary of State may, with the consent of the Treasury, determine.
- 12 (1) A member of the Authority who is in any way directly or indirectly interested in a release notification or marketing authorisation under this Act must, as soon as possible after the relevant circumstances have come to his knowledge, disclose the nature of his interest to the Authority.
- (2) Any disclosure under sub-paragraph (1) above must be recorded by the Authority.
- (3) Except in such circumstances (if any) as may be determined by the Authority under paragraph 9(1) above, the member must not participate after the disclosure in any deliberation or decision of the Authority with respect to the release notification or marketing authorisation, and if he does so the deliberation or decision is of no effect.
- 13 The validity of any proceedings of the Authority, or of any committee or sub-committee, is not affected by any vacancy among the members or by any defect in the appointment of a member.

Instruments

- 14 The fixing of the seal of the Authority must be authenticated by the signature of the chairman or deputy chairman of the Authority or some other member of the Authority authorised by the Authority to act for that purpose.
- 15 A document purporting to be duly executed under the seal of the Authority, or to be signed on the Authority's behalf, may be received in evidence and is deemed to be so executed or signed unless the contrary is proved.

Investigation by Parliamentary Commissioner

- 16 The Authority is subject to investigation by the Parliamentary Commissioner and accordingly, in Schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 (which lists the authorities subject to investigation under that Act), the following entry is inserted at the appropriate place in alphabetical order—

“Genetic Technology Authority”.

Amendment 2, in title, line 2, leave out

“and animals, and the marketing of food and feed produced from such plants and animals”

and insert

“, and the marketing of food and feed produced from such plants”.

This amendment, which is contingent on Amendment 1, would change the long title to reflect the removal of animals from the scope of the Bill.

Daniel Zeichner: This Bill is now on its third Secretary of State, and I think the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), is the fourth Minister to speak to it.

I welcome back the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who took the Environment Act 2021 through Committee. She will be delighted to know that I will never cease to remind her that the Government's 25-year environment plan was supposed to be for 25 years, not to take 25 years.

On Friday, we once again saw why the Conservatives cannot be trusted on the environment. They are breaking their own law by failing to come up with critical air, water and biodiversity targets on time. On the same day, the Prime Minister gave up on the UK's leadership role on climate change by ducking COP27.

When the Government bring forward such a vague, thin Bill, asking the country to trust them to get the secondary legislation right, they can hardly be surprised that people are sceptical, and we are. Their failure fails Britain, and we all deserve better. This is an important Bill that, with the right regulatory safeguards, will reassure the public and provide the right environment for the research and investment we all want to see. Labour is pro-science and pro-innovation, but we also know that good regulation is the key to both innovation and investor confidence.

This Bill concerns our food. After 12 years of Conservative government, people are fighting to keep their head above water against the rising tide of inflation, which is even higher for essentials such as food. It is no exaggeration to say that people are at breaking point, and the fears for this winter are very real. Despite the possible gains that science and innovation might bring, this Bill does not bring urgent relief to families across the country, but it is an important step in enabling scientific advancements with the potential to deliver huge benefits by helping us to produce our food more efficiently and sustainably.

Labour Members are enthusiasts for science and innovation, which can help to find ways to maintain and improve the efficiency, safety and security of our food system, while addressing the environmental, health, economic and social harms that the modern system has unfortunately caused. These are the challenges that Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy set out to tackle, but the Government have, of course, completely failed to engage with it seriously.

However, alongside the challenges, there are opportunities. The UK has the opportunity to create a world-leading regulatory framework that others would follow. Even though they rejected them in Committee, there is still time for the Government to accept the improvements that we and many stakeholders believe are necessary to achieve that goal.

7 pm

Gene editing technologies have the potential to deliver great benefits, as well as healthy hard-earned rewards for those who are skilled in developing them. Let me repeat my thanks to the many serious people from learned societies and institutions who have done the thinking, and have spent time briefing me and my team as we grapple with some very big issues. I am grateful for the serious and engaged contributions from those who are deeply sceptical about this technology; they raise serious points, which should be properly addressed.

Let me particularly cite the work from the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. Unlike this Bill, which takes the narrowest approach possible, it stood back and asked the bigger questions about our food system, about our treatment of animals, about where traditional selective breeding has brought us to, and about how we might approach novel foods and the great changes that we may see in a very few years. In its recent public dialogue, the results of which were published just a few weeks

ago, it demonstrated that the public are quite capable of taking a sensible and considered view, one that sits well with the amendments we tabled in Committee, some of which we raise again today.

Those who took part in that detailed discussion would not be satisfied with the Bill as it stands, and I hope the Government have taken note. They, like us, want animal welfare concerns addressed. They want transparency and a stronger framework, and they want to be sure that the technology is used for the wider good, not just to maximise returns.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the constructive, pro-science approach that he is taking—it is not surprising, given the constituency he represents. Do we not also need to learn from the experience of the vaccine taskforce, which demonstrated how we can achieve results at pace without in any way infringing on safety and while still applying proper regulation? Is that not the challenge for the Government tonight?

Daniel Zeichner: My right hon. Friend, as always, speaks good sense. He is absolutely right; with focus and a proper attempt to meet the challenges we face, it is remarkable what can be done. But this needs leadership and, as ever, it is missing.

Let me turn in detail to the public interest test and our amendment 3. The potential benefits of gene edited crops include creating plants resistant to extreme weather conditions and diseases, which could reduce the need for pesticides and create higher yields to address rising food insecurity driven by climate change and other factors. Genetic editing could also be used to improve the nutritional quality of food. For example, giving farmers the tools to beat virus yellows without recourse to neonicotinoids is a prize worth having.

However, we must recognise that any new technology also carries risks: risks of unintended consequences; risks of technology being misused; and risks of commercial pressure being exerted in ways that might not be for the benefit of the wider public. Those are all risks that must be properly recognised and addressed, because unless public and investor confidence is maintained, research will stall and opportunities will be squandered. Unfortunately, the Government's blind faith in the market means this is a *laissez-faire*, minimalist Bill, which does not come close to an effective regulatory framework to guide and oversee the work of researchers and developers.

Amendment 3 would therefore require that a gene edited organism has been developed to provide one or more of the public benefit purposes listed, if it is to be released into the environment. The amendment neatly recycles much of the wording in section 1 of the Government's own Agriculture Act 2020, which lists the public goods that can be funded. We are simply applying the same approach to the development and use of gene editing technologies. We believe they should be used only where that is clearly in the public interest, including, for instance, in protecting a healthy, resilient and biodiverse natural environment; mitigating climate change; improving the health or welfare of animals or plants; and supporting human health and wellbeing.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): During the Bill Committee, we heard that one of the potential benefits of these innovations was a possible reduction in the

overuse of antibiotics on farms, because we would be able to breed things that are more resistant to disease. Although I welcome that, does my hon. Friend share my concern about the comments on antibiotics made by the new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), when she was briefly Health Secretary? Is he concerned about her seemingly relaxed attitude towards these entering the food chain and the impact on public health?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right; people should not be careless about antibiotics and that was not an approach to be encouraged at all. I share her concerns.

Amendment 3 would strengthen the Bill by harnessing the good that can be created through such technologies and ensuring that they are not developed and used for purposes that would not deliver beneficial outcomes—surely that is an objective we can agree on across the House. We believe that would take the Bill much further forward in establishing the kind of regulatory framework that really would place the UK in a leading position. That sits alongside our new clauses, which would establish a single, robustly independent regulator, along the lines of the very successful and genuinely world-leading Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. That regulator does not just approve an application, but tracks, traces and checks over time. That is an important and very different approach, and one discussed in Committee by expert witnesses.

Our new clauses would ensure that Ministers' decisions on gene editing are properly guided by the environmental principles set out under the Environment Act 2021, and that there is no regression from the environmental standards agreed in the trade and co-operation agreement, which is pretty important when it comes to trade issues. Our new clauses would build an environment in which the UK really could attract the worldwide talent and investment in gene editing research and development that we all want to see.

On animal health and welfare, I turn to our amendment 4, which I am delighted to see has been endorsed by Compassion in World Farming and 12 other animal protection organisations, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. The amendment would require a range of animal health and welfare factors to be taken into account by the Secretary of State when deciding whether to issue a marketing authorisation for a gene edited animal. We appreciate that gene editing can be used in the same way as “traditional” selective breeding to produce fast growth, high yields and large litters, which, sadly, we also know are capable of causing suffering in farmed animals.

Clearly, we have existing legislation to protect animal health and welfare, but the concern is that we should be very clear at the outset that we do not want to see gene editing used in ways that make it more possible for animals to endure harm and suffering. As the Nuffield Council on Bioethics put it,

“animals should not be bred merely to enable them to endure conditions of poor welfare more easily or in a way that would diminish their inherent capacities to live a good life.”

Some researchers aim to use gene editing to improve disease resistance in livestock. Of course, that could be hugely beneficial and could help to reduce the serious

[Daniel Zeichner]

harm caused by the overuse of antibiotics, for instance. It would be hugely beneficial if we could find ways to tackle porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome in pigs or avian flu. But the public would not want to see gene editing used to allow animals to be kept in poorer, more crowded, stressful conditions by making them resistant to the diseases that would otherwise result.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): When it comes to this genetic technology, the farmers I represent are keen to see this happening in a way that does not harm their animals. They are not out to harm them; they want to protect them. I know that the Minister understands that, as my local farmers and I do. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the farmers do not want to see anything happening that will harm the animals?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but of course there are always economic pressures and this is about making sure we guard against those. The Minister will be familiar with the chlorine-washed chicken debate, where lower welfare standards are disguised and the Government are always at pains to assure us, “We’re not going to tolerate that.” So they must not allow new scientific developments to be the tech equivalent; there must be no backsliding.

Referring to the power of gene editing to reduce the risk of disease, Nuffield’s 2016 ethical review of genome editing highlighted the problem. It said:

“If this risk were reduced or removed altogether then it might be easier to pack more animals together in crowded spaces.”

That is the concern, so let us guard against it. We believe we can create a regime that can do much better than that, but it requires this Bill to be strengthened to make it happen.

On transparency and labelling, the research carried out by the Food Standards Agency and others has clearly found that although consumers support genetically edited foods having a different regulatory system from genetically modified foods, they overwhelmingly want effective regulation of gene edited products, with transparent information and clear labelling.

The Government are trying to gloss over the issues by inventing the entirely non-scientific term “precision breeding”. I could speak at length about this term; I will not, but there is much dispute about it. It is a term without clear scientific meaning. Frankly, it has been invented by the Government for their convenience and is a misnomer. Telling us in a rather paternalistic tone that we need not worry because there is no difference between gene edited or traditionally bred crops and livestock does not convince. There is a risk that, as worded, the Bill will allow trans-genetic transfer—effectively, GM through the back door. I know the Government deny and dispute that, and we had a lengthy discussion about it in Committee, but I and many others remain unconvinced.

Leaving that matter aside, it is perfectly reasonable for people to want, and to be able to know, how their food has been produced. Clear labelling is the way to deal with another potentially difficult issue: the legitimately held views of different Administrations in the UK. It is fair to say that the devolved Administrations are not

happy with the way in which the issue has been handled so far. I suggest that the Government tread carefully. Clear labelling is a sensible way forward.

Labour is also concerned at the number of key elements of the Bill left to secondary legislation, with little or no opportunity for scrutiny or amendment. The Government must spell out the detail to boost confidence for businesses and consumers. The organic sector and those developing cultivated meat have expressed concerns over the lack of clarity in the Bill, which once again risks driving investment and research elsewhere.

It should not be forgotten that the Regulatory Policy Committee made a damning impact assessment of the Bill, giving it a red rating because it failed to take into account the impact of creating a new class of genetically modified organism; failed to assess the impact on businesses, especially SMEs; failed to acknowledge and assess competition, innovation, consumer and environmental impacts; and failed to address the impacts arising from removing labelling and traceability requirements. I hope the Minister will address those points.

In addition to that list of failures, the Bill fails to address the trade implications of the misalignment in regulation of genetically engineered organisms between the UK’s devolved nations and with our EU neighbours. That could have a significant impact on many food businesses that are struggling to rebuild trade with EU countries despite all the self-inflicted red tape, added costs and barriers that the Government have created.

John Spellar: Is not the EU in a slightly difficult position because of a perverse judgment from the European Court of Justice against the views of many EU nations, which would have taken the same rational position as my hon. Friend on gene editing? If we take the lead on this issue and do not wrap ourselves up in endless judicial review and litigation, could we not work with our European neighbours and partners to bring an advance not only in this country, but across Europe?

Daniel Zeichner: My right hon. Friend speaks good sense once again. Of course, that quite legalistic judgment was met with surprise by many. The question is how we go forward. Others in Europe are going forward as well. I suspect that we will end up in similar places at similar times, but it would be sensible to end up in a much more similar place than looks likely if we pursue the Bill as it has been developed so far. The worry is the effects that the changes are already having on sectors such as the organic sector, which used to have exports to the EU worth some £45 million a year, according to Organic Farmers and Growers, which rightly remains concerned about the Bill as it stands.

Much more could be said on a topic that is as fascinating as it is interesting and important, but I will spare the House and direct those Members who are interested to look at the detailed discussion in Committee. Tonight I will end where I started and restate Labour’s commitment: we are pro science and pro innovation. We are in no doubt that gene editing could bring real gains in improving environmental sustainability and reducing food insecurity. Science and technology used for public good can be a huge boon, but to achieve that—to give investors, researchers and the general public confidence—we need a much stronger regulatory framework.

At the moment, as ever with this Government, the approach is simply to leave it to the market. They think that minimalist regulation is the way forward, whereas we say that good regulation is the way forward—a fundamental divide in this Chamber. I would simply say that, given the evidence from the fundamentalist deregulatory experiment carried out on our country over the last few weeks, one hopes that those on the Treasury Bench might just have learned something.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): I will address new clause 1 directly. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, “We are very pro science and pro this technology,” and then spent the next 15 minutes explaining why he was not in favour of this technology, so I will address some of his comments.

The objective of the Bill is to achieve proportionate regulation of precision breeding organisms, which are currently regulated as genetically modified organisms. Science is at the heart of this policy, and the Bill rightly requires the Secretary of State to make decisions based on the advice of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment—ACRE—which advises on the regulation of genetically modified organisms.

7.15 pm

ACRE has considerable scientific experience on precision breeding technologies, and has an exemplary record. It is well regarded nationally and internationally for its advice, guidance and insight, and I assure the House that it operates to the highest standards of impartiality, integrity and objectivity.

Precision breeding technologies mimic traditional breeding processes, but more precisely and efficiently, which means that products from precision bred plants or animals contain only genetic changes that would occur through traditional breeding or natural transformation.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): There is concern among the cultured meat industry, which is unsure about the impact of the Bill on its research and trade. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to show our support for this important new technology, which the UK is currently at the forefront of developing?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are many new technologies out there that we want to embrace and give the opportunity to come forward, albeit in a regulated format so that we can have confidence in our food systems, and that is the exact process that the Bill seeks to correct.

We do not label food products that have been produced through traditional techniques such as chemical mutagenesis, and we do not label foods as “novel” because precision bred products are indistinguishable from their traditionally bred counterparts. It would not be appropriate to require labelling to indicate the use of precision breeding in the production of food or feed. That view is shared internationally; many of our partners across the world, such as Canada, the US and Japan, do not require labelling for precision bred products.

The Food Standards Agency is developing a new authorisation process to ensure that any food or feed product will only go on sale if it is judged to present no risk to health, does not mislead consumers, and does

not have lower nutritional value than its traditionally bred counterparts. In order to ensure transparency, the Bill enables regulations to make a public register through which information about precision bred food and feed products can be assessed by consumers.

I do not know whether it is appropriate to speak to other amendments now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): It is up to you, but you will have an opportunity to speak again at the end of the debate.

Mark Spencer: I think I will leave it there and speak to other amendments at the end of the debate.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Mark Spencer: Before I sit down, I will of course take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for giving me the chance to intervene. I am very conscious that because of the status of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, Northern Ireland is currently under EU rules in this area. That means that the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, which my party and many farmers across Northern Ireland would like to see in place, will not apply to Northern Ireland. Will the Minister assure me that it is the intention of the Government to ensure that every part of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has the same opportunities? We want those opportunities in Northern Ireland as well.

Mark Spencer: The last thing I want is to see farmers in Northern Ireland disadvantaged. There will be a huge advantage to English farmers over other parts of the United Kingdom, so we want to share this technology. There are parts of the United Kingdom, outside of England, particularly with James Hutton in Scotland and the Roslin Institute at Edinburgh University, where we are world leading in this technology. We have some of the best scientists in the world who genuinely lead this field and we want to share that technology across the United Kingdom and to see it embraced and celebrated.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con) *rose*—

Mark Spencer: I shall take one last point from my hon. Friend.

David Duguid: A UK-wide approach would be preferred by food producers and farmers right across the country. Can the Minister confirm that the invitation is still open to the devolved Administrations, such as the Scottish Government, to help progress this technology on a UK-wide basis?

Mark Spencer: Of course it is. I encourage those devolved Administrations to get on board and to support this new tech. They should embrace it and give their farmers the same advantage that we will hopefully achieve in the world marketplace.

John Spellar *rose*—

Mark Spencer: I keep saying that I will take a final intervention—the Whips will start to get upset with me, but I will take the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention none the less.

John Spellar: I was hoping the Minister would expand on some other areas, but can he respond to my point about how the vaccine taskforce has shown that science and proper regulation can work at pace for the benefit of our people? Moreover, will he address the question of what protection the Government will give to institutions engaged in this area, whose facilities may be targeted for vandalism by those who are anti-science?

Mark Spencer: I can address many of those points when I sum up the debate, but I am interested to hear other comments from Members around the Chamber before I do so. However, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that the sector already has some robust regulatory bodies, and we want to give them the power to regulate and oversee this technology. What we do not want to do is bind the hands of those bodies so that, in 20 years’ time, we have to re-legislate for another similar structure. We will have a robust regime in place, albeit heavily regulated, that allows the flexibility for this technology to go in directions that we cannot foresee at this moment.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I look forward to further comments from colleagues and to responding to them later in the debate.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We are concerned about the disadvantageous position that the Bill will likely put farmers in and about the knock-on impact on farmers in Scotland, despite the fact that the Scottish Government are not yet at the stage to approve the technology in Scotland.

The regulation of genetically modified organisms is a devolved matter. There is no question about that, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments have made that clear in their responses. The Scottish Government have been clear in their opposition to the UK Government’s moves on this. We do not presently intend to amend the GMO regulatory regime in Scotland, as we want to await the outcome of the EU’s consultation on whether some gene-edited organisms will be excluded from the GM definition.

According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, we are already suffering a 4% reduction in GDP due to this hard Tory Brexit. We do not need to see the introduction of further trade barriers caused by the UK’s rush to make this change. A delay to see the outcome of the consultation early next year would be far more sensible than passing the legislation now. This is relevant because of the impact of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which tramples over devolved competencies, and prevents the Scottish Parliament from refusing the sale of these products.

I wish to speak to new clause 9 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), which ensures that the democratic principle of devolution is upheld and that the Scottish Parliament still has the authority to legislate on the marketing of precision bred organisms. We have raised concern after concern about the implementation of the 2020 Act. If the UK Government intend to respect

devolution, which the people of Scotland voted for, they must ensure that the Scottish Parliament can continue to take those decisions.

There are both animal welfare and environmental concerns relating to precision breeding. We must ensure that those are properly considered and that all information and evidence is available before taking any decision. We strongly welcome more research into gene editing and new genetic technologies, but that must precede the wide-scale deployment of such technologies.

The Scottish Government want to ensure that Scotland operates to the highest environmental and animal welfare standards, so that our world-class Scottish grown food continues to be outstanding. The impact assessment of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the precision breeding Bill acknowledges divergence from the EU approach, which could have implications for compliance costs and future trade. We must be able to export our produce and the Bill risks our farmers being further hamstrung—in addition to all the hardships they already face as a result of this Tory Brexit.

David Duguid: The hon. Member will be aware of the expression of disappointment from Martin Kennedy, president of NFU Scotland, that the Scottish Government have not become more involved in a UK-wide approach to this matter. None the less, she is absolutely right to say that this is a devolved competency. Does she agree that the UK Government have done nothing but be positive in terms of inviting the Scottish Government to be as involved in this matter as they possibly can be?

Kirsty Blackman: I cannot answer a question about the conversations that the Scottish Government and the UK Government have had on this matter, because I am not aware of exactly how those conversations have gone. What I am concerned about is the significant amount of produce that we export to the EU and the fact that the Bill poses a risk, for example, to the export of Scottish salmon. That is because the Scottish Government will lose some of their competency over this due to the internal market Bill and to the way that this framework is laid out.

Should amendment 1 from the Green party be pushed to a vote, the SNP will support it. The paucity of evidence is particularly acute in relation to animals. The Bill also risks violating the intention and application of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, passed for England and Wales earlier this year. The RSPCA has highlighted the fact that the public would not and do not support that.

New clause 8 relates to the labelling of food or feed produced by precision-bred animals. Eighty four per cent of people polled consider it important that all GE products introduced for sale in the UK are labelled as such, and only 8% do not consider that to be important. We are disappointed, therefore, that the UK Government no longer plan to consider requiring labelling for these products, despite the Minister saying in January 2022 that they would look at the matter. This will have a double impact in Scotland, because, even though the Scottish Parliament does not currently permit the marketing of these products, consumers will not be able to make an informed choice due to the lack of labelling requirements.

Mr Deputy Speaker, now is not the time for this Bill to pass. The UK Government have failed to make the case for “why now?” and have failed to ensure that the devolved competencies of the Scottish Parliament are respected as they seek to push through this legislation.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): As the former Secretary of State who introduced this Bill on Second Reading, I rise to express a little sympathy for amendment 4—not so much sympathy that I would vote for it if it went to a Division tonight. Nevertheless, I believe that it highlights some important issues that are worthy of further consideration.

First, amendment 1 proposes removing animals altogether from the scope of the Bill. Undoubtedly, using gene editing on animals raises complex ethical issues, along with the animal welfare dimension, and it was during such discussion when the Bill was being drafted that I considered excluding animals from the Bill. However, I want to explain to the House why, after reflection, I decided that we should include them.

First, from my experience in government and, indeed, in this place, there is always a tendency to put off things that are difficult or complex and to kick the can down the road, but the right thing to do is to grapple with these complex matters and chart a course through them. Secondly, when considering some of the issues that we might be able to address through precision breeding, it became clear to me that, if this technology was used properly, we could actually enhance animal welfare in certain areas. When I first became a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Beak Trimming Action Group set up by the last Labour Government was concluding its work. Beak trimming, using infrared beak tipping on day-old chicks, is required particularly for free-range systems, because otherwise there may be injurious pecking of laying hens. Through that work, we concluded that, while there were things we could do such as paying special regard to the feeding regime, it was against the welfare of those birds not to carry on the beak trimming.

7.30 pm

However, something else emerged from that work. The white-feathered birds, which lay white eggs, are much less prone to injurious pecking. In fact, if white-feathered birds had the docility and behavioural traits we see in the brown-feathered birds that lay the brown eggs that dominate the UK market, the door would be open to regulatory changes that could ban beak trimming. It is the long-standing position of both main parties in this House that mutilations in the livestock industry should be phased out.

There is a second area, which I saw first-hand, relating to the fate of male chicks in hatcheries producing laying hens. Every Easter, we will see pictures of yellow chicks on Easter eggs to celebrate spring and the birth of new life, but the fate of yellow chicks is not a particularly happy one. In the inter-war years, commercial laying flocks were bred specifically so that male chicks would be yellow, with the express purpose that somebody working on the production line could helpfully put the yellow chicks on to the right conveyor belt so that their life could be ended, since they had no use as laying hens.

Leipzig University has explored the possibility of changing the eggshell colour so that a male egg can be identified much earlier and sentient beings are not hatched and then killed. I think precision breeding techniques could phase out that very bleak practice of killing day-old male chicks, which is a clear part of the laying hen system.

Kerry McCarthy: I am very pleased to hear what the right hon. Gentleman says, as I have spent quite a lot of time trying to convince people that that does happen to day-old chicks. Is it not the case that some other European countries have introduced legislation on that point, so it is not necessarily linked to genetic technology? I think they have acted to prevent so many chicks being killed.

George Eustice: What a number of countries have done—the UK was in the vanguard of this—was to move away from maceration of day-old chicks towards the use of carbon dioxide and argon gas as a means of dispatching them. However, I think we could accelerate the process of identifying the eggs through the use of genetic technology.

Dehorning cattle is another mutilation that we would like to phase out over time. Progress has been made for some breeds on polled cattle—that is, cattle born without horns, so that we do not have to use a hot iron, albeit under anaesthetic, to de-bud them. Again, it is difficult to perfect without precision breeding techniques, but if we had that technology, we could have more polled cattle and reduce the need for conventional dehorning of cattle, or even pave the way for a regulatory change to prevent it.

There is also the prospect of breeding more resistance to diseases. In the dairy herd some selection is already done for natural resistance to bovine tuberculosis. It is limited in its ability, but if we had the technology, we might be able to go further.

At the moment, the Government plan to phase out and remove badger culling is predicated on a lot of confidence that a cattle vaccine will be viable and deployable, but it would be helpful to have additional tools in the box, and resistance to TB could be one of them. Of course, we are about to face another very difficult winter when it comes to avian flu, and this technology might have some application there.

However, my sense when I read amendment 4 was that whoever drafted it had had one sector in particular in mind—the broiler chicken sector. There is a genuine concern that the production speed of broiler chickens, reduced now to around 32 to 33 days, is so fast that they are having all sorts of leg problems, and we might be able to make some changes there. That is a legitimate point, because while we might say it has improved the welfare of a broiler chicken that it is bred to finish within 32 days, we might say it is in its welfare interest to ensure that it does not have leg problems. There is a second question, which is whether it is the ethical and right thing to do to produce a chicken within 32 days rather than, say, 37 days, in which case the welfare problem goes away.

A less obvious and less talked-about situation might be commercial duck production. We know that ducks need and want open water—it is part of their physiology and the way their beaks work. However, many commercial duck producers do not give ducks access to water. I have

[George Eustice]

come across vets who will argue that it is in the interest of ducks not to have access to water, since that can spread disease and that is not in their welfare interest, but that goes to the root of the issue with animal welfare. We can either see animal welfare in the conventional five freedoms sense—freedom from pain, hunger, thirst and so on—or we can see it in the more modern sense of a life worth living.

The amendment does not work, because the more we put into an amendment the more we inadvertently exclude. If we accepted an amendment that proscribed certain things but missed certain things, at a future date a breeder might bring a judicial review and say, “Well, this wasn’t covered by the Bill and everything else was.” Therefore, we would not be future-proofing the importance of animal welfare.

However, that is where guidance could work. After Second Reading of the Bill, I asked our officials to give some thought to the idea of guidance, which might give organisations such as Compassion in World Farming and people such as Peter Stevenson, who is very thoughtful on these matters, the reassurance they need in the absence of a legislative change on the face of the Bill, which is difficult to do. The Minister may find that there is some guidance helpfully drafted—or it may be that it was not drafted, but it is not too late, because the Bill has time in the other House.

Will the Minister consider whether this issue of how the animal welfare body should approach its task and how it should assess the impacts on animal welfare could be dealt with in a non-statutory way through guidance. He and his officials will have to issue terms of reference anyway to the animal welfare body, which is likely to be a sub-committee of the Animal Welfare Committee, and it would not take much to set out some parameters for the things we want it to bear in mind when making assessments.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I will not speak for too long, but I want to address a couple of the amendments and some of the issues affecting the Bill overall.

I will start by being extremely critical of the European Commission—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Indeed. Most of us in this House think that science is broadly a good thing, or certainly at least neutral; it is a case of what we do with it. One of the things that has irritated me most about part of the Commission over a 20 or 30-year period is its knee-jerk objection to science in this area and the idea that there can be a moratorium not just on the application of knowledge, which is an issue, but on the very knowledge and research in the first place. That troubles me greatly. We should weigh all issues up and make wise, evidence-based decisions.

On the one hand, I welcome the Bill and I certainly welcome and support science-based approaches to technologies such as genetic modification and what the Government refer to as precision breeding. They have the potential to deliver a major improvement in productivity and on the environmental front, reducing the impact of farming. Genetic modification can have a positive impact by allowing us to address pest and disease pressures on crops and farm animals, and so reduce our reliance on fertilisers and pesticides; that helps more broadly in the

fight against climate change. Genetic modification also provides opportunities for us to meet global need, including the food requirements of the global poor. However, there are problems with the Bill, and reasons why I would support the Government being more open to amendments from the other place, and especially to amendments 3 and 4 tonight.

Let me mention some areas in which the Bill is weak. It does not solve the intellectual property and commercial issues surrounding genetic modification technology. If we allowed science to be better used in farming, for the reasons we have set out relating to the environment and the quality and scale of production, but ended up making farmers, particularly tenant farmers, entirely beholden to the commercial interests of large, multinational agribusinesses, that would be an outrage. That is not what farmers in this country want; they want science applied, and they want freedom. They do not want to be pawns in a multinational game. That major area of concern is not addressed in the Bill.

The Bill is also light on the details of the new regulatory requirements for crops and animals. I accept that animals should be in the scope of the Bill, but we are transitioning from a very high regulation system to a relatively low regulation system. The lack of detail on how the new system will work makes it hard to support the Bill.

Amendment 12, tabled by the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), would prevent the Secretary of State from authorising a new product if scientific evidence indicated

“that the precision bred traits are likely to have a direct or indirect adverse effect on the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny”.

Lack of detail on those kinds of situations makes it hard for us to go into the Aye Lobby and support the Bill this evening. Editing a pig’s genes could, for example, make it resistant to disease—that would obviously be a welcome advantage of this technology—but the Bill must not be a shortcut that allows pigs to be reared in less hygienic, more crowded conditions. Again, that issue is not covered. Animals’ welfare must not only continue to be protected but be continuously improved.

We do not want all the effort that has been put into the high standards in British farming to be wasted as a result of a back-door watering down of standards; but if there was such a watering-down, it would be part of a pattern, I am afraid. It would fit the pattern of the trade deals that are being designed and agreed to. The deals with Australia and New Zealand in particular basically throw away the high standards we have developed. It is not only that it is morally right to have those standards; they make the provenance of our produce important, make it high-quality, and give it high ethical value. What a desperate shame that free trade, which is a good thing, should be done so badly that our farmers are thrown under the bus, have their livelihoods threatened, and cannot take advantage of the benefits that free trade ought to provide. If the Bill is part of a deregulatory framework, or part of an agenda that seeks to unfairly disadvantage British farmers or throws the standards that they have developed under the bus, that is unacceptable. Unamended, the Bill forms part of a pattern of this Government throwing our farmers to the wolves.

Farmers do not benefit from the application of science envisaged in the Bill if they do not survive the transition from the current payment scheme to the new one.

Reshuffle upon reshuffle has followed on from great uncertainty, which the Government introduced in September when they indicated that they might be prepared to rip up the environmental land management scheme. There are many problems with that scheme, by the way; the fact that only 1% of eligible farmers have applied for the sustainable farming incentive shows how poorly the Government are rolling out a scheme that most Members agree with in principle. The worst thing the Government could do is rip it all up; the best thing they could do is invest in protecting the £3.5 billion supposedly ringfenced for ELMS and allow the process to take place, so that farmers survive. Farmers will be in no position to protect our environment, produce our food or apply the science that the Government want them to apply if they do not survive.

In short, we strongly support the principle underlying the Bill, but we strongly urge the Government to consider the amendments before us this evening, and those that will undoubtedly be tabled in the other place, to improve regulation, safety and animal welfare, and protect farmers from the damage that could be done to them if they end up being the pawns of multinational global enterprises. I would hate the United Kingdom to end up a mirror image of the European Commission, which regulated to such an extent that applying science was impossible. Alternatively, the Government may deregulate to such an extent that it is hard to defend the science, and that would be a real shame for all of us who genuinely care about the application of science in farming.

7.45 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I will speak to amendment 12; I hope to be commendably brief. A fundamental principle of veterinary science is that procedures should be carried out in the interests of the animal and animal welfare. Many of the proposals brought forward will, I believe, be in the interests of animal welfare, and I have no problem with them whatever. I simply seek an assurance from the Minister that, if it becomes apparent that a change that is to be made would have an adverse effect on animal welfare, no licence for the change would be granted. That is all I ask for.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to follow the important speech by the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), with which I agreed. As I said on Second Reading, this is a flawed Bill; it is unclear and it is not robust, and legal experts have said that it is staggeringly imprecise. Nothing that has happened since Second Reading has caused me to change my mind, so I have tabled a number of amendments, and welcome the opportunity to speak to them, starting with amendments 1 and 2, which would remove animals from the Bill's scope and title. For the record, it is my intention to press amendment 1 to a vote.

As I say, amendment 1 would remove animals from the scope of the Bill, but the intention is not, as the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) suggested, to kick the can down the road; I genuinely believe that we need more time to look more carefully at what kind of regulatory framework we need, so that we can make the most of potential benefits, but also safeguard ourselves against risk. I acknowledge that there may well be potential benefits to the legislation, but I hope that others will acknowledge that there may

well be serious risks, and I do not think that the work has been done to get the balance right in the Bill. We need more safeguards that are commensurate with the risks. That is why—for the moment, at least—we should remove animals from its scope. If the Government wish to legislate on gene editing of animals, they need to give much more thought to defining the circumstances in which that is acceptable, and to provide much more detail on how it will be regulated.

I recognise that clauses 10 to 15 are an attempt to prevent the significant risks that are associated with precision breeding, but I do not think that those measures are sufficient. When we debated the animal sentience legislation, the Government were prepared to accept that there should be a mechanism, via the animal welfare hub, through which the impact of animal sentience legislation could be properly considered by independent experts with the relevant skills. There is an urgent need for something similar that allows us to judge whether genetic engineering will be harmful to animals, how it can be better regulated, and how that can be done transparently. The model in clause 11, however, gives the person applying for authorisation and the Secretary of State far too much authority and responsibility, and the proposed animal welfare advisory body is given only a weak, secondary, advisory role. I worry that that suggests that welfare considerations will carry very limited weight in decision making.

It is also of concern that, under the Bill, the full regulatory system is supposed to be set through secondary legislation. That vastly reduces the scope for vital parliamentary scrutiny on issues of animal welfare and gene editing.

The claims made for gene editing mainly focus on increasing productivity and disease resistance. The Government argue that gene editing is simply an extension of traditional breeding, such as selective breeding, but is more precise and efficient. I assume that is intended to be reassuring, but over the last 50 years selective breeding has itself caused substantial health and welfare problems in most of the main farmed species. We have already heard about the concerns about broiler chickens who have been bred to grow so quickly that many suffer from leg disorders, while others succumb to heart disease. Hens have been bred to lay over 300 eggs a year. They have to draw on their own bone calcium to produce egg shells. This results in osteoporosis, leaving them susceptible to bone fracture. A cow producing milk for her calf would normally produce just over 1,000 litres in her 10-month lactation. Many of today's dairy cows have been bred to produce 10,000, or even 11,000 or 12,000 litres of milk a year. That contributes, unsurprisingly, to many suffering from lameness, mastitis and reproductive disorders, and the animals live with those welfare problems for a substantial part of their lives.

Gene editing for even faster growth and higher yields would exacerbate the suffering caused by selective breeding. I believe it would be unethical to permit it for increased productivity, and it simply should not be necessary for disease resistance. The proper way to reduce diseases that are generated by keeping animals in poor conditions is to move instead to health-oriented farming systems, in which good health is inherent in the farming methods. Indeed, gene editing could lead to animals being kept in

[*Caroline Lucas*]

even more crowded and stressful conditions, as they would be resistant to the disease risks that are inherent in those conditions.

I cannot be the only Member who has been lobbied hard to remove animals from the Bill's scope. I urge the Government to listen to the public and look again at this. They should return the legislation on this subject only once they have given much more detailed consideration to the issues that I have raised. Another of those issues is that nobody involved in drafting this legislation could, I imagine, have honestly envisaged it applying to, for example, domestic cats and dogs. Yet, without clarification, that is exactly what the current drafting could result in.

Our constituents want to be confident that there is consistency in the Government's ambition for improving animal welfare. They want to know that gene editing cannot be used as some kind of techno-fix and that it will not entrench intensive farming, with its inherent environmental and animal welfare shortcomings. If my amendments are a step too far, I would urge Ministers, as a form of compromise, to bring forward an amendment of their own in the other place that will at the very least limit the scope much more explicitly to farmed animals. In the meantime, my amendments 1 and 2 would remove animals from the scope of the Bill.

Let me move on briefly to a few other amendments in my name. New clause 7 is about informing consumers about what they are buying. It would require the Secretary of State to make regulations on the labelling of this new class of GMO and to do so in consultation with key named stakeholders. Clear labelling is something that we know consumers want. The Food Standards Agency found that:

"Consumers wanted transparent labelling...if genome edited foods reach the UK market."

My new clause does not prescribe what form that labelling should take; the groups and organisations that it lists for consultation are much better placed to determine that. They include the FSA, food producers, retailers, consumers and anyone else the Government think appropriate. In other words, it would allow for co-operative, sensible, well-informed approaches. I hope Members will back new clause 7 on that basis. Finally, labelling—in either the form set out in my clause or some other form—could represent a step towards resolving the differences with the devolved Governments, which we have already heard about, for whom, for example, alignment with EU standards is a major priority and a current source of disagreement with Westminster.

Amendments 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are a group designed to ensure that regulation is sufficiently robust when it comes to authorising activities involving so-called precision-bred organisms. They seek to convert the powers afforded to the Secretary of State into requirements. In addition, amendment 8, alongside amendment 7, would require obligations relating to supply chain traceability. Without amendment 7, the Bill fails to mandate any such traceability for the new category of precision-bred organisms.

That would be inconsistent with the current long-standing requirement for mandatory traceability for GMOs and would create significant trade barriers for organic businesses in the UK wanting to export products to, for example, the EU or Northern Ireland. The UK organic sector is

worth £3 billion, so it makes no economic sense not to amend the Bill and ensure mandatory supply chain traceability. Traceability of genetically engineered organisms is also essential to support recall in the event that novel allergens or toxins, or other safety issues emerge after release.

I believe the Bill is badly conceived and badly drafted. My amendments are all designed with one of two things in mind: to bring either clarity or robustness to the regulatory framework for precision-bred organisms. It is with that intention that I lent my name to a number of other amendments, on behalf of the official Opposition in particular. I hope that they might support mine in the same spirit.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (*Caroline Lucas*), who is a passionate advocate for the environment and animal welfare issues.

I firmly believe that this Bill is an important piece of legislation. I first declare an interest: as a veterinary surgeon, I am passionate about animal health and welfare. I also represent Penrith and The Border, a huge rural constituency with a huge farming footprint. We have the most fantastic farmers in Cumbria, and across the UK, who farm to the highest animal welfare standards. I firmly believe that we do not have anything to fear from this legislation, but I do understand some of the concerns that have been raised, and I will speak to some of the amendments and new clauses.

It is important to reaffirm from the outset that this Bill is to do with gene editing, which is very different from genetic modification, where genetic material from an exogenous species is potentially inserted. That is not the case with what this Bill is concerned with. Gene editing is very different from genetic modification. When the Government move forward with this Bill, it is important that they keep articulating and communicating that to the public, to try to alleviate some of those concerns.

I firmly believe that there are huge benefits to be gained from this legislation to animals, plants, the environment and the human race. I respectfully disagree with amendment 1, because I firmly believe that it is important that animals are included within the scope of the legislation. I will try to articulate why I believe that. There will be huge benefits to animal health and welfare from the development of animals and potentially birds that have more resistance to diseases, as colleagues have touched on. As a veterinary surgeon, I firmly believe that is a good cause, because if we can reduce the incidence of disease, that is an animal health and welfare gain.

We have talked about birds becoming more resistant to avian flu, and we have seen how this country is being ravaged at the moment by avian influenza. Technology that helps us to mitigate that is to be welcomed. In addition, in the pig world, pigs with resistance to porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, PRRS, will be another good development. Anything that can reduce morbidity and mortality in the animal world is something to be welcomed. As some Members have touched on in interventions, ultimately that could also lead to a reduction in the use of veterinary medicines. That will be of benefit to the animals, but it will also be of indirect benefit to humans. If we can reduce the amount of antimicrobials

used, that will mitigate the blight of antimicrobial resistance that is affecting the whole world. I firmly believe that there are indirect benefits to the human race as well.

As I have touched on, we are seeing widespread cases of avian flu across the UK, which leads me to stress to the new ministerial team that we really need DEFRA to adequately fund the Animal and Plant Health Agency. Certainly, the Weybridge headquarters in Surrey is in urgent need of refurbishment, which has been estimated at £2.8 billion. The Public Accounts Committee has looked at that, as has the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I really push the Government to invest in the APHA to try to prevent diseases and outbreaks in the future. That is very important.

I firmly welcome anything that can reduce morbidity and mortality in farming. I speak as a vet with a lot of first-hand experience through the patients I have treated, but also through my experiences in the foot and mouth crisis of 2001. The trauma that infectious diseases can create for rural communities is something that we are still living with in Cumbria and other parts of the UK. When a farmer who is farming his or her stock gets the vets involved to treat disease, that has a toll on the vets and on the farmer. No one working there wants to see animals suffering from disease.

I firmly believe that if we can improve animal health and welfare with such technology, that will have an indirect benefit on human mental health. We on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have looked at that in our rural mental health inquiry. If we reduce the amount of medicines, that will help animals and people.

8 pm

I also firmly believe that the Bill will help with food security, as other hon. Members have said. If we can develop climate resilient and disease resistant crops, that will reduce the need to use pesticides and fertiliser. In the food security crisis in the UK and across Europe, we have seen how critical the supply of fertiliser is to the country. We have two plants, one of which, the Ince plant, has been mothballed and one of which, the Billingham plant, has ceased to produce ammonia. Anything that can help to reduce the use of fertilisers will help with critical infrastructure too.

As I said, I understand some of the concerns that have been raised tonight and in Committee. To mitigate and alleviate some of those concerns, the Government could tweak the Bill in the other place, or the Minister could give reassurances at the Dispatch Box tonight that the Government are looking at some of those suggestions and will move forward with them.

On amendment 11, regarding exogenous material, that point has been well made. As I said earlier, however, gene editing is different from genetic modification where exogenous material comes in. If the Government could be clearer with the public and articulate again that the gene editing procedure does not include exogenous genetic material being inserted, many of the fears outside this place would be mitigated.

I share some of the concerns about consumer confidence in terms of transparency, the provenance of our food and how it is produced, so the Government could indicate that they will look at giving more information to consumers through labelling and information about

how some of those products are produced. We have nothing to fear from this technology, so I do not think that we have anything to fear from being clear with the public about the technology. If the Government could give reassurances on that, it would help people inside and outside this place.

I take on board the concerns about animal health and welfare. People fear that the Bill might lead to different practices that will exacerbate animal health and welfare issues in farmed animals. It is important to remember that in this country, we farm to the highest animal welfare standards and that there are robust mechanisms for monitoring animal health and welfare in our farming practices. People should be reassured by that, but equally, there is scope within the Bill for increased monitoring of animal health and welfare in terms of the animals that are produced through this technology. So again, we have good regulatory mechanisms and there is scope within the Bill to improve them. If the Government could give reassurances on that, it would alleviate some of the fears.

We in this country should be proud of farming to the highest animal health and welfare standards and we can be a beacon for the rest of the world in that area. I support the Bill, but I understand some of the concerns that have been raised. If we can get some clarity and assurances from the Government, the House could come together, as the Bill progresses to the other place, to say that this will ultimately benefit animal health and welfare. As I said, I think it will help animal health and welfare and the environment, and support human and public health and the mental health of people working with animals. I wish it well as it progresses.

Jim Shannon: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson). He brings much knowledge to the debate and I thank him for sharing that with us.

I welcome the Bill and I declare an interest, as I must, as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union and a farmer in Northern Ireland. The Bill will bring great benefits, not just to England but to the whole United Kingdom. In my earlier intervention, I mentioned the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which I will touch on later. I welcome the Minister's response.

I live among farmers, who are incredible people. They love their animals and the job they do. They are very efficient. Near me, they have high-quality dairy herds, beef cattle, lamb, pork and poultry. My farmers want the best, and that is what I want for Northern Ireland. It is no secret that Northern Ireland's high-quality produce is some of the best in the world and is much envied. Northern Ireland leads the way, but we want to be part of the Bill. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, however, does not enable us to do the same as the farmers here.

As the Member for Strangford, a strong agricultural constituency, legislation to unlock new technologies to boost food production, support farmers and grow more productive crops is certainly of great interest to me and those I represent—my neighbours across Strangford and across Northern Ireland. As always, one of my first ports of call was to see what the farmers thought about it. They were clear and quickly explained to me that gene editing is different from GM and gives us an opportunity to be more efficient and farm better. It does not result in the introduction of DNA from other

[*Jim Shannon*]

species and creates new varieties similar to those that could be produced more slowly by natural breeding processes. It will potentially provide a greater yield and better farming practices.

Crucially, precision breeding technologies will help to develop foods with direct benefits to the public, such as products of better quality, increased nutritional value and a longer shelf life. Those are things that we are all striving for and we should all try to make those ambitions happen, so the technology can only be a good thing as long as it is safe and has farmer buy-in. From my discussions with farmers, it clearly has that buy-in.

We must be realistic and say that farmers have been gene editing for generations but did not have a fancy name for it; they knew it as splicing. I am old enough to remember my grandmother splicing the peas and beans to make bigger and better varieties of peas and beans. That goes back to the '60s—it was not yesterday—but even in those early days, perhaps my grandmother was a bit of a pioneer in doing such things. Today we do not call it splicing but genetic technology. That is a much fancier name, and much greater, because it is about more than that, which is why the Bill is important. Through trial and error, science has allowed us to go to the next level, yet we must be mindful of the difficulties that can come by decimating the wonderful structure of nature that God has put in place. I believe that the Bill provides safety and security, and a way forward to UK food security.

A fortnight ago, I had the opportunity to meet a constituent, Stephen Alexander, who keeps 130 Dexter cattle—an almost-unique herd across Northern Ireland. He takes 60 acres of land at Orlock in North Down, he has some land at home in Greyabbey, and he takes other land just down the road. He made a deal with the National Trust, which was that he would not use fertilisers or bring anything new on to the land—it all had to be natural; the grass was natural—which was quite unique. Along with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Edwin Poots and others, I had a chance to see how that works. It does work: it is an organic farm in every sense of the word, yet all the cattle are exceptional.

That is another reason why it is essential to bring in the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill as a matter of urgency. As Edwin Poots outlined:

“The introduction of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill in England will not apply to Northern Ireland. The Protocol requires alignment to EU rules so gene-edited crops developed in England under the Bill”—

that we could take advantage of in Northern Ireland—

“would not be available for cultivation in Northern Ireland.”

We need parity of opportunity and of legislation. When the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill returns to this House from the other place, we need to see that we will have that opportunity.

The fact is that for any British gene-edited crops we would have to apply to the European Food Safety Authority for approval before they could be sent to Northern Ireland, which imports, among other things, grain for animal feed. Even then, the crops could still be banned by Dublin, and that is what this really is: the EU and Dublin, with their hand—their dead hand—upon

us on many occasions. That would present a fresh headache in ensuring the affected plants did not cross that invisible Irish border.

It is clear that while this Bill is a stand-alone one, the fingerprints of European intransigence are all over it. I again make the point that it is not this Bill, but the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, whenever it comes back, that will give us in Northern Ireland the same chance as the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill. I would ask the House and the Government to reinstate their support for us whenever the Bill, which I think is going through the other place tomorrow, comes back to us.

As someone who loves the land and always supports the farmers, I trust those who have farmed for generations when they say that this is an enhanced version of splicing and that there is a need to be open to all possibilities. I say the Bill is the right way to go to ensure that the facility is there and so suits the farmers and food producers, and allows Northern Ireland to play a crucial and important role to advance our markets across the world. It will also ensure that we can grow and provide more jobs and a stronger economy, and that we can determine this for ourselves, rather than have the unelected EU, with no Northern Ireland voices, dictating our food security and farming practices.

That is my bid for the Minister about what has been brought here tonight. I really do support this, and I think it is the right thing to do. I will say in advance that amendment 4—perhaps the Minister can clarify this for me at the end, if possible—while it has been put forward by the Labour Opposition, has I believe been done in the best possible sense. I understand that the Minister's colleague, the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), was going to put forward something similar, and we were apt to support that. So if the Opposition move amendment 4, which would ensure that the Secretary of State takes into account animal welfare in relation to Northern Ireland, that is the one on which we will probably disagree with the Minister, unless clarification can be given to us. However, on everything else, I fully support the Minister and the Government as they bring this Bill forward.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I think we have had a very thoughtful and good-humoured discussion. It is clear that animal welfare is a key feature for both sides of this House. I just want to mention amendment 7, with which I have a great deal of sympathy, but I will not be supporting it because I think the question of labelling needs to be looked at in a much wider context. I would very much urge the Minister, within that wider context, to look at consumer information, which I think is a really important issue.

Last week, I spoke in the Chamber on the national food strategy and food security. Much has changed since Henry Dimbleby published his recommendations last summer. The cost of everyday staples continues to rise as the war in Ukraine pushes food price inflation to its highest level in 14 years. So this is the right time to consider alternative ways that our Government can strengthen the nation's food security.

By removing barriers to precision breeding, the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill will open the future

to developing crops that are more resistant to pests, disease and climate change, reducing the need for fertilisers and pesticides. Genome editing provides the opportunity to achieve the outcomes of plant breeding, which has been so successful in controlling diseases and improving yields, but in a much more precise manner.

In encouraging this innovation, placing UK researchers and commercial breeders at the forefront of exploring what these technologies have to offer, we can use science to move away from chemical use and make land more productive, both reducing the cost of food and restoring the balance of nature. However, the UK's world-leading animal welfare standards must be upheld, so I support the step-by-step approach to legislation, with a focus on plants and maintaining our high standards in animal welfare. I am sure that the Minister has listened to some of the concerns that have been expressed, and that will probably be reflected in looking at the wording of the Bill.

This Bill is a real opportunity to make a positive contribution to a more sustainable food system. For instance, by reducing the spoiling and browning of foods and increasing their shelf life, we can help reduce food waste. It could enable us to improve the nutritional profile of foods—for example, by increasing antioxidants, phenols and tannins in fruit and vegetables, or improving oil and carbohydrate profiles, delivering foods that benefit consumers and reduce the burden on healthcare providers.

Precision breeding represents an opportunity to develop crops with modified macronutrient status, such as increased resistant starch, which naturally reduces the calorific content of food, but increases the level of fibre. Through agritech innovations, farmers around the world will have the opportunity to make better use of their land, fight off harmful pests and better regulate the nutrients in their soil, while removing unnecessary barriers, and helping the world grow more and strive towards a greener tomorrow. In that spirit, I think the Bill is the right step forward, and I just hope that we can all get behind it.

8.15 pm

Mark Spencer: Can I say how much I have enjoyed the comments from across the Chamber? I will seek to give colleagues some reassurance.

I will start with the comments from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who spoke to new clause 9, in the name of her hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). The mutual recognition principle in the UKIM Act means that goods that comply with the relevant legislative requirements in one part of the United Kingdom can automatically be sold in other parts of the United Kingdom without complying with any differing relevant legislative requirements in those parts. Consequently, should UK Government legislation allow precision bred plants, seeds, animals, food and feed to be placed on the market in England, such products would be able to be placed on the market in Wales and Scotland. However, this would not be the case if a UKIM exclusion was put in place for precision bred products.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North may recall that when this matter was raised in Committee, my predecessor explained that there is an established process for considering exclusions to the application of the market access principles of the UK Internal Market

Act in the common framework areas. This process has been agreed by the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. No formal request for a UKIM exclusion has been received from the Scottish Government in the context of ongoing intergovernmental discussions on the Bill between DEFRA and devolved Administration officials. As a result, we do not consider amending the UKIM Act itself to be appropriate, but rather that the UKIM exclusion process would be the appropriate route to consider the rationale and potential impact of a UKIM exclusion.

Turning to amendment 13, which is in addition to new clause 9, the hon. Member may once again recall that this was discussed extensively in Committee, and my predecessor explained that the common framework covering GMO marketing and cultivation was within the scope of the common frameworks programme. However, all four Administrations agreed that a common framework in this area was not required because the administration and co-ordination of this policy area was already provided for through existing intergovernmental arrangements under the GMO concordat.

In addition to engagement between DEFRA and genetic technology officials in the devolved Administrations, it is worth noting that the precision breeding policy interacts with four provisional common frameworks: animal health and welfare; plant varieties and seeds; food and feed safety and hygiene; and food compositional standards and labelling. Engagement among the respective officials is ongoing through these relevant frameworks.

We will continue to engage with our devolved Administration counterparts to address their specific concerns in connection with the Bill, but I encourage the hon. Member to embrace the opportunity that the Bill presents to unlock the benefits of science and research and development in this country, and ensure that the UK continues to invest in innovation in the agrifood industry. It would be a tragedy for Scottish farmers not to be able to embrace this new technology and I urge her to come with us on this journey and not to disadvantage Scottish farmers.

On amendment 3, we are very much aligned with the intentions of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and his colleagues to embed public interest into the Bill. We want precision breeding technologies to secure real benefits. I believe that they are a vital part of our toolkit to secure benefits for our food and environment. The amendment applies to release into the environment, which principally covers field trials. These are crucial in building our understanding of how genetic changes impact organisms under field conditions, and they are an integral part of the pure research as well as for breeding programmes. It is not necessary to place restrictions on research using these technologies, and we have no evidence to suggest that developers are doing anything other than what occurs in traditional breeding or in nature by creating new, stronger varieties that allow us to grow better and harvest better.

We also recognise the need to safeguard animal welfare, which is why we intend to take a step-by-step approach to implementing the Bill. We intend that precision bred animals will remain regulated under the GMO regime until the regulatory system outlined in the Bill is developed, to safeguard animal welfare. Delivering public good is

[Mark Spencer]

what we strive for across Government and we are fully committed to developing a new, sustainable, resilient and productive food system, and I hope Members see that our interests and those of researchers in the UK are aligned.

On amendment 5 and environmental principles, the hon. Member for Cambridge and his colleagues have made it explicit that regulations made under this Act must be made in accordance with the environmental principles and the policy statement in the Environment Act 2021 and article 391 of the trade and cooperation agreement between the UK and the EU. Section 19 of the Environment Act provides that Ministers must have due regard to the policy statement on the environmental principles. DEFRA has already published and laid a draft version of the statement before Parliament for debate. Parliamentary scrutiny of the draft policy statement concluded in June and we are considering the feedback received from Parliament and will publish a final statement in due course.

As we are making good progress in this regard, it is unnecessary to amend the Bill with a provision that will be unnecessary by the time the regulations under the Bill come into force. Of primary importance is the advice from the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment that the provisions in the Bill do not have the effect of weakening or reducing environmental protections. The esteemed independent experts who sit on ACRE have provided the Government with this assurance, and it is this guidance that gives the Government the assurance to take the legislation forward. I would emphasise that Ministers before me have found that the Bill is consistent with our non-regression commitment to the EU and does not reduce our environmental protections.

On the debate about aligning with the EU, as some Members want, we recently closed the consultation on a potential new regulatory framework for precision bred plants. Some 80% of people considered the current regulations not to be fit for purpose. The EU intends to reform its own regulatory system as early as 2023 and we await the details on that.

Amendments 1 and 2 caused a great deal of debate and clearly many colleagues have concerns, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for this opportunity to address this area. As with plants, there are potential benefits in enabling precision breeding in animals to improve the health, welfare and resilience of those animals, and we have a real opportunity to harness the great research taking place across the UK. Ensuring that these technologies are used responsibly without compromising animal health and welfare is vital. That is why we intend to take a stepwise approach in implementing the Bill, with regulatory changes to the regime for plants coming first, followed by animals at a later date. We want to ensure that the framework for animal welfare set out in the Bill is effective and workable, and we will not bring the measures in the Bill into force in relation to animals until the system is in place.

We are also clear that the system to protect animal health and welfare in the Bill will work with our existing animal welfare regulatory framework for protecting animals. We want to maintain and build on our strong

record of animal welfare. If we want to drive investment in new research with potential for innovation and precision breeding in animals, we need to move forward with this Bill. It provides a clear signal that the UK is the best place to conduct research and bring products to the marketplace.

Building on this, and turning to amendment 4 in the name of the hon. Member for Cambridge and his colleagues, I recognise the level of concern about animal welfare. The suggestions outlined in the amendment represent issues that we will make sure are explored further as we develop the technical details underpinning the system for safeguarding the welfare of relevant animals and their qualifying progeny. That is why we have commissioned a research project to gather the evidence required to develop the health and welfare assessment. We have published an update note on animal welfare to explain our approach. I do not, however, consider this amendment to be necessary. Clause 13 will make sure the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will need to be satisfied with the animal welfare declaration before issuing a precision bred animal marketing authorisation. This goes to the heart of what my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) was concerned about. Further, the power in clause 25 allows us to set out in regulations what constitutes an adverse effect on health or welfare, including parameters needed for assessment.

The welfare declaration and the welfare advisory body's assessment will be based on the principle that precision bred relevant animals will need to be kept in conditions that satisfy existing requirements on the keeping of animals set out in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007. I understand hon. Members' concerns but reiterate that we have welfare-led legislation in place and this Bill is intended to work alongside it to enable responsible innovation.

I will take the opportunity of turning to amendment 12 to expand on the process set out in the Bill to ensure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have the necessary information to determine whether it is appropriate to issue a precision bred marketing authorisation. An application for such authorisation will have to include a declaration, with supporting evidence, that the notifier does not expect the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny to be adversely affected by any precision bred traits. Any adverse effect could cover any direct or indirect effect and as such specifying this is not required in the Bill. The Secretary of State will need to refer the welfare declaration and all required accompanying information to a welfare advisory body with independent scientific expertise, which will report its conclusions to the Secretary of State.

These steps will provide a rigorous and proportionate basis for ensuring that the Secretary of State's decisions on whether to issue precision bred marketing authorisations are appropriately informed by scientific evidence. As set out in our recently published policy update on animal welfare, the power in clause 25 could include consideration of any known health or welfare issues in selective-bred animals. I hope that gives my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet the reassurance he seeks.

Amendment 8 would require provisions in regulations for securing traceability of precision bred organisms in food and feed through supply chain auditing. The Bill

proposes powers to introduce specific traceability requirements for food and feed produced from precision bred organisms placed on the market in England. That will be in addition to general rules on traceability that apply to all food and feed and to specific traceability rules that apply to particular food products regardless of the production method used. The Food Standards Agency will develop and design evidence-based options on how best to secure traceability of food and feed from precision bred organisms placed on the market in England. Any options on traceability must be sufficiently future-proofed and strike a proportionate balance between ensuring food safety and enabling innovation. Additionally, any new measure to secure traceability of precision bred organisms will need to build on existing infrastructure for general traceability, which food businesses already have a statutory obligation to secure.

The Food Standards Agency will advise on proportionate measures for securing traceability, making use of the advice from its scientific advisory committee, and will ensure that proposals are subject to a public consultation before any specific measures are implemented. The amendment proposed by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion would not allow for that process to happen as it would restrict traceability to supply chain auditing.

8.30 pm

I will turn briefly to my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who had some concerns about exogenous DNA—I hesitate, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I do not want to use the word “erogenous” rather than “exogenous”, so I will not use that word again. Amendment 11 would exclude any organism from the definition of a precision bred organism if a technique or process involving the insertion of said genetic material was used during any step of its development. Under the amendment, such important research would fall outside the scope of the Bill and such plants would be classed as genetically modified organisms.

Professor Napier’s research illustrates the situation that would arise for much of the other great research taking place across the country if the amendment were to stand. Innovation through technology such as precision breeding can help to create new markets, support a sustainable economy and help British businesses to compete globally. If we were to accept the amendment, countries elsewhere in the world with proportionate regulations would be able to use the technology with its huge potential and benefits as it develops whereas we would remain impeded by our current legislation. I hope that I have reassured my hon. Friends and hon. Members across the House and that they will not press their amendments so that we can continue to progress this important piece of legislation.

Daniel Zeichner: I do not have much to add and do not want to detain the House. All I will say is that I am slightly disappointed that the Minister does not feel able to join us in looking for a stronger regulatory framework. We really think that would help, and some contributions from colleagues on the Government Benches indicated that there are concerns. Ultimately, the Opposition will support the Bill tonight, but we would much prefer it if it came with the amendments that we have proposed,

which would much strengthen it. We do not propose to press new clause 1, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 9

POWER OF THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT TO LEGISLATE ON THE MARKETING OF PRECISION BRED ORGANISMS

“(1) Schedule 1 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph 11 insert—

“*Marketing of precision bred organisms*

11A The United Kingdom market access principles do not apply to (and sections 2(3) and 5(3) do not affect the operation of) any Act of the Scottish Parliament, or any subordinate legislation made under or by virtue of such an Act, relating to the marketing of—

- (a) precision bred organisms, or
- (b) food or feed produced from precision bred organisms.”.—(*Kirsty Blackman.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 37, Noes 282.

Division No. 81]

[8.33 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah	Linden, David
Black, Mhairi	Lucas, Caroline
Blackford, rh Ian	MacAskill, Kenny
Blackman, Kirsty	Mc Nally, John
Brock, Deidre	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Brown, Alan	McDonald, Stuart C.
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Monaghan, Carol
Cherry, Joanna	Newlands, Gavin
Cowan, Ronnie	Nicolson, John
Day, Martyn	Offord, Dr Matthew
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	O’Hara, Brendan
Doogan, Dave	Oswald, Kirsten
Dorans, Allan	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Edwards, Jonathan	Sheppard, Tommy
Fellows, Marion	Stephens, Chris
Ferrier, Margaret	Thewliss, Alison
Gibson, Patricia	Wishart, Pete
Hendry, Drew	
Hosie, rh Stewart	Tellers for the Ayes:
Lake, Ben	Richard Thomson and
	Steven Bonnar

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel	Benton, Scott
Afriyie, Adam	Beresford, Sir Paul
Aldous, Peter	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Lee	Blackman, Bob
Anderson, Stuart	Blunt, Crispin
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bone, Mr Peter
Ansell, Caroline	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Argar, rh Edward	Bradley, Ben
Atkins, Victoria	Brereton, Jack
Bacon, Gareth	Bridgen, Andrew
Bailey, Shaun	Brine, Steve
Baillie, Siobhan	Bristow, Paul
Baker, Duncan	Britcliffe, Sara
Baker, Mr Steve	Bruce, Fiona
Baldwin, Harriett	Buchan, Felicity
Barclay, rh Steve	Burghart, Alex
Baron, Mr John	Butler, Rob
Baynes, Simon	Carter, Andy
Bell, Aaron	Cartlidge, James

Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinénage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan

Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen

Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 1

PRECISION BRED ORGANISM

Amendment proposed: 1, page 1, line 4, leave out
 “or a precision bred animal”.—(Caroline Lucas.)

This amendment removes animals from the scope of the Bill.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 159, Noes 280.

Division No. 82]

[8.48 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ali, Tahir	Bardell, Hannah
Amesbury, Mike	Barker, Paula

Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bonnar, Steven
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dorans, Allan
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Hendry, Drew
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart

Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Lucas, Caroline
 MacAskill, Kenny
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 Norris, Alex
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Stephens, Chris
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thomson, Richard
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian

Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittome, Nadia
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete

Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Mary Glindon

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinéage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan

Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip

Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne

Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggan, Sir Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy

Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 3

RESTRICTIONS ON RELEASE OF PRECISION BRED ORGANISM IN ENGLAND

Amendment proposed: 3, page 3, line 35, at end insert—

- “(c) the organism has been developed for or in connection with one or more of the following purposes—
- (i) producing food in a way that protects or enhances a healthy, resilient and biodiverse natural environment;
 - (ii) growing and managing plants or animals in a way that mitigates or adapts to climate change;
 - (iii) producing food in a way that prevents, reduces or protects from environmental hazards;
 - (iv) protecting or improving the health or welfare of animals;
 - (v) conserving native animals or genetic resources relating to any such animal;
 - (vi) protecting or improving the health of plants;
 - (vii) reducing the use of pesticides and artificial fertiliser;
 - (viii) conserving plants grown or used in carrying on an agricultural, horticultural or forestry activity, their wild relatives or genetic resources relating to any such plant;
 - (ix) protecting or improving the quality of soil;
 - (x) supporting or improving human health and well-being;
 - (xi) supporting or improving the sustainable use of resources.”—(*Daniel Zeichner.*)

This amendment would require that a precision bred organism has been developed to provide a public benefit, if it is to be released into the environment.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 136, Noes 279.

Division No. 83]

[9.1 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Champion, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Charalambous, Bambos
Amesbury, Mike	Creasy, Stella
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cruddas, Jon
Barker, Paula	Cryer, John
Begum, Apsana	Cunningham, Alex
Benn, rh Hilary	Daby, Janet
Betts, Mr Clive	David, Wayne
Blake, Olivia	Davies, Geraint
Blomfield, Paul	De Cordova, Marsha
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Debbonaire, Thangam
Brennan, Kevin	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Dodds, Anneliese
Bryant, Chris	Doughty, Stephen
Burgon, Richard	Dowd, Peter
Butler, Dawn	Eagle, Dame Angela
Byrne, Ian	Eagle, Maria
Byrne, rh Liam	Eastwood, Colum
Cadbury, Ruth	Edwards, Jonathan
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Elmore, Chris
Carden, Dan	Eshalomi, Florence
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Evans, Chris
Chamberlain, Wendy	Farron, Tim

Farry, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu

Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Norris, Alex
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Pollard, Luke
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stone, Jamie
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Mary Glindon

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib

Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo

Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon

Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny

Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe

Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 13

ISSUE OF PRECISION BRED ANIMAL MARKETING AUTHORISATION

Amendment proposed: 4, page 9, line 20, at end insert—

- “(za) that the precision bred traits will not have a direct or indirect adverse effect on the health or welfare of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny,
 (zb) that the relevant animal and its qualifying progeny are not likely to experience pain, suffering or lasting harm arising from or connected with fast growth, high yields or any other increase in productivity,
 (zc) that the precision bred traits will not facilitate the keeping of the relevant animal or its qualifying progeny in conditions that are crowded, stressful or otherwise likely to have an adverse effect on animal welfare,
 (zd) that the objective of the precision bred traits could not reasonably have been achieved by means that do not involve modification of the genome of the animal.”—
 (*Daniel Zeichner.*)

The amendment requires a range of factors to be taken into account by the Secretary of State when deciding whether to issue a precision bred animal marketing authorisation.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 141, Noes 275.

Division No. 84]

[9.13 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Hayes, Helen
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Lake, Ben
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lucas, Caroline
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Norris, Alex
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Paisley, Ian
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Pollard, Luke
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stone, Jamie
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam

Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 Western, Matt

Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mary Glindon and
Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip

Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris

Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran

Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philip, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swaney, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt

Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Williams, Craig

Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

Question accordingly negatived.

Third Reading

King's consent signified.

9.25 pm

Mark Spencer: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I put on record my sincere thanks to the fantastic officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who assisted with the drafting and delivery of the Bill. I also thank previous Secretaries of State: my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who put an enormous amount of work into the Bill, and my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena). I pay tribute to a series of Ministers who assisted at various stages of the Bill: my hon. Friends the Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who are present; my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who assisted with the Bill when he was a Whip; and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones), the Whip who is assisting today.

The Bill is a fantastic example of the opportunities we now have outside the EU. I am delighted that we have got to Third Reading. I wholly commend the Bill to the House, and I look forward to its progress in the other place.

9.26 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State back to her Department, as well as her team, some of whom are new, and some of whom are recycled; obviously, in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, that is a good thing. I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words as this important Bill completes its passage through this House.

We are pleased that the Bill is finally before us. The continual leadership crisis in the Tory party has meant that environmental and animal welfare legislation has been pulled, delayed and ignored, and we learned on Friday that the Government have missed today's legal deadline to set clean air targets. The lawbreaking just goes on. This Bill was an opportunity to tackle one of the great issues of our time, but instead of rising to that challenge, I am afraid that the Government have flunked it. We may have got a new Prime Minister last week, but it is the same old Tories.

Labour Members are pro-science and pro-innovation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) stated. We want to find ways to maintain and improve the efficiency, security and safety of our food system, and address the environmental and health damage that the modern food system has caused. Our United Kingdom has the opportunity to create a world-leading regulatory framework that others will follow. That is what we would do in government. The public need assurance that new technologies are being used for the public good, not narrow commercial advantage.

Labour is the party of food safety; we established the Food Standards Agency. Different approaches to food production must be respected, and there must be proper safeguards for organic production. The issues covered by the Bill require us to take a long-term view, and to have an understanding and appreciation of the wider public good, but this Government stagger on from day to day, focused only on how they can get to the end of next week without yet another change at the top.

Labour Members have no doubt about the possible benefits of gene editing. We understand the pressure that it puts on farmers when we rightly say that they cannot use neonicotinoids because of the harm they cause to pollinators, but there are so many questions still unanswered as the Bill travels on its journey. Do we want to use gene editing to modify an animal to allow it to tolerate more cramped conditions? No. We want a regulatory system that ensures that technologies are used for the right purposes. We fully understand that the laws designed 30 years ago for genetically modified products do not reflect advances in understanding and technology, and many countries recognise that gene editing needs to be treated differently. Labour Members want our scientists to succeed and use their skills for good here in the UK. Over the years, traditional crop development and innovation has brought us all significant gains.

But as we enter new territory, we need a strong regulatory framework to get it right, and this Bill badly needs strengthening. Far too much is being left to secondary legislation. Although we understand that this is attractive to Ministers, it largely means "trust us". That is increasingly difficult to do, because we all know that it means a blank cheque on an issue that requires trust and public acceptance, and that is not a good starting point. We needed much more detail on the face of the Bill.

That detail is necessary because the Bill covers both plants and animals. That makes the legislation much more complicated and difficult, and important too. The Government originally said that they would introduce new measures for animals only after looking at plants and after extensive consultation on the right regulatory frameworks for animals had been established. So far as we can see, there is nothing in the Bill to make that happen. Frankly, it is the wrong way round. We need to sort out the preferred regulatory framework first and then put it into law, not the other way round.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Am I wrong in thinking that Third Reading is about what is actually in the Bill, rather than what is not? The shadow Minister seems to be referring to what is not in the Bill. My understanding was that on Third Reading we are supposed to talk about what is actually in the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I must say that the hon. Lady does seem to be making rather an extensive speech, but I am sure she will be coming to her point shortly.

Ruth Jones: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; yes, of course.

I want to acknowledge all the animal welfare organisations that have expressed their concern—indeed, the RSPCA says in its brief that it is “incredibly concerned”. I say to them and all those following the passage of the Bill, now that it is out of Committee, that we require stronger animal safeguards.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for leading on the Bill and to the folks in his team—Milly, George and Jenna—who have worked on it. I thank Rob Wakely and Adam Jogee, who have worked to support me too. I also thank the officials in this House and in the Department for their work on this important Bill. As it now moves on, we on the Labour Benches wish it well and hope that it will be strengthened and given the detail that it so desperately needs.

9.31 pm

Tim Farron: Briefly—I promise—I thank the many, many Ministers who have helped to lead this Bill through Parliament. Let me say on behalf of farmers in Cumbria that we would be grateful if this Government did not take us for granted in the transition to the new payment system, which has been botched so badly, or any indeed in the trade deals that have thrown so many of my farmers underneath the bus.

Science has an important role in farming. That includes GM, and there is no doubt in my mind that the European Commission’s stifling position on GM was massively regrettable. It is good to have a debate on it in this place and to try to move forward with it. GM and science in agriculture can reduce harm to the environment, reduce the reliance on damaging and expensive pesticides and fertiliser, increase productivity and help to meet global food needs, but to achieve those advances the Bill would need to provide proper detail and regulation, to protect animals and consumers and to protect farmers from being sold out and their livelihoods placed at the mercy of multinational businesses. We must not replace the European Commission’s knee-jerk opposition to science with a reckless lack of detail. I fear that that is where we are.

9.33 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I rise to support the Bill, which we will of course be voting for if there is a vote on Third Reading.

It is important in modern farming that we look for ways of increasing productivity and breeding out some of the imperfections and difficulties and, in doing that, improve animal welfare. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out earlier in the debate, this is not something new. In fact, his granny practised it, with the splicing of beans and peas to improve their productivity, size, disease resistance and everything else. It is important that we find ways of applying science, especially as agriculture is such a big part of our economy.

Of course, one of the good things about being out of the European Union is that we have the opportunity to break away from some of the stifling rules that were imposed as a result of our being attached to the European Union.

I noticed that the Minister avoided responding to the point my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford made. Although farming is important in Northern Ireland, and although exports, and therefore competitiveness, are important to our farmers, when this legislation is passed and its fruits begin to be seen, they will not apply in Northern Ireland. The Minister pleaded with the Scots Nats, who appear to want to keep their economy in the stone age so they can have devolution and defend their devolution settlement—that is the price they are prepared to pay for independence and for safeguarding the role of the Scottish Parliament—not to be backward looking, but the Government, through refusing or being unable to remove the impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, will do exactly that in Northern Ireland.

I hope that there is some joined-up thinking in Government and that they recognise that as we change laws in the United Kingdom, that must not be seen to drive a wedge between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, constitutionally or economically. We will support the Bill, but I hope that events and developments will ensure that farmers in Northern Ireland benefit from it as much as farmers elsewhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

PRODUCT SECURITY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 26 January 2022 in the last Session of Parliament (Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill (Programme)), as varied by the Order of 25 May 2022 (Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill Programme (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: 17, 1 to 16.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Question agreed to.

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 17. If Lords amendment 17 is agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered into the *Journal*.

After Clause 74

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS CODE

9.37 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 17.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 1 to 16.

Julia Lopez: I am pleased to see the progress that the Bill has made since it left this House before the summer, and I am grateful to Members in the other place for their scrutiny of it. Fast, reliable and secure digital connections are the cornerstone of a competitive economy and thriving society, and the sooner the legislation comes into force, the better. As hon. Members will recall from earlier stages of the Bill, its objective is twofold: first, to speed up the roll-out of 5G and gigabit-capable broadband; and secondly, to protect and enhance the security of consumer connectable products, such as monitors, doorbells, connected kitchen appliances and so on, so that users can get their benefits without being exposed to risk. I am confident that the Bill will do just that.

I will start by explaining the need for the relatively straightforward Government amendments tabled by my now former colleague, Lord Kamall, whom I thank and pay tribute to. I will then move on to Lords amendment 17, with which I hope the House will disagree.

Lords amendments 1 to 11 seek to implement recommendations made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. Those recommendations relate only to part 1, on product security. The amendments change the parliamentary procedure for two delegated powers from the negative resolution procedure to the affirmative resolution procedure. Those are the powers in clause 3, the power to deem compliance with security requirements, and clause 9, the power to exempt manufacturers from needing to draw up a statement of compliance. The amendments will also ensure that the Secretary of State is able to authorise another person to exercise enforcement functions only by making regulations rather than by agreement. Those regulations will also be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. We have carefully considered the Committee's regulations and we are happy to accept those three.

On part 2 of the Bill, on telecoms infrastructure, Lords amendments 12 to 14 would remove the clause formerly known as clause 57 and make relevant consequential amendments to the version of the Bill that this House sent to the other place. That clause was intended to address difficulties that had arisen following upper tribunal and Court of Appeal decisions on the meaning of "occupier". However, a judgment of the

Supreme Court on this very issue was made during the Bill's journey through the other place, and the judgment resolves the policy concerns that clause 57 was designed to address. As a result, we think it is no longer necessary to retain that clause, and its removal will ensure clarity and certainty for all users of the code.

Lords amendment 15 was made by the Government following a lot of debate and work by my team of officials, and I expect hon. Members on all sides will be pleased to see it realised in the Bill. It gives operators the rights to facilitate two things. First, the amendment makes it easier for a telegraph pole to be shared that is used by an operator other than the operator that owns the pole. Secondly, it makes it easier for the equipment on a pole to be upgraded—for example, by replacing an old copper line with a fibre-optic one.

This amendment is something that many of my hon. Friends and hon. Members, and indeed the telecoms industry, were asking for. Overhead lines are used to provide a substantial proportion of network delivery across the country, and we think the amendment will therefore play a very important role in delivering better services to our constituents. We have listened carefully to stakeholders, and as well as meeting the needs of operators, I can assure hon. Members that we have included safeguards to protect the interests of private landowners and occupiers. For example, the legislation will not provide operators with an automatic right of entry on to private land. I hope that this amendment will therefore be welcomed.

The final Government amendment, Lords amendment 16, concerns an issue that has not yet been discussed in this House, so I should spend a little more time explaining its rationale. The amendment is intended to protect the autonomy and integrity of our national security, defence and law enforcement sites across the country. As it stands, the electronic communications code allows telecoms operators to seek consensual agreements with landowners to install and maintain telecoms equipment on private and public land, including sensitive national security, defence and law enforcement sites. If an agreement cannot be reached, a telecoms operator may seek a court order imposing such an agreement, potentially giving the operator access to those sensitive sites without consent. The code works in this way to make sure that operators can deliver the 5G and gigabit-capable broadband roll-out at pace.

However, this process does raise some national security concerns, including physical security, technical security and legal risks, which I shall go into a little further. On physical security, the presence of engineers and site surveyors on particularly sensitive sites, potentially without proper security clearance, could pose a national security risk. On technical security, the installation of 5G equipment on particularly sensitive Government sites could pose communications and information security risks.

Finally, on legal risks, the courts that consider proceedings under the code are not able to undertake closed material proceedings. That means that classified national security concerns cannot be evidenced properly, which might lead to courts granting access to sensitive sites without a full awareness of the risks. Lords amendment 16 seeks to address those particular national security risks without undermining our ambitious gigabit-capable broadband and 5G roll-out plans. It will confer powers on the relevant Secretary of State to intervene and prevent a court from imposing an agreement sought by an operator.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her presentation. In relation to personal data—my constituents contact me about it all the time, and probably hers do as well—can we be assured that, through this Bill, personal data will not be available to people who do not have the right to access it?

Julia Lopez: I think that is probably for other legislation, but if the hon. Member would like to discuss further with me, perhaps in relation to the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, I would be very happy to do so.

Turning back to Lords amendment 16, I have to emphasise that it is not a blanket national security exemption. It is a very specific power that will be deployed only rarely, on a case-by-case basis and only when all other routes to a mutually consensual solution have been exhausted.

Finally, turning to the last amendment in the group, I hope the House will disagree with Lords amendment 17. The amendment adds a new clause to the Bill requiring the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the effect of the electronic communications code and of the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Leasehold Property) Act 2021.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is the Minister's belief that the Bill will be a remedy for the problems in the market. She will acknowledge that, while there are only a few of us in the House who do so, there is a rather larger number out there who believe that it will make a bad situation significantly worse. The Lords amendment at least gives the opportunity of finding out who is right about this—whether it is her belief that the situation will be better or mine that it will be worse. It will put some proof into the pudding. Why must she resist it?

Julia Lopez: I shall set out my reasons for resisting now, but I am afraid I am not of the same opinion as my right hon. Friend on this issue. I have looked at it at length: I have looked at casework and the numbers of renewals, and I believe a review would simply cause a great deal of delay, which would further stymie roll-out.

9.45 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Minister for her intervention on this. Does she agree with me, as chair of the all-party group on broadband and digital communication, that the industry is desperately concerned that this review amendment will wreck the intentions of the Bill, and in constituencies like mine in North Devon will simply slow down the roll-out of this vital infrastructure further?

Julia Lopez: I agree and I thank my hon. Friend for making the point. It seems sensible and benign, but it would significantly delay roll-out and create a great deal of uncertainty.

I understand why Members in the other place tabled this amendment. Its aims are noble, but it is impractical and unnecessary and would have a disastrous effect on investment in telecoms infrastructure, leading to a slow-down in getting great connectivity to the places that most need it, particularly rural constituencies. The Government and Ofcom already produce regular reports on coverage targets and competition, and to that extent the amendment is unnecessary and would duplicate effort.

On the subject of coverage and targets, we are making great progress. We have listened at length to the concerns in both Houses and among stakeholders, and we of course understand that there are tensions between landowners and operators that must be resolved, albeit a lot of progress has been made since 2017. This Bill tries to resolve some of the challenges, particularly by introducing more collaborative negotiations and a greater use of alternative dispute resolutions.

The prospect of another full-scale review of the code framework would have the opposite effect, exacerbating existing tensions by prolonging that debate about valuation. The result would be a cooling effect on the market, with landowners and operators reluctant to conclude agreements until the review was completed. That would seriously delay the delivery of digital services, including gigabit-capable connections and 5G coverage, which so many of our constituents tell us they need and which hon. Members hold me to account for every day because those things are important to economic growth and social wellbeing in their constituencies, particularly rural ones. I urge hon. Members not to stitch further delays into the process through the uncertainty created by a review. For these reasons, although amendment 17 is well-intentioned, it is disproportionate and unhelpful, and I hope the House will disagree to it.

I am nearly at the end of my speech, but I want to thank all Members who have contributed to debates on this Bill, especially the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and her predecessor the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). Parliamentary scrutiny here and in the other place has provided the Government with much food for thought, allowing us to refine and improve the legislation, and I am pleased that Members on both sides of the House support the objectives of this much-needed Bill in recognition of the importance of digital connectivity to the people and communities we serve and the security of the products that will be increasingly present in their lives.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Labour has always broadly welcomed the principles of this Bill and has supported amendments, whether Government or Opposition-led, that strike a sensible balance. That remains the case today, and as such I welcome the Government amendments before us. I will instead focus my remarks on amendment 17 on a review of the electronic communications code.

Labour stands firmly behind the aim of improving roll-out. Digital connectivity is a necessity, not a luxury in this day and age. In order to participate in society—from banking to shopping, to education and using public services—access to the digital world is crucial for people of all ages and in every corner of the country. As such, it is vital that we facilitate the building, maintaining and upgrading of digital infrastructure that allows for this connectivity.

The last Labour Government delivered on this belief, ensuring the creation of infrastructure that brought first-generation broadband to around 13 million households by 2009, but unfortunately over the last 12 years roll-out simply has not gone as far or as fast as we would like. Both broadband and 5G roll-out have been woefully slow, and the Government have repeatedly reduced their targets. We therefore support the aim of part 2 of this Bill, to speed up roll-out to the levels needed. The amendment

[Stephanie Peacock]

that calls for a review of the electronic communication code is proposed with the firm intention of boosting rather than jeopardising roll-out. It would ensure that a balanced evidence base is built surrounding the changes made to regulation in the last five years so that concerns held by both landowners and operators can be addressed objectively and in the public interest.

Selaine Saxby: Will the hon. Member explain why the entire industry has asked me to speak this evening to say that the amendment would slow down the roll-out and do literally nothing to speed it up?

Stephanie Peacock: I understand that there are concerns in the industry, but there are also concerns on the other side of the argument among landowners. Indeed, in the consultation for the legislation, the most contentious parts of the 2017 regulations were considered, and that is why we are considering the amendment.

Indeed, the electronic communications code, as hon. Members will be aware, is the legislation that underpins the use of land for mobile telecommunications infrastructure. It was reformed in 2017 and further changes are being made to it through the Bill. After a period of initial adjustment, many operators now cite the 2017 ECC reform as a welcome set of changes that has in time helped them to act quicker and invest more in the roll-out.

Those who host masts, however, have seen their rents decrease by 63% on average as a result of those same changes and report that they have only caused them further problems, reducing their agency and disincentivising their involvement in facilitating the roll-out. That is a particular concern for smaller landowners—the likes of churches, sports clubs and community groups—whose rental income has been cut at a time when they are already suffering as a result of the cost of living, but whose land and involvement is vital for connecting hard-to-reach areas, some of which do not have 3G yet, let alone 5G.

Ultimately, roll-out is dependent both on those who build and operate masts and on the willingness of site owners to host them. Where we rely on both to succeed, the needs of both must be taken into account, striking the right balance so that roll-out is not impeded at either end. At the moment, however, the objective information on whether the ECC strikes the right balance is simply not available. Will the Minister share any objective evidence held by the Department on the impact that changes to the ECC have had and will have on roll-out, particularly as its consultation, as I mentioned, did not include the most controversial elements of the code. A review would help fill the evidence gap. Put simply, it would seek to measure in a balanced way whether the ECC is increasing roll-out as it was intended to.

To be clear, the amendment would not prevent the measures in the Bill from coming into force. It is designed to ensure that all the provisions that we hope make improvements to roll-out can still be enacted as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent. Compliance would still be expected from both providers and landowners. The amendment has no agenda for reversing any hard-fought changes in particular. It is a neutral amendment that

seeks to put an end to years of constant disputes between providers and landowners and bring focus back to roll-out. The review would make recommendations only in areas that show clear evidential need for change and are currently stopping targets for connectivity from being met. If instead we choose to ignore the ways in which the ECC has been controversial, such disputes will only continue.

I take this opportunity to put on record Labour's thanks to all those who host digital infrastructure on their land or buildings and are helping to connect their neighbours and communities to our modern world. It is clear that hosting masts can be difficult at times, but we must remember how vital it is for our country's future that we get the widest possible connectivity. We want more groups to step forward to host infrastructure, not less.

Ultimately, Labour wants to see a fair settlement that supports small landowners in hosting digital infrastructure but allows providers to maximise roll-out. The amendment, which received cross-party support in the other place, provides an opportunity to ensure that the ECC is compatible with those aims and is supported by balanced evidence. All sides should be able to get behind that. We must be united behind the goal of boosting connectivity for those who need it so that our country can get on with harnessing the power of technology for good.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Witnesses at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee have offered me, a history graduate and not the most technical of parliamentarians, a window into the world and advantages of connected tech. It is sometimes referred to as the "internet of things": a world of possibilities and advantages for companies and consumers. The possibilities are wide-reaching and seemingly never-ending, but it is a brave new world that is already introducing us in Parliament, as well as those in the police service, healthcare and many workplaces, to new and unforeseen issues around our security.

The Bill does much good work in improving the culture of security from the inception of the product right from the design stage. Improved security will be integral, and as customers we will have the benefit of security information provided at the point of sale. All of that, surely, is advantageous. We on these crowded SNP Benches behind me recognise the value of the Bill. It is, however, well past time for speedier legislative progress. The world of connected tech is already well developed and established in healthcare, courier services and a multiplicity of industries around the world. We should have had legislation in place long before now.

As long ago as 2016 we saw a weaponised interconnection of connected tech devices used in a botnet to take down online titans such as Netflix, Amazon and others—2016. Countless Tory Prime Ministers and Chancellors have come and gone and, in one case, almost come again since then. Yet the Bill only hurtles into view as 2022 winds to a close. In that time, we have seen attacks on connected tech devices rising by hundreds of per cent. year on year.

Sir Desmond Swayne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hate to interrupt this poetry, and it is indeed poetry, but what has it got to do with the amendments before us tonight?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am sure Mr Nicolson will be getting to Lords amendment 17, and to Lords amendments 1 to 16 as well, but I am being generous because it is almost Christmas and I know he does not have many pages in front of him.

John Nicolson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Indeed, I always stand in awe of the brevity of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) on these matters. I will try to emulate it.

Homes and industries across these islands are riddled with insecure technology because this House and the Conservative Government have been too slow to act. On the SNP Benches, we recognise that part 2 of the Bill sets out welcome changes that will be made to reduce bottlenecks and barriers to the roll-out of 4G and 5G masts. Let me highlight in particular Lords amendment 17, which has been opposed by the UK Government and by certain pressure groups and companies. The amendment requires that a review of the functioning of the code be started three months after the passage of the Bill into law. The amendment simply provides greater independent oversight on the efficacy of legislation and ensures that we as parliamentarians have access to more reliable information. The Government's opposition to Lords amendment 17 is, I believe, misjudged. The amendment reinforces the principles of independent oversight and accountability. The Government should concede on the amendment. It improves the Bill.

Although the Bill is overdue, it is far from polished or complete. On the SNP Benches, we have been keen to work with the Government on a cross-party basis to resolve the deficiencies in the Bill highlighted by stakeholders and in expert evidence. It is imperative that these shortcomings are resolved as the Bill continues its passage. We will not oppose the Bill. Both here and as a Government in Holyrood, we will continue to push for co-operative engagement to produce a more polished and complete piece of legislation. We have waited this long, we had better get it right, Mr Deputy Speaker—and happy Christmas!

Mr Deputy Speaker: My first of the season.

Jim Shannon: I just want to make a couple of quick comments on Lords amendment 17—I can confirm to the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that that is exactly what I am going to speak to—and on telecommunications infrastructure, which was referred to by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock).

Many landowners back home in my constituency have put in a telecommunications mast, which is an integral part of the infrastructure. They find that their rental contracts have changed from what was potentially an income over a 10-year period to an income that has dropped down to about £200 or £300. The value for the landowners of having that infrastructure on their land is no longer a financial equation to their advantage.

If the telecommunication giants, or whatever they may be, try to retract and change the agreement with the landowners, do the landowners have any rights? Can they put an end to the infrastructure that is on the land? Can they seek recompense from the telecommunication companies, and can telecommunication companies proceed without the consent of the landowners?

It is important for my constituents back home, who are faced with these predicaments, to get answers on such matters. I seek guidance from the Minister and hope that she can give me those answers.

10 pm

Julia Lopez: I thank hon. Members for their contributions and for the wide-reaching support for the Bill, as that shows recognition of its importance.

The 2017 reforms were introduced to drive roll-out and were designed to make rents more akin to those for a key utility. There were, no doubt, issues after 2017 that led to protracted negotiations and examples of poor practice by operators, some of which we heard in Committee, but I am confident that we are now reaching market equilibrium, and renewal numbers are increasing year on year.

We believe that the Bill will lead to further progress, and we are making great progress on the roll-out. Our national gigabit coverage was 6% in 2019 and it is now more than 70%; 4G coverage is at 92%; and we met our 5G target five years early. We review the situation. We have monthly stakeholder meetings that have led to a new national connectivity alliance between operators and landlords. I assure the House that I am not on the side of either operators or landlords in the negotiations; I am on the side of people with poor connectivity. That is the lens through which I view the amendments and such people are our motivation, plain and simple.

I thank the Bill team and all the officials across many Departments who have worked hard over the past couple of years to reach this stage. The Bill will help people up and down the country to access the digital services that they need, and to do so securely. If the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would like me to, I shall take up the issues in his constituency. Beyond that, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 17.

The House divided: Ayes 268, Noes 132.

Division No. 85]

[10.1 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Blunt, Crispin
Afriyie, Adam	Bone, Mr Peter
Aldous, Peter	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Anderson, Lee	Brereton, Jack
Anderson, Stuart	Bridgen, Andrew
Andrew, rh Stuart	Brine, Steve
Ansell, Caroline	Bristow, Paul
Argar, rh Edward	Bruce, Fiona
Atkins, Victoria	Buchan, Felicity
Bacon, Gareth	Burghart, Alex
Bailey, Shaun	Butler, Rob
Baillie, Siobhan	Carter, Andy
Baker, Duncan	Cartlidge, James
Baker, Mr Steve	Cash, Sir William
Baldwin, Harriett	Cates, Miriam
Barclay, rh Steve	Caulfield, Maria
Baron, Mr John	Chalk, Alex
Baynes, Simon	Chope, Sir Christopher
Bell, Aaron	Churchill, Jo
Benton, Scott	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clarkson, Chris
Bhatti, Saqib	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Blackman, Bob	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse

Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davison, Dehenna
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, Julian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll

Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Tellers for the Ayes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

NOES

Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elmore, Chris
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Foord, Richard
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hardy, Emma

Hayes, Helen	Powell, Lucy
Hobhouse, Wera	Rayner, rh Angela
Hollern, Kate	Reed, Steve
Hopkins, Rachel	Reeves, Ellie
Howarth, rh Sir George	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Jardine, Christine	Robinson, Gavin
Jarvis, Dan	Rodda, Matt
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Johnson, Kim	Shah, Naz
Jones, Darren	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Jones, Gerald	Slaughter, Andy
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Smith, Cat
Jones, Ruth	Smith, Jeff
Kane, Mike	Smith, Nick
Khan, Afzal	Sobel, Alex
Kyle, Peter	Spellar, rh John
Lake, Ben	Stone, Jamie
Leadbeater, Kim	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Lightwood, Simon	Tami, rh Mark
Madders, Justin	Tarry, Sam
Mahmood, Shabana	Thomas, Gareth
Malhotra, Seema	Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Maskell, Rachael	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
McCarthy, Kerry	Turner, Karl
McDonald, Andy	Twist, Liz
McDonnell, rh John	Vaz, rh Valerie
McKinnell, Catherine	Wakeford, Christian
Mearns, Ian	Webbe, Claudia
Moran, Layla	Western, Matt
Morgan, Helen	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Morgan, Stephen	Whittome, Nadia
Murray, Ian	Wilson, Munira
Murray, James	Wilson, rh Sammy
Norris, Alex	Winter, Beth
Olney, Sarah	Yasin, Mohammad
Onwurah, Chi	Zeichner, Daniel
Osamor, Kate	
Peacock, Stephanie	Tellers for the Noes:
Pennycook, Matthew	Navendu Mishra and
Pollard, Luke	Lilian Greenwood

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 17 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 1 to 16 agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 17;

That Julia Lopez, Mike Wood, Simon Baynes, Paul Bristow, Stephanie Peacock, Chris Elmore and John Nicolson be members of the Committee;

That Julia Lopez be the Chair of the Committee;

That four be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Julie Marson.*)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reason to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Andrew Griffith relating to the Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Bill.—(*Julie Marson.*)

Question agreed to.

PROTECTION FROM REDUNDANCY (PREGNANCY AND FAMILY LEAVE) BILL: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Julia Lopez.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

TRADE MARKS

That the draft Trade Marks (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Crime (International Co-operation) Act 2003 (Designation of Participating Countries) (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces (Covenant) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.

That the draft Armed Forces (Service Court Rules) (Amendment) (No. 2) Rules 2022, which were laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.

REHABILITATION OF OFFENDERS

That the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Bus Manufacture in the UK

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

10.17 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate on the importance of bus manufacturing, specifically electric bus manufacturing, in the United Kingdom. Electric buses play a vital role in helping us to reach net zero and reduce pollution in our congested cities. It is for that reason that the Government announced a £200 million boost to support the roll-out of zero-emission buses in March 2022—the zero-emission bus regional areas, or ZEBRA, scheme.

The UK has three main bus manufacturers: Alexander Dennis in Falkirk, Scotland and in Scarborough; Switch Mobility, formerly known as Optare, which is based in Sherburn in Elmet in my constituency; and Wrightbus in Northern Ireland. They have all developed electric buses and have a small number in service across a handful of our cities. The competition comes from China, with Chinese companies manufacturing around 420,000, an estimated 98% of the global electric bus fleet. These have been in service since May 2020.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman has initiated an important debate this evening. A few years ago, 70% of the buses Wrightbus was making would have been diesel buses, but in the last year and a half, 70% of its production has been electric buses. There is a market out there for these wonderful, low-emission products but they will only be purchased if Transport for London, Leicester Council and other councils are encouraged through an incentivised scheme to buy British. What does he think should be done to encourage them to buy British products?

Nigel Adams: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. That is the point of this debate. There is incentive. The Government are saying all the right things about wanting to see electric buses on our streets and they have launched this scheme, but the reality, as he will know, is that the organisations and local authorities that are buying the buses are not necessarily buying British. I will move on to the reasons shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nigel Adams: I give way to the hon. Gentleman in time-honoured fashion.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, and I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). Wrightbus in Northern Ireland has secured a contract with Translink to supply 100 zero-emission buses. The contract not only secures local jobs but promotes the company. We must invest in local bus-manufacturing companies in Northern Ireland to supply a global market that is crying out for the innovation of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and particularly of Wrightbus in Ballymena.

Nigel Adams: As ever, the hon. Gentleman is spot on.

To put those 420,000 Chinese electric buses into perspective, the UK currently has about 40,000 locally operated buses and only about 4% of them are electric. China is intent on maintaining world leadership in electric bus manufacturing and has been winning orders for buses funded by British taxpayers via the ZEBRA scheme. A key question for the Minister is whether the scheme is purely aimed at transitioning buses to electric power, or whether it is also intended to support and encourage our domestic manufacturers to fully transition to manufacturing only electric vehicles.

I am very familiar with the buses manufactured by Switch in the Selby district. The company was formerly known as Optare and is now part of the Indian Hinduja Group. We also have Plaxton in North Yorkshire. It has been part of Alexander Dennis since 2007. My right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill) knows that company all too well, as it manufactures in Scarborough. This is an important part of North Yorkshire's manufacturing capability.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that local authorities and passenger transport executives look not only at the bottom line but at the social implications of placing orders outside the United Kingdom, as it could diminish our manufacturing base and mean that, in future, China could have a monopoly of bus supply to the UK?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend is right. As we sit here now, China more or less has a monopoly on global bus supply. If we take Wrightbus, Plaxton, Alexander Dennis and Switch into the mix, the industry employs 3,500 individuals directly and an estimated 10,000 indirectly within the supply chain. This is an important sector.

I have been to the Switch factory in Sherburn in Elmet, which has orders from Transport for London, First Bus, Manchester Airport parking, City of York park-and-ride, Dubai and New Zealand. As I mentioned, Switch is part of the Hinduja Group and has started manufacturing UK-designed buses in India, including double-decker buses for the Indian market.

Ian Paisley: Is the right hon. Gentleman amazed that we have companies in the United Kingdom that build buses for Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America, Germany, Hong Kong and countries all over the world, yet a scheme that is designed to help manufacturers is putting money into the pockets of China and not supporting indigenous employment in the United Kingdom? That is just not right, is it?

Nigel Adams: Not only does it not smell right; it is absolutely not right that we are not purchasing British-manufactured buses.

The model for supplying electric buses is very different from the model for supplying the existing fleets of diesel-powered buses, but electric buses are an excellent fit for the needs of a local bus service. Electric buses do not have the same range as diesel buses, but this is not a disadvantage because the distance travelled each day by local buses on a defined route is known precisely and is within the range of an electric bus working from a local depot. However, the cost of an electric bus is higher than that of an equivalent diesel bus and operators are

not experienced in running electric bus fleets. For that reason, the industry is moving to a slightly different model, which should be investigated further, where buses are provided via service contracts, which cover the cost of the buses, the operation of the buses and the charging infrastructure. They can also cover, as part of that, battery upgrades and replacement costs. However, electric buses are far more cost-effective, with lower costs per mile once the transition is made and the infrastructure for charging and servicing is in place.

The key to this is the battery, which is a key component in an electric bus, or any other electric vehicle. For that reason, there is a lot of focus on battery technology, battery capacity and expected battery life. It might be thought that the bigger the battery capacity, the better the range of bus. That is not necessarily the case, but that has not prevented battery capacity from being a key part of the specification, including in some tender documents.

Therefore, battery capacity has been a factor that is believed to have unduly influenced some purchasing decisions. Buses manufactured in China are typically heavier than UK buses, so they have larger capacity batteries. In the case of Switch, the bus is designed around a lighter framework and less weight. Operating methods have a major impact on the capacity of battery required.

The ZEBRA scheme is especially important because, in addition to encouraging the take-up of electric buses, it is encouraging the purchase of new buses to replace an ageing fleet. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the number of passengers using local bus services and even now passenger numbers are far lower than they were before the pandemic. During the pandemic, bus services were supported by the Department for Transport. In August 2022, a further £130 million was made available to support bus services, which is a considerable sum. However, bus operators are now experiencing reduced passenger numbers and the inflationary pressures of fuel and wage rises. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are not placing orders for new buses in larger numbers. In North Yorkshire, a large number of bus services are currently not viable because of reduced passenger numbers.

ZEBRA is a major driver of investment in new buses and a key enabler as a step towards net zero. The £198.3 million of funding announced in March is sufficient to fund 943 new buses. That funding is built on the £71 million announced last year to support up to 335 new zero-emission buses in five areas, as well as hundreds more zero-emission buses that have been funded in London, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I hope that that provides you with an insight, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that they will be thinking of nothing else in Ribbles Valley aside from the electric bus market. I now wish to move on to how the Government's ZEBRA scheme is working in practice and to look at the recent decision by Nottingham City Council to purchase buses from the Chinese manufacturer Yutong.

Nottingham City Council has received £15 million of Government funding, yet it awarded the first 12 of its single-deck buses to Yutong. Within the tender, it did not ask for range requirements, instead asking for a specific battery capacity; it asked that the capacity exceeded 420 kW, which basically excluded all UK manufacturers. That is like asking someone to provide the size of the fuel tank rather than the range or the miles per gallon of a vehicle.

UK manufacturers run smaller, more efficient batteries than the Chinese manufacturers, so tend to achieve a similar range with a smaller battery. Nottingham City Council has set a target of becoming a carbon neutral city by 2028, yet it is prepared to ship buses from around the world, rather than buying from carbon neutral UK bus manufacturers. That does not make a lot of sense. It is also believed that the Chinese-made Yutong buses were not the cheapest to tender. I will give some other examples.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind that China has not exactly covered itself in glory in relation to human rights and democracy?

Nigel Adams: As a former Minister for Asia, I know that too well. I have been at the Dispatch Box, where the Minister for Science and Investment Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), is sat this evening—we all look forward to what she has to say—and she was sat where I am, quite rightly giving me stick up and down dale about human rights abuses in China. I will be interested to hear what she has to say on this particular subject.

Let me give the House some more examples, including the decision taken by Leicester City Council, where the first ZEBRA buses were delivered—also Chinese. Cardiff Council ordered 36 zero-emission buses from the same Chinese company, and Newport City Council ordered a further 16 Chinese buses. They were all supported by UK Government funding.

I mentioned light goods vehicles, especially those used for delivery services. Bus manufacturing is a skilled, bespoke process, as operators seek individual design features. Light goods vehicles are manufactured on a production line and use mass manufacturing techniques; these are high-volume processes. Light goods vehicles are ideally suited to be electric vehicles, because they travel regular routes and not especially long distances. They are the next major EV opportunity, and the technology being used in electric bus transmission is directly transferable.

Ian Paisley: One of the ways in which the Government could buck the market and protect British manufacturing would be to say that 50% of the next number of ZEBRA buses that are ordered must be hydrogen buses. That would guarantee the location of the market and that buses are built by UK companies; it would force the market to go down that route and not force them only to buy electric buses.

Nigel Adams: That would make sense. I would like to think that the purchasing authorities taking such decisions bear those factors in mind. The battery example calls into question whether the process is completely joined up between DFT and the passenger authorities and local councils making the decisions.

The zero-emission bus market is forecast to see significant growth and provide great export opportunities globally, with compound annual growth rates of more than 25%. The EV bus and light commercial vehicle market is projected to be worth about \$50 billion by 2030. There is, however, a high risk that British manufacturers could lose out to international competitors whose Governments have taken bolder steps to support their domestic markets when it comes to growth and export opportunities. Switch, which is based in my constituency, has announced

[Nigel Adams]

its plans to invest £300 million across the UK and India to develop its range of electric buses and light commercial vehicles, demonstrating its commitment to a shift to zero-emission vehicles.

The transition from internal combustion engines to battery technology is a major disruption to motor manufacturing, and Chinese companies have responded to that and enjoyed huge volumes of exports around the world. Based on a large Chinese domestic market, with 420,000 electric buses already amounting to 98% of electric buses worldwide, the UK faces a major challenge in gaining market share. However, the products available from UK manufacturers are competitive and ideally suited to the UK market, for which they were originally designed. The products are also suited for export. The double-decker, which I am proud to say was designed in my constituency, is to be built in volume in India to meet that specific market.

Without nurturing the transition and supporting British companies in the move to electric buses through the support that the Government are providing, we are in danger of losing the ability to compete. The Government have provided funding to enable local bus operators to transition to EVs. We have three fantastic bus manufacturers that can between them deliver the products required, and supply the orders and exports. As I mentioned, the next opportunity is likely to be light vans and delivery vehicles, for which electric vehicle manufacturing expertise will be critical. UK companies are prepared to invest, but they need the Government to back them, rather than to unintentionally support Chinese manufacturing jobs.

10.34 pm

The Minister for Science and Investment Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing tonight's important debate and setting out clearly some of the challenges that UK bus manufacturers face. He knows that if I were on the Back Benches, this is exactly the sort of debate that I would have instigated, so I am actually pleased that he has raised this tonight. I give him an absolute assurance that this is not the end of the discussion; now that I am aware of this, it is only the start.

I share my right hon. Friend's concerns that the procurement of these Chinese-made buses could adversely impact the UK bus manufacturing network and centre. In particular, I was concerned to hear my right hon. Friend say that some of these procurements that take place with China are not always the cheapest contracts, which is not great when it comes to making sure that we get good value for money. In particular, he mentioned that when councils are writing their specification tenders, UK manufacturers cannot bid as only the cheaper Chinese product fits their specification. I am sure that will be heard loud and clear in my Department and at the Department for Transport, and they will no doubt be writing in response.

It is true that, since 2019, Chinese companies have been enjoying huge volumes of exports around the world, with 98% of electric buses being found in China. I also share the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), who chairs the bus and coach industry all-party

parliamentary group, that we can allow one country to monopolise the market and that we should be doing everything we can to make sure that our supply chains are as clean and as transparent as they can be.

I will try my best to respond to all the points raised, but I will just run through what we are doing within the sector to help bus manufacturers. As my right hon. Friend mentioned, this sector is incredibly important for the Government's green growth, making sure that we are levelling up across our country and driving emissions to net zero by 2050. In a previous life, I was the bus Minister, making sure that we were indeed supporting zero-emission buses.

My right hon. Friend mentioned how important the sector is to jobs. The sector employs 155,000 people—6.1% of total UK manufacturing employment—and a further 347 jobs are estimated to be supported by the industry in the wider economy. Within the framework, UK bus manufacturers are uniquely positioned, employing more than 3,000 people across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is a sector that we need to protect.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned the prominent British companies, Alexander Dennis, Switch Mobility and Wrightbus, which employ more than 3,500 workers directly and 10,000 indirectly. These manufacturers also have the aptitude and capacity for completing the transition to fully electric bus fleets in the UK by the year 2030 without the need to import buses—that was a very important point to land.

As I am also joined by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), it would be remiss of me not to mention his visit to Ballymena factory to pay tribute to the company's net zero emission products and to affirm the Government's support for hydrogen. I believe that he also declared the innovative technology fund, which provided £11.2 million for Wrightbus. It is incredibly important that we are doing everything we can to support UK manufacturers.

Ian Paisley: It was an honour to be at the Wrightbus plant with the Secretary of State. He was so enthusiastic. I think he actually said that he was really into buses—he is a wee bit nerdy about that. It was brilliant to see a person who really took a specific interest in the manufacturing process and in understanding how important it is in terms of jobs leading through to good green technology. Will the Minister take up the point that I made during the debate, which is about ringfencing the next phase of ZEBRA funding for hydrogen buses? If that happens, British manufacturing will be protected.

Ms Ghani: To quickly address the hydrogen point, I am not sure that ringfencing is the appropriate word for me to use at the Dispatch Box, but there is funding available for hydrogen buses; I believe the ZEBRA scheme is helping the West Midlands Combined Authority to deliver 124 hydrogen buses and refuelling infrastructure. As my hon. Friend is raising the profile of the business in his constituency, it is right that we do everything we can to ensure that the money is spent locally within the UK.

One point my right hon. Friend raised was why councils were shipping buses to the UK when they are not the cheapest option or carbon neutral. As he mentioned,

the DFT's latest ZEBRA scheme has been designed in line with the principles set out in the national bus strategy for England, placing partnership work between local transport authorities and bus operators at the heart of improving bus services.

That is why the DFT has asked for local transport authorities to submit proposals that have the support of bus operators, to ensure that they work together. Once funding has been awarded to local transport authorities, they will work with bus operators to implement the proposals, but ultimately decisions about the procurement of zero-emission buses will be made locally by local transport authorities or bus operators. DFT is not able to require bidders to design their procurement process in a way that would explicitly favour UK bus manufacturers.

Nigel Adams: On the point about not favouring particular manufacturers, is the Minister aware that in March, in its promotional material for announcing the new fund, DFT used a sparkly new electric bus as part of that marketing? The marketing geniuses in the DFT may or may not have been aware that it was a Chinese Yutong bus that was used to promote the scheme, but the idea that we are promoting Chinese buses is slightly alarming—I am turning to the box where the Minister's officials sit, but I am sure it is not the young lady there who was responsible. Only when UK manufacturers complained was the photograph changed to a British Alexander Dennis bus.

Ms Ghani: First of all, it is not a DFT official in the box, but a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy official. Secondly, as my right hon. Friend knows, I would have kept an eye out to make sure it was not a Chinese bus, but most definitely a UK bus, and I will do so in future.

The answer I am giving is not exactly what my right hon. Friend wants to hear, but I want to repeat the issue he raised: when the procurements are put together, if they deliberately exclude UK manufacturers, that is something that needs to be looked at. Now that it has been raised in this debate, I will ensure that both BEIS and DFT officials respond in writing to ensure that that point is covered.

To quickly cover why China has the largest electric vehicle battery industry in the world, because that is important for resilience and ensuring that we support UK manufacturing, we know that China has 98% of the market. We know that we must be resilient, and that is why we have a number of programmes in place, especially the Advanced Propulsion Centre, the Faraday Battery Challenge and Driving the Electric Revolution.

For example, the Advanced Propulsion Centre provides £11.2 million for the development and manufacture of low-cost hydrogen fuel cell bus technology and the

hydrogen centre of excellence with Wrightbus in Ballymena, as mentioned earlier, to further the development of hydrogen technology and drive product sales across the world. We need to be doing more of that kind of work with Members of Parliament, raising the profile of what can be done locally.

We have talked about the grants available through the Advanced Propulsion Centre, but we also have the ESTHER project, which includes the provision of £9.1 million within the £22 million ESTHER project to develop hydrogen fuel cells—again, that was mentioned earlier. Then there is the consortium led by Intelligent Energy, which includes bus maker Alexander Dennis Ltd. Funding has also been provided to ensure that the ESTHER consortium develops and integrates valuable technology delivery skills, and creates supply chain advantages for the UK, so that it can capitalise on this technology and unlock additional research and development funding from UK suppliers.

A lot of work has been taking place on localised supply of key components to meet the growing demand for electric vehicles, but we need to make sure that local companies have the opportunity to bid for tenders. I should mention the net zero strategy produced in October 2021, and the Government's promise of £350 million over the next three years to deliver the automotive transformation fund.

I keep talking about the funding available, but that may not exactly address the points that my right hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty raised. To conclude, the issue has been brought to our attention, and I will do my very best to ensure that DFT and BEIS respond fully. My right hon. Friend is aware that if I were on the Back Benches, I most definitely would have raised this issue, even if—especially if—he was on the Front Bench; I would have given him quite a tough time.

I assure hon. Members that this is not the end but the start of a conversation. We need far more transparency, especially regarding those councils that seem to be giving the majority of their contracts to one particular country or place overseas; that is not good news for us here. We recognise the challenges that we face. We need to help our local authorities to procure buses from the UK. Of course, the supply chain for zero-emission buses will always be global, but we want to make sure that UK bus manufacturing remains strong, and this obviously involves the key components. I will end there. I am keen to meet my right hon. Friend as soon as possible to make sure that everything discussed today is put in writing.

Question put and agreed to.

10.45 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 31 October 2022

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

Public Ownership of Energy Companies

4.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 608056, relating to public ownership of energy companies.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Murray. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this important and prevailing issue—so prevailing that, within one week of the petition closing, another one, with the same title, was opened. I encourage anyone who supports the call for the Government to take back ownership of strategic energy assets to consider signing the new petition, because the issue is clearly not going away any time soon, and Parliament will undoubtedly be asked to revisit it. The new petition will remain open until 1 March next year.

The petition before us closed on 9 August and attracted over 109,000 signatures, including over 200 from my constituency. Before moving on to the essence of the debate, I thank the signatories to the petition and I particularly thank David Abrahams-Edley for starting it. It is David's action that brought us here today for what I am sure will be an enlightening discussion. It is worth mentioning that David's petition was started in February this year, just after Ofcom—Great Britain's energy regulator—announced there would be a substantial, 54% price cap increase from 1 April. The fact that the petition was started before the announcement of an additional, eye-watering rise of 80% from 1 October shows a foresightedness that appears to have largely escaped the Government. I will say more about that later.

The petitioners call for the Government to “take back ownership of strategic energy assets” and

“accept that the Free Market has failed the energy sector”.

They believe that

“it is in the national interest to renationalise our energy assets”

because, even back in February, people were

“having to choose whether to heat or eat.”

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In August, the *Financial Times* estimated that if a buyer was not found for Bulb the cost to the public purse could have reached £4 billion by spring next year, although transfer of ownership has now been agreed. Does the hon. Member share my concern that bailing out privately owned companies in this way could have a catastrophic impact on the public finances, whereas nationalising them could be much cheaper?

Martyn Day: The hon. Lady makes a good point. It is reasonable to say that UK Governments of all stripes have overseen the deeply dysfunctional system of privatised energy companies, and we are where we are today. We need to get out of the hole that we are in.

It goes without saying that the situation that people are now facing has worsened considerably. In September, inflation exceeded 10%—its highest rate in 40 years.

It would be helpful if we quickly reminded ourselves what a free market is or is meant to be. Voluntary exchanges take place, accounting for supply and demand, and that is the basis of an economic system without Government intervention, with a key feature being the absence of coerced transactions or conditions on transactions. However, we all know that free market economies do not exist in the real world, because all markets are constrained in one way or another, with Ofgem and the introduction of the price cap being the obvious interventions in the market we are debating, and that is before the current energy crisis triggered even more interventions. So when the opening paragraph of the Government's response to the petition states:

“Properly regulated markets provide the best outcome for consumers as a driver of efficiency and innovation”,

it raises various questions. Clearly, consumers are not benefiting from the best outcome. Does that therefore signal that the free market has indeed failed the energy sector, as the petitioners believe, or that the energy market is not being properly regulated? Either way, something is not working. Will the Minister tell us what the Government can do to fix it, if he does not agree that nationalisation is the right approach?

It is reported that economists who measure the degree of freedom in markets have found a generally positive relationship between free markets and measures of economic wellbeing. Unfortunately, most people in the UK are not enjoying economic wellbeing—we only have to look at the end of the Government response, which details what is described as the “unprecedented scale” of financial support that the UK Government are providing, to see that. Consequently, although Government intervention in this regard is welcome—indeed, necessary—it also serves as evidence that

“the Free Market has failed the energy sector”,

as the petitioners say.

At this point, a bit of background about the Government action in relation to the current energy crisis would be helpful. We likely all remember that the proposed solution of the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) to situation at the time was to reduce every domestic electricity bill by £200 and then recover it over a five-year period. That initial intervention was the “token gestures of mandatory loans”

mentioned in the petition. In case anyone is confused by the revolving doors at the top of this Government, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) was the Chancellor when David's petition was started, not the third Prime Minister we have seen this year, as he is today.

Thankfully, that part of the petition was addressed by the then Chancellor, and his so-called loan-not-loan was ditched and replaced by the energy bills support scheme, under which domestic electricity consumers were to receive £400 of support with their energy bills, paid as a grant over six months, starting from the beginning of this month.

Then our second Prime Minister this year, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), announced the two-year energy price guarantee—an intervention in an intervention—which superseded the

[Martyn Day]

proposed energy price cap increase of 80% and limited the price that suppliers can charge customers for units of gas from 1 October. That move was of course widely welcomed, not least as the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk was reported to be acting

“so people and businesses are supported over the next two years”, but it was simultaneously criticised for being misleading. A UK Government press release on 8 September stated:

“a typical UK household will pay no more than £2,500 a year on their energy bill for the next two years from 1st October”.

However, the MoneySavingExpert Martin Lewis, who is arguably the most trusted man in Britain, commented:

“I’ve seen a lot of confusion, so let me start by saying there’s NO MAXIMUM ENERGY BILL.”

Not surprisingly, that confusion continues.

Exactly two weeks ago, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), our fourth Chancellor this year—so far—announced that, instead of lasting two years, the energy price guarantee would last only until April next year. In just over five months, many could be placed back on the energy regulator Ofgem’s price cap. According to energy analysts Cornwall Insight, that means another massive hike in bills for millions of people. The current prediction under Ofgem’s existing cap methodology is an increase of 74% more than the energy price guarantee.

I hope everyone here is keeping up with the Government actions taken so far to manage the UK’s energy crisis. Recapping on these recent events demonstrates that the energy crisis could have been handled in a more straightforward way if strategic energy assets were not open to the free market economy but owned by the Government, as the petitioners call for.

In the previously mentioned UK Government press release of 8 September, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk was reported to say:

“Decades of short-term thinking on energy has failed to focus enough on securing supply”.

I am sure that that is a sentiment the petitioners wholeheartedly agree with. Indeed, they call for a 25-year strategic plan. However, like me, I do not think they would agree that launching

“a new oil and gas licensing round”

and lifting

“the moratorium on UK shale gas production”

is the way forward. That is regressive and builds on a nonsensical investment allowance that, unbelievably, incentivises investment in fossil fuel extraction instead of a just transition. Investment in energy security should be targeted at renewables, carbon capture and storage, and our net zero future. Have the Government forgotten the commitments they made to the world at COP26 last November? Additionally, the press release was entitled,

“Government announces Energy Price Guarantee for families and businesses while urgently taking action to reform broken energy market.”

If that reference to a broken energy market does not align with the petitioner’s claim that

“the Free Market has failed the energy sector”,

I fail to see what would.

Returning to a question I posed earlier about whether the energy market is being properly regulated, will the Minister explain why the Government’s response states that they continue to believe

“that properly regulated markets...provide the best outcome for consumers and promote market competition as the best driver of efficiency, innovation and value”?

Aside from the fact that market competition has all but disappeared, with the removal of lower-price tariffs from the market, and with around 24 million households out of 28 million on standard variable tariffs at the end of August, I do not think people across the UK believe they are getting value from the energy market, not least because of the punishing standing charges that are levied before even a kilowatt of power is used. Perhaps the Minister can come up with something to change my mind on that.

The Government response also mentions that

“properly regulated markets...incentivise private capital to invest in the energy system”.

My basic understanding of investment is that private capital is invested to make money for the people who have money to invest in the first place. Would it not therefore make more sense if those energy assets were in public ownership, so that the return on investment came back to the public purse, not the coffers of the energy companies? Of course, the temporary energy profits levy gains 25% of profits from oil and gas firms, and it is reported that it will raise £5 billion in its first year. That will help, but does the Minister agree that 100% of profits would help more?

The Government response stated that

“if the Government renationalised energy companies, the British taxpayer would have to compensate directors, shareholders, and creditors to the tune of tens of billions of pounds—money that would be better spent supporting families.”

This is where I return to the Government’s lack of foresightedness. Have they considered that the taxpayer has already been saddled with the burden of paying for the Government’s cost of living support for years to come? Has any assessment been done comparing a one-off payment to directors, shareholders and creditors with the repeated, ongoing costs that have been forced on the taxpayer? Why should the public be paying for energy costs while companies rake in significant increases in profits earned from UK oil and gas extraction?

Earlier this month, the chief executive of Shell said:

“The solution should not be government intervention but protection of those who need protection.”

That was before Shell’s third-quarter profits of \$9.5 billion were reported just last week—eye-watering profits for the super-rich, compared with eye-watering bills for those who can least afford them. The Government are making the rich richer at the expense of low-income and middle-income households. Can they take immediate and prudent action to protect those most impacted by this energy crisis, now and in the future?

I am reminded of a famous George Bernard Shaw quote:

“Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time.”

Can the Minister convince me, as well as David and the other petitioners, that the Government’s refusal to nationalise the country’s strategic energy assets is not, in fact, an ideological blind spot? A nationalised energy

sector would have the potential to deliver an integrated approach, guiding the country away from its dependency on unstable fossil fuels, thereby tackling climate change while, at the same time, protecting consumers. Are this Government capable of using some foresight?

I feel I have barely scratched the surface of the issues surrounding today's petition, but I look forward to hearing the contributions of the other speakers. I particularly look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response.

4.44 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Murray. I pay tribute to everybody who has signed the petition.

Energy is a necessity for all of us, yet people are at the mercy of big business when it comes to deciding who can afford to heat their homes or run their businesses. Profits at the world's biggest oil companies have soared to nearly £150 billion so far this year. At the same time, as the e-petition acknowledges, people are having to choose between heating and eating. That cannot be right. As Lord Sikka has written:

"It is Christmas every day for oil and gas companies, and their shareholders and executives are laughing all the way to the bank, leaving the rest of us to pick up the cost in higher energy prices, inflation, bankruptcies and a deepening cost of living crisis."

Labour called for a windfall tax on oil and gas back in January so that some of the eye-watering profits that are being raked off by big business could support people to pay their bills. However, it took months for the Government to U-turn and follow Labour's lead, and even then the then Chancellor, now Prime Minister, could not resist resorting to his instinct to put big business first and everyone else last. He allowed those energy giants to shield most of their profits from the very levy that he was announcing. The Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Act 2022, which the current Prime Minister designed, allows energy companies to apply tax savings worth 91p in every £1 invested in fossil fuel extraction in the UK. Promoting fossil fuel extraction instead of investment in renewables is irresponsible as we face the climate emergency, and it is an insult to young people and to future generations. Labour has called for the tax to be tightened to remove the option for energy firms to claim tax relief on 91% of the levy if the money is reinvested.

It is notable that, during the passage of that Act, the Government voted against a Labour new clause that would have required an assessment within three months of the Bill becoming law of how much extra revenue would have been raised if the levy had been introduced on 9 January 2022 rather than 26 May 2022. The 9th of January is significant because that is when Labour first called for a windfall tax—four and half months before the Government came forward with their U-turn. Why did it take the Government so long to act? I would be grateful if the Minister could respond on that point. There have been reports over the weekend that the windfall tax on energy companies could be raised to 30% and extended by three years. Perhaps the Minister could give us more information today, and let us know what discussions have taken place about that in Government.

It is clear that there is a need for long-term change where energy is concerned. As the independent campaign group We Own It has highlighted, of the top 10 countries in the world that are leading the energy transition to renewables, only the United Kingdom does not have a publicly owned renewable energy generation company. Of those that do, Sweden owns 100% of Vattenfall, one of Europe's largest producers of electricity and heat; Norway owns 100% of Statkraft, Europe's largest renewable energy producer; Switzerland owns 100% of Axpo, the country's largest producer of renewable energy; Iceland owns 100% of Landsvirkjun, the country's largest electricity generator; and France will soon own 100% of EDF, a world leader in low-carbon electricity generation and a company that many of us in this country use—despite the fact that the French people will own 100% of it fairly shortly. The other countries—Denmark, Austria, Finland and New Zealand—all own at least 50% of renewable energy generation companies.

There is a lot of public support for the United Kingdom to go down a similar path. There are no profits for shareholders in a publicly owned energy company. A poll for We Own It, carried out by Survation, found that 66% of those surveyed wanted energy in public ownership. Earlier this month it was reported that a YouGov poll found that 55% of more than 1,700 adults who were surveyed across Great Britain favoured public ownership of energy. In August, a poll by 38 Degrees found that 73% of voters would favour temporarily renationalising energy companies if they cannot offer lower bills.

Public ownership of services is understandably popular, whether that be energy, water, buses, trains or the NHS. The NHS has been massively opened up to the private sector on the Conservative's watch, with billions of pounds of taxpayers' money being handed to private companies to treat NHS patients. Privatisation is never a guarantee of quality. According to a study by the University of Oxford, private sector outsourcing in the NHS corresponded with significantly increased rates of treatable mortality, potentially as a result of a decline in the quality of healthcare services.

To return to energy, Common Wealth reported recently that 72% of voters think it is a good idea to set up an energy company that is Government owned and aims to create low-cost environmentally friendly energy. Labour has announced a plan to establish Great British Energy, a new publicly owned, clean-generation company that will harness the power of the sun, wind and waves to cut energy bills and deliver energy security and independence for our country, as well as good, secure, high-paid jobs.

Margaret Ferrier: On that point, in September, in response to a written question on an impact assessment for nationalisation, the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), said:

"The Government does not intend to make such an assessment. Nationalisation will not solve the current challenge of high global fossil fuel prices and the impact this is having on the cost of energy."

Does the hon. Member agree that it is difficult to see how Ministers can speak with such certainty if they will not even make a full assessment?

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Lady raises a really interesting point, and I thank her for it. To me, it speaks of ideology rather than taking a practical approach to what needs to happen to secure our energy and bring down our energy costs.

Among other things, GB Energy will enable long-term investments in a range of new and emerging technologies. It will also ensure that home-grown research and development leads to domestic manufacturing, and nurture partnerships with small and medium-sized enterprises and large local employers. It will enable the UK to retain the strategic assets that we need to build national resilience.

To reiterate my earlier point, of the 10 countries in the world who are leading the clean energy transition, only the UK does not have a public generation company. The Government should reflect on that and be bold, as a Labour Government would be.

4.51 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), who always makes such a compelling case for public ownership. I was pleased that she mentioned the escalating privatisation of the national health service, which she has worked hard to expose. It seems to me, and to many others, that the Government have an ideological opposition to public ownership: no matter the evidence, reality or public opinion, the Government will resist it.

Let us take a look at the petition that secured today's debate: 109,000 people signed it, showing the strength of support for bringing energy into public ownership. A Survation poll this year showed that not a bare majority of the public, but 66%, believe that energy should be in public ownership. That includes a majority of Conservative party voters, and maybe even members too. The energy sector is being used as a cash cow for shareholders. We have an energy system that is privatised at every single stage—generation, transmission, distribution and supply. That means that at every opportunity, profits are extracted so there are higher bills for ordinary people, and so there is less investment and a worse service, resulting in a failure to make the green transition work.

Let us take the big six energy suppliers. Common Wealth shows that £47 billion-worth of dividends and share buy-backs have occurred since 2010. That money should have been in a public system, but it goes much deeper than that. Even the National Grid is paying out billions each year in dividends. It is lose-lose for everyone, apart from those who own our system. Who does own energy? Other states have bought our system, as is the case with EDF, for example. So have billionaires. Northern Powergrid is owned by the US billionaire Warren Buffett. UK Power Networks is owned by the Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing.

The high prices are not just about the global crisis. Of course, we are in a global crisis, but privatisation makes it much worse. In many other countries, energy bills have not increased as they have here. Their Governments are using public ownership as a tool to help people. In France, for example, publicly owned EDF kept energy bill rises to just 4% in April 2022, while our prices soared and soared. Norway has been paying 80% of people's bills above a capped price.

Even before the current energy crisis began, domestic energy bills steadily increased by 50% in real terms—inflation-adjusted—from 1996 to 2018. We see and people out there feel what privatisation means in practice. In practice, privatisation of our energy system means higher bills than needed. Research shows that prices are 20% to 30% lower in systems with public ownership. Privatisation means, in practice, wasting vital funds on lining the pockets of shareholders. Privatisation means, in practice, failing to invest enough in connecting renewable energy to the grid, with the needs of the current fossil fuel firms put first.

What is the way forward? This petition, signed by well over 100,000 people, shows the way forward: nationalise the big five energy supply retail companies, most of which are just owned by bigger companies anyway. I welcome the plan from the TUC setting out how a publicly owned energy retail system could deliver a social pricing structure that lets everyone afford the energy they need to cook, clean and stay warm all year round, while the wealthiest with extravagant energy use pay more per unit. The way forward is also to bring the privatised monopolies of the National Grid and regional distribution into public ownership to help us prepare for the energy transition that we need. The way forward must include introducing permanent—and high—windfall taxes on North sea oil and gas companies that use the revenues to cut people's bills, invest in renewable energy and pay for further nationalisation policies that will benefit the country.

We must create a new state-owned renewable energy company to ensure that the errors of privatisation are not repeated. It is useful to reflect on the fact that nine out of 10 countries leading on green transition have a state-owned company leading the way on renewables. We cannot become fixated on continuing and defending privatisation because of ideological dogma and the hero worship of the Thatcher period. As someone once said, "What matters is what works." Public ownership works; privatisation has failed. Let us have an energy system that puts people and planet before profit. If we do, that is a good way to set about helping to get people through this cost of living crisis and making way for a better, greener, fairer and more decent future.

4.57 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Murray. This winter, more than three quarters of UK households will face fuel poverty. Many will have to make impossible choices between putting food on the table or keeping the lights on. We are now at the dystopian point where local councils are forced to open warm banks to prevent people from freezing to death in their own beds. Unfortunately, this was the harsh reality for many across the country long before this current crisis. The UK is ranked sixth highest in long-term rates of excess winter mortality out of 30 European countries; that is literally thousands of people dying from fuel poverty because of extreme costs every single winter.

According to research from National Energy Action, the UK experiences mortality rates of, on average, 32,000 more deaths in each December to March period than across the rest of the year. Of these, 9,700 deaths are directly attributable to the avoidable circumstances of living in a cold home. That is about the same as the

number of people who die from breast or prostate cancer each year. How shocking is that? The scale of the surge in fuel bills represents the gravest threat to living standards since the second world war. This winter, as fuel poverty skyrockets and inflation hits a decade-high peak, the impact on families cannot be overstated. Unless dramatic action is taken by the Government, countless people could even die, and that responsibility will lie in the hands of the Government and their friends in the energy lobby.

Thinking locally, my inbox is full of desperate pleas from my constituents—from carers, pensioners, local businesses and ordinary people who have not the slightest clue how they or their business will survive this winter. Sadly, they feel incredibly let down by the people in this House and this Government. They think that their pleas are not being recognised, heard or even valued.

Ilford is a proud and diverse working-class community. I have lived and worked there most of my life, and I am proud to still call it home now. It represents the best of our country: its diversity, industry, entrepreneurialism and communal spirit. However, working-class communities like Ilford are suffering—they are being left behind to freeze this winter. The Government tell us that we must all tighten our belts during this crisis and be prepared to make tough decisions and sacrifices. Why do these tough decisions seem to fall on working-class people every single time, when many at the top think that things have never been so good?

This year, Britain's oil and gas giants are taking home record profits. Last week, Shell announced profits of £8 billion—double its profits for the same period last year. In August, the big five posted quarterly profits of £50 billion. These energy companies are literally profiteering off the backs of the unimaginable suffering of millions in the UK, paying out huge multibillion-pound dividends and bonuses to their wealthy shareholders. It is an immense cost, and it is hurting people.

It is not as if those companies are running an exemplary service for which they should be rewarded. While supporters of privatisation may claim that it benefits consumers and lowers prices, the opposite has been true. Even before the current energy crisis, domestic energy bills had increased by 50% since energy was first privatised by Margaret Thatcher. The UK energy industry is now so bloated and out of touch that it is unable to deliver for the citizens of this country. I argue that it has, in fact, stifled innovation and held back the fight against climate change. Because the market is so desperately out of control, the UK has lost a decade of potential progress on decarbonising buildings, and that has made the task of decarbonising before it is too late all the more challenging. It is hardly cost-effective for the taxpayer, either. Since June 2021, this Government have spent more than £2.7 billion to bail out these failing energy companies.

It is indeed a great energy rip-off. It has sparked palpable public outrage, with people organising on WhatsApp and the internet about not paying their bills in the same way as with the poll tax revolts in the '80s. People are sick and tired of being taken for mugs by the ultra-rich who are ransacking the economy and making even more money on a daily basis.

There is clearly an alternative. Private UK energy providers must be replaced by a single publicly owned energy company that is run in a way that involves

workers and—more importantly—consumers alike. It is the right thing to do for the families who have been suffering for so long. Bringing those energy companies into public ownership, or, as Labour has proposed, starting a new company that could begin to take control and offer better services for all at cheaper prices, would allow us to put a freeze on any further price increases for the remainder of this Parliament—at least until the end of 2024. There could be cuts to current charges and the company could deliver a moratorium on disconnections.

Bringing energy companies into public hands would also generate huge revenues for the state. Analysis by the TUC shows that the Government are missing out on between £63 billion and £122 billion of direct income over the next two years because of past decisions to privatise power plants and the resulting lack of UK public ownership of electricity generation.

Bringing energy companies into public hands would also truly put Britain back at the heart of the battle against climate change—the biggest issue facing humanity. Indeed, the election in Brazil was won partly on that basis. Research by We Own It found that state-owned utilities invest far more in renewables, as they can make use of the state's ability to plan for the long term and ensure that more ambitious climate targets become a reality.

UK public energy would accelerate the deployment of new clean power. It could include developing new technologies where the private sector is slow to scale up—priming the pump for the private sector to get with the programme—such as floating offshore wind or zero-carbon hydrogen. It would also deliver thousands of good, green, unionised jobs. Evidence commissioned by GMB suggests that where public bodies invest in renewables directly, orders are far more likely to be placed through UK supply chains, ensuring that we all benefit from the climate transition. Nine out of 10 countries leading the green transition have a state-owned company of some description—why do we always choose, through sheer ideology, to do things differently, when there is something that could work for our country and our people?

The energy companies have proven, time after time, that they cannot be trusted to keep bills at affordable levels or to keep executive pay under control. Public ownership could generate billions for the Treasury. It could be the linchpin for a genuinely revolutionary green industrial strategy that could deliver jobs and transform communities from the top of Scotland to the bottom of Cornwall. It could protect millions across the country from the very worst whims of disaster capitalists who are looking to make a quick buck out of the suffering of others.

Some 66% of the public believe that energy should be brought into public hands. I hope that His Majesty's Government and the Minister will listen and take action. The ability to make a difference on the issue is in their hands, but I suspect that it will be a Labour Government—hopefully soon incoming—who will begin to deliver the change that this country needs.

5.5 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mrs Murray. I commend the petitioners. It is clear that we need a serious debate about energy, strategic assets and how the energy market operates. For too long, what has constituted a so-called debate in this place has been the

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argument that private is good, and nationalised or public sector is bad—or vice versa. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be too much debate today either: most of the speakers are in broad agreement. It prompts the question: where are all these compassionate Conservatives, bringing forward their views, sticking up for what is going on and putting forward other ideas? [Interruption.] I see that someone is pointing to the Minister from a sedentary position. I state the obvious: the Minister has to respond. We will get his point of view, but where are all the Conservative Back Benchers?

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for securing the debate on behalf of the petitioners. He spoke in a balanced way, while also highlighting the abject failures of this UK Government. My hon. Friend rightly pointed out that the free market has effectively collapsed and failed. There has been insufficient regulation over the years. He also said that, if there was a properly regulated market, the citizens of the UK would feel the benefit, and there would not be such high levels of fuel poverty. He highlighted that the problems were exacerbated by Chancellors coming and going, and Prime Ministers coming and going, and the fact that when the current Prime Minister was Chancellor, he had no idea of the scale of the problem. The then Chancellor tried to introduce a £200 energy loan scheme, which would clearly never address the issues that real people face as they struggle to pay their energy bills.

Another point that my hon. Friend made on behalf of the petitioners was the need for a 25-year strategic plan. I certainly agree. In the long term, we should be looking at how we get to net zero. What do we need to do to get there? Where should we build the generation facilities to facilitate that, and in the cheapest possible way? What grid upgrades will we need? What other measures should be implemented, such as energy efficiency and upgrading homes properly? That would be long-term planning, and it would realise the most benefit for people in the UK.

The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) effectively highlighted the dilemma that many people now have: heating or eating. Sadly, in some cases, they can afford to do neither, because they cannot even turn on their gas hobs to heat their food. She highlighted the failings in the design of the oil and gas profits levy, and the obscene oil and gas profits that are being realised. That was another common theme from speakers. The hon. Member rightly highlighted the success of smaller countries, such as Norway, Denmark, Iceland and so on, in public ownership and leading the way in the renewable transition. That is not lost on us MPs from Scotland.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) asked: who actually owns the energy companies at the moment? We keep hearing the UK Government talk about energy security, yet they are quite happy to have many foreign owners of our energy companies. That is a real paradox. The response to the last written question I tabled about the consortium building Sizewell C showed that China General Nuclear still owns a 20% stake. When will the Government realise that that partnership should be dissolved, and that they need to end their obsession with Sizewell C?

The hon. Member for Leeds East mentioned social pricing structure; I would call it social tariffs. Now is the time for that to be considered. We need layered tiers based on usage, because we all know that people on the lowest incomes use the least amount of energy, so they would benefit from that. We can also use social tariffs to protect the most vulnerable. It is much more progressive, because those who can afford to pay more for the energy that they use do so.

The hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) made the final Back-Bench contribution, which started with eye-watering figures about the tragic consequences of fuel poverty. The reality is that fuel poverty kills people. Roughly 10,000 people a year die prematurely because they cannot afford to heat their homes. That is a national scandal that needs to be remembered. I would like the Minister to explain how the Government will address that, because we cannot let that scandal continue. Clearly, it will get worse, as fuel poverty rates have increased massively. Have the Government even assessed what that means for future excess deaths?

A year and a half ago, the so-called price cap was £1,100 per annum for an average household. Now people are expected to be grateful for the support package that the Government announced, which is equivalent to £2,500 per annum for an average household. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk highlighted the fact that the previous Prime Minister did not even understand her own policy. She kept stating that she was ensuring that people would not pay more than £2,500 for their bills. Average bills in Scotland are likely to be £3,300 even under the support scheme. That shows the gravity of her misinformation. Too many people will be under the illusion that their bill will be smaller than they actually will be. Frankly, it is dangerous for people's financial management.

The Government's own impact assessment for the Energy Prices Act 2022 estimated that the support package would prevent average bills from rising to over £4,400 come January 2023. The former Prime Minister was claiming that the support package would prevent energy bills from rising to over £6,000 per annum. Given that the UK Government made the last-minute decision to slash the support period, will the Minister advise us what he thinks Ofgem's cap level will increase to for the 22 million or so dual fuel customers who are currently on standard variable tariffs when the support package ends in April 2023? When will the Government announce their plan to protect the most vulnerable, as they claim they will?

The reality is that more and more people are already in debt, and they have been put on to prepayment meters, so why is the Government's support package not even contingent on not forcing more people on to prepayment meters, which have higher standing charges? National Energy Action estimates that with the current support package, there will still be 6.7 million households in fuel poverty. Can the Minister provide an estimate of how many people will go into fuel poverty come April 2023, when the support package ends? How many households do the Government think are vulnerable enough to merit further support, and when will we hear what that support package will look like?

Fuel poverty on this scale is why people are angry and want a more serious debate about the merits of nationalisation and putting people before profits. They

know that the energy profits levy for oil and gas companies does not go far enough, and that the investment allowance of 91p in the pound perversely incentivises investment in fossil fuels over renewable energy. For too long in the energy retail sector, the excess profits being made by the big six were deemed acceptable by the Government. When they eventually moved to a price cap, the truth is that it came in too late, because by that time the market was being squeezed by new entrants that thought that they could come in and make easy money in the energy retail sector. Thirty companies have gone bust since July 2021 and many of them had been using customers' money for their cash flow, effectively operating their own Ponzi schemes while the Government and the regulator were sleeping on the job. The reality is that, unfortunately, it is now billpayers who are picking up the tab for these losses and covering the customer credit that these companies effectively stole. Why has there not been stronger action to bring the guilty people in these companies to account?

The largest energy company to go into administration, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) pointed out, is Bulb, which has cost the taxpayer billions of pounds. What is the Government's estimate of the special administration regime costs for Bulb? What we have seen in this energy market—and in the retail market in particular—is similar to what we have seen in other markets, particularly the rail market: profits are being privatised, but the debts and the risks lie with the people. How can that be a fair system?

While Bulb was in a special administration regime, its chief executive was still allowed to pick up his salary of £250,000 a year, supposedly for his expertise. That is the same man whose expertise took the company into administration. Only a Government who see raising bankers' bonuses as a priority could think that that chief executive should have been kept in place with a £250,000 salary.

Another example of privatising profit while taxpayers take risks is something I touched on earlier—the Government's obsession with new nuclear power. Hinkley Point C is nearly 50% over budget and EDF's latest programme shows that it could be 2030 before both units are operating, which would be five years behind schedule. Yet the Government still tell us that replicating the world's most expensive power station at Sizewell is the answer to our cost and security crisis.

It beggars belief that the Government want to give EDF a 60-year contract while moving the risk on to the bill payers under the regulated asset base model of funding. This is a project that the Government's own impact assessment shows could cost £63 billion for capital and borrowing costs. We have a classic example of how the free market in nuclear energy generation has completely failed, yet the Government are stepping in to the market to support a fully nationalised French company and transfer the risk to UK bill payers.

What frustrates me is that Labour continues to goad the Tories to build even more nuclear power plants. It is groupthink madness and it is tying up future generations of bill payers to pay not only for these costly new power stations but for the nuclear waste legacy, which is already estimated to cost about £140 billion. How will that approach reduce bills in the future?

Switching slightly, if we look to Scotland we see that it provides an example of a nationalised utility company that has kept all its assets under public ownership: Scottish Water. Water and sewerage bills are cheaper in Scotland compared with the rest of UK water companies; comparative performance is better, as measured by the regulator; and of course any surpluses or savings are reinvested. By contrast, the privatised water companies south of the border have taken something like £60 billion in dividends since privatisation and, as we know, sewage discharges into rivers and seas by these private water companies are out of control. Will the Minister comment on the comparative success of the nationalised utility company in Scotland and say what lessons can be learned from that? In a similar vein, what assessment have the Government made of the dividends paid out in the energy sector over the years with regard to risk and balance, and whether the dividends paid by the energy companies have indeed been excessive?

When we look at the oil and gas industry elsewhere, we see what nationalised companies have achieved in returns for the benefit of their citizens. In Norway, Statoil generated profits for the citizens of the Norway while the Norwegian Government still took taxes and put some of that money aside in a sovereign wealth fund, which now sits at \$1 trillion, making it the largest such fund in the world.

That energy company, which is now Equinor, operates in 30 countries around the world and has massively diversified into renewable energy. Although it was technically privatised, the Norwegian state is still the majority shareholder, with a 67% shareholding. It really is the ultimate success story, whereas in Scotland's case, we know that by comparison the UK, with broad shoulders, has squandered all the oil and gas revenues—some £380 billion over the years.

Independence will allow the Scottish Government to create an investment fund that would invest in renewable energy; could be used to support the decarbonisation of homes; and could take stakes in renewable generation while also leveraging in private investment. The Energy Prices Act gives the Secretary of State powers to buy energy assets. Is that a nod away from ideological opposition to all forms of nationalisation, and can the Minister tell us whether the Government will be using those powers to buy some energy assets, for which the Energy Prices Act allows?

I have highlighted a lot of the benefits of having publicly owned assets—for instance, the success of Scottish Water—but I do not believe that now is the right time to renationalise energy companies in full. The amount of money to pay out is untold billions, and it will scare off future investors and the market. The only estimates on costings that I have found are from the Centre for Policy Studies which, I accept, is a right-wing think-tank—not necessarily one that I would normally utilise. The CPS estimated that it would cost something like £55 billion to nationalise transmission assets, but £185 billion to nationalise the entire sector. Those are eye-watering sums that might not be manageable in this difficult climate.

The same principle applies when Scotland becomes independent, because there is no point creating additional debt and investor turbulence. However, that does not preclude a Scottish energy company being set up and working in collaboration with the private sector on a mixed-equity basis to ensure that maximum investment

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is levered in, but also that the state gets returns for the good of the population and revenue streams that allow for reinvestment.

With independence, we can end the ridiculous situation whereby people in the highlands of Scotland pay a surcharge on their electricity bills while renewable energy generation in the highlands supports the rest of the UK. They are bringing down bills across the UK, while they pay a surcharge on their own bills. It is completely topsy-turvy and unfair, and it something that the Government refuse to address. Again, it is another inequity that only independence will resolve. Although Scotland is an energy-rich country, we do not yet have the powers to unleash our potential and create a fairer society, but I have a feeling that that day is coming, and I look forward to the response from the Minister.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Before I call the shadow Minister, I understand that people watching the debate online were unable to view the first 20 minutes. I reassure anyone watching that the full recording of the debate will be made available online later.

I call the shadow Minister, Dr Alan Whitehead.

5.23 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Thank you, Mrs Murray.

Before we go any further in this debate, we ought to be clear about what the petition is calling for. I congratulate the petitioners on bringing forward the petition, which has received over 100,000 signatures, 500-plus of which are from my city of Southampton. I congratulate the petitioners on bringing it forward because it really underlines just what a dreadful state we are in at the moment with our energy provision and energy markets. I take the petition to mean that the Government should effectively expropriate all generation, all transmission, all distribution and all retail energy; place it, with compensation, in the public sphere; and then run a fully nationalised energy system, as was the case 30 to 40 years ago, before the privatisation experiment came into being.

I can see why many people consider that that is the brief solution to the awful mess that we are in the moment. They see that they are paying sky-high energy bills and that, at the same time, a number of energy companies are making sky-high profits not from their ingenuity in suddenly developing new ways of delivering energy, but from doing what they have always done: supply gas to the UK market for the production of power, for which retail customers are paying sky-high prices.

Those customers scratch their heads about why that has happened: “How is it that we are paying absolutely out-of-the-window high energy prices while companies are making such enormous windfall profits?” They scratch their heads when the Government spend such a long time deciding whether to alleviate some of the problems caused by those sky-high bills by introducing any form of windfall levy on those companies, and when the Government put an enormous loophole in the windfall tax so that the companies get back most of what they would have paid in windfall tax if they are, so they say, in a position to undertake further gas and oil exploration. The grotesque result is that Shell has not—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he should address the Chair.

Dr Whitehead: I apologise, Mrs Murray—I will face the right way from now on.

The grotesque result is that Shell has stated that it has not actually paid any windfall levy because it has got it all back through that loophole. Customers see that the regulation of the system is so dreadful that they are paying enormously high prices for their power as if all of it came from gas, even though half of it now comes from much cheaper renewables. That is because the market is regulated in such a way that the marginal cost of gas provides the whole of the price for the market, and it is a substantial part of the reason why prices are so high. In short, customers have seen for themselves a thoroughly broken energy system in operation. They have perhaps concluded that the privatised norm of the last 30 years has failed, and that placing energy back in state hands is the relatively straightforward answer.

What a delight it is to see so many Conservative Members in the Chamber to support their Government’s response, which states:

“The Government does not agree that nationalisation of energy assets is the right approach. Properly regulated markets provide the best outcome for consumers as a driver of efficiency and innovation.”

Wouldn’t it be nice if proper regulation did drive energy efficiency and innovation? We know that it simply does not; the failure of proper regulation is at the heart of the many problems in our energy markets. We also know that the Government themselves have recently resorted to measures that might be compared to nationalisation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said, Bulb—the seventh largest retail energy company in the country—went bust a little while ago, along with 40 other retail energy companies. Bulb, however, was regarded as too large to fail and was effectively nationalised by Government. It was put into special administration and has sat there for quite a while, at a cost to taxpayers of about £3.5 billion. It has just been sold for scrap, as it were, with its customers being transferred to Octopus Energy for, we think, several hundred million pounds—far less than the amount that taxpayers put in as a result of the Government’s reaction to appallingly bad regulation. Does the Minister have further information on exactly how much Octopus paid for the remains of Bulb, so that we can get an accurate grip on how much money has been retrieved from that episode?

An energy Bill that was recently mysteriously withdrawn by the Government proposed that the operator of the national transmission system be fully detached from National Grid and placed in the public sector. That means that it would no longer be a part of National Grid, even at a distance. As set out in the Bill, the future system operator would have full power to plan the system, commission investments in it, and run and balance the system overall as a public sector organisation. However, as I say, that Bill has mysteriously disappeared, but I would be interested to know whether the Minister continues to support the idea that the future system operator be a company in the public sector, not the private sector. I would also be interested to hear when that energy Bill will return to Parliament, if at all. It contains

a great deal of things that could lead to better regulation of the energy system, which is exactly what the Government are saying is the alternative to nationalising it.

Although it is true that part of the answer to the problems we face in the energy system at the moment is proper regulation—and the Government have an enormous amount of work to do get it properly regulated—we also have to give careful consideration to where our energy system is going now, because it will not be successful in reaching its targets, particularly in the low carbon context, if we simply continue the privatisation experiment of the past 30 years. Of course, the energy system is changing before our eyes. All the old considerations about 80 or so power stations providing power for the grid and then to customers through retail sales are effectively disappearing. We now have about 1.5 million inputs that are owned by all sorts of different people. Indeed, some of that input is from companies and bodies that are not in the private sector, but are community owned or locally owned. There are all sorts of generators providing a different form of input to the grid.

Of course, the grid itself is changing rapidly. National Grid Electricity System Operator, the forerunner of the future system operator set out in the energy Bill, considered in a recent holistic design plan that accommodating the new way in which the energy system is going to work, and making sure that it works well in future, would require a huge recalibration of the grid system, both onshore and offshore, at the probable cost of about £62 billion. An enormous amount of investment is needed to make the future energy system secure, and to get the green and low-carbon generators into it for the future. We will not sort that out by just hoping that somehow the market will come to the rescue and provide all the investment for the future based on our current regulation and system. My hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West, for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) both pointed to how that needs to be done. Perhaps we should not have to rely on the private sector to come to the rescue and sort out the future system.

The Labour party wants a Great British energy company—a publicly owned company at the heart of investment and driving forward, planning and managing that new energy system. As my hon. Friends have pointed out, that company would stand alongside companies elsewhere in Europe that have already started that energy revolution with investments not just in their own countries but on an international scale. Companies such as Vattenfall in Sweden, which owns the largest onshore wind farm in the UK, Ørsted in Denmark, Equinor in Norway and a number of others across Europe are making investments in the future system and, moreover, keeping the equity in those investments for the people of the countries on whose behalf they are working. Either individually or in partnership with the private sector, they are turning over those investments for those people, and keeping their equity in them.

In this country, as members of the public and customers we are spending enormous amounts of money each year on providing energy transmission and distribution companies with the means to invest in the grid system—the assets of which stay with those companies, even though we the public have paid for those assets. That is also the proposal for the new nuclear programme—we pay the money, they get the asset—but a Great British energy company would put a stop to all that. The assets would

stay with the public and the money would come back to the public purse. That is the right approach. Our investment ought to go towards producing our future energy system.

I reject the Government's idea that this will all happen via better regulation—though it would be nice if that did happen—and the operation of the market. We need to be much smarter than that. I do not agree that we should nationalise the energy system as it stands. Among other things, if a lot of the junk and clapped out stuff in the energy market were nationalised, the people who own those stranded assets would be delighted to have them put out to grass and taken off their hands as the energy system changes, so that they could run off with the compensation money.

We have to think smartly about the future of our systems. They will certainly not be funded, run or sorted out on the basis of the failed privatisation experiment of the last 30 years.

5.39 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (George Freeman): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. May I take this opportunity to say what a pleasure it is to be back on the Front Bench after the turmoil of the last few months?

Let me first congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing the debate, and David and the 100,000 public petitioners who triggered it. As an open democrat, I welcome the fact that the public are able to trigger debates. It is important that we respond, and I am glad that the public will be able to see the response both in real time and recorded. I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and I am grateful to all those who have taken an interest in the topic.

The petition received over 100,000 signatures and calls on the Government to do two things: to set out a coherent 25-year plan for UK energy security and strategy, and to take back ownership of our strategic energy assets. As the Minister for Science, Technology, Research and Innovation in the Department, I am delighted to be replying on behalf of the Minister for Climate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart).

Let me put everyone out of their misery of expectation and anxiety about what I might say. I absolutely agree that we need a 25-year coherent plan for energy, which is why the Government have put just that in place. I also agree that we need to think much more strategically about our energy security resilience and energy economy, but the Government do not agree that nationalisation is the right way to achieve the objectives that many, but not all, of us share. I say that not in the spirit of complacency at all.

It is fair to say that successive Governments over the last 40-odd years have taken cheap energy rather for granted, and have not foreseen the urgency of decarbonising our energy supply nor the geopolitical perils of being dependent on overseas suppliers, often from hostile or unsavoury regimes.

Margaret Greenwood *rose—*

George Freeman: I will just finish this list, if I may. I approach this issue with no ideology, either. All parties have had their problems in the past: in the '60s and '70s

[George Freeman]

Labour was rather heavily dominated by the union barons, and the nationalised industry did not do nearly enough to promote innovation. I notice no Liberal Democrat Members here; theirs and the Scottish National party's tribal opposition to nuclear leaves them playing one-club golf. I do not think there are any easy solutions to this issue, but I do not want to dismiss the urgency of the problem.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is talking about a 25-year strategy. Given that we are facing a climate emergency, could he explain what the thinking was, and presumably still is, on allowing companies to shield 91% of their profits from a windfall tax designed to tax profits? That means that they are able to invest those profits in fossil fuels.

George Freeman: I will happily set out the explanation for our position, which I think will deal with that point. If it does not, I am sure that the Climate Minister will want to follow up with the hon. Lady. We profoundly believe that the way to deliver a low carbon, net zero, sustainable, resilient British energy market and supply chain is to harness the market—the enterprise, the investment, the leadership and the management excellence of the free market—but not in an untrammelled way. I will set out in a moment how our approach is not at all about the free market but about harnessing the market with a lot of regulations, shape and structure, harnessing the genius of the market to public ends. That is a fundamental difference.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous with his time. He talks about harnessing the market, but he is talking about directing that investment at fossil fuels. How does he square that with our need to meet net zero? That does not make sense.

George Freeman: I will deal with that point as I come on to explain our position on net zero and the extraordinary success that the market has had, with appropriate regulation.

Alan Brown *rose*—

George Freeman: I would like to make some progress as I have hardly even got through my first paragraph, but I will give way.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way again. On energy resilience and his point about harnessing the market, we know that energy resilience requires long-duration storage. That can be provided by pumped-storage hydro, a technology that already exists. SSE has all the permissions in place to build a new pumped-storage hydro scheme at Coire Glas. It will have 1.5 GW output. All the private investment is there—we are talking about harnessing the market, but the private investment is already there. All that is needed is for the Government to negotiate a cap and floor price mechanism for the sale of electricity. Will the Minister commit to having officials speak to SSE and other operators in the pumped-storage hydro market to bring these schemes forward?

George Freeman: I did make clear that I am not the Climate Minister, so I am not going to make that commitment on his behalf, but I will make the undertaking that he will follow up that specific point with the hon. Member.

I will make some progress and summarise, not least for those listening and watching, the background to this debate and where we have been with British energy policy. Almost four decades have passed since the privatisation of the British energy system began—long enough that I forgive all those watching who may have forgotten why the original decision was taken.

Back in the 1970s, nationalised industries were run by Government, along with many others, and they were in a very bad state, not least the energy industry. These inefficient monopolies were leaking cash, and they needed much more money to upgrade their age-old and similarly leaky infrastructure. Privatisation, beginning in the 1980s, has completely transformed that situation. I am not suggesting that the energy market is functioning perfectly, but it has transformed that situation.

It is a shame that this debate has had so little balance and so few references to any of the successes of any private industry. Indeed, at times it sounded like a Corbynite litany of anti-capitalist, anti-business complaints. This debate needs some balance. I am not saying that the energy market is perfect, but let us at least acknowledge the extraordinary progress in the last few years.

Sam Tarry: Will the Minister give way?

George Freeman: No, I am going to make some progress. Since privatisation, the UK's energy sector has attracted around £20 billion a year of private capital investment into our energy infrastructure. That money would otherwise have had to come from higher taxes or additional borrowing. Those are policies that the Opposition may prefer, but we prefer to secure private capital to secure those public goods.

The cost of transporting a unit of electricity has fallen by 17% since the 1990s, while investment has increased. Energy efficiency has gone up. Reliability has increased. Customer service has improved—though it is still not perfect. The number of power cuts has almost halved. These are the real lived experiences of people over the last 30 or 40 years of privatisation. Finally, current market arrangements have allowed for massive decarbonisation of our energy system, with dramatic drops in the cost of renewables.

It is worth making the point that between 1990 and 2019, we grew the UK economy by 76%, and we cut our emissions by over 44%, decarbonising faster than any other G7 country. That is an extraordinary achievement, secured by the private sector working in partnership with Government. There is more. In the last 15 years, not only have we led the way in decarbonisation; we have also led the way in many of the specific areas of clean energy. We have put it at the heart of the UK's commitment to reduce emissions as we expand our economy.

Personally, having arrived here following the 2010 election, I would have liked to have seen the coalition and the Lib Dem-run Department of Energy and Climate Change take the opportunity of a “buy one, get five free” nuclear deal and double and modernise our nuclear

capacity. The Lib Dems were religious in opposition to anything nuclear—a position seemingly mirrored by the SNP—but they also thought it would take too long to come on stream. I have news for listeners. It would have been on stream now. We would have had a high-quality, green, resilient supply of nuclear energy for one more generation, guaranteeing clean and green resilience, and many jobs in Scotland, and we would have been able to use this period to invest in the range of renewables that hon. Members have hardly mentioned. I will come to those in a minute.

Nobody can look back and say that this was all easy. A lot of mistakes have been made, but the truth is that our net zero strategy is the most comprehensive of its kind. The British energy security strategy sets out extra ambitions to those we set out in 2010. It is on track to secure 480,000 well-paid jobs by the end of the 2030s, unlocking £100 billion in private investment by 2030 and mobilising £30 billion of Government investment. That is not the free market with no support from Government. It is a massive programme of Government in partnership with the private sector, and that is why we have driven down emissions at the fastest rate in the G7.

Dr Whitehead: Does the Minister agree that, as has been suggested in this debate, quite a lot of the investment that has been achieved for future energy—indeed, it is coming in now—is from companies representative of other states in Europe putting forward that investment, so we could say that he would be happy to have publicly owned investment in this country, provided it is not from the UK? Is that the right conclusion to come to?

George Freeman: I am not totally sure I understand the question. The point is that we live in a modern global economy. I do not think anyone other than political dinosaurs would think we can ring-fence all investment to only one country. We live in a global economy, and that is all to the good. This country benefits hugely from that investment. A huge risk of the proposed renationalisation is that, internationally, it would destroy investors' confidence in the UK, and that is something we have to think seriously about. We do not have a right to attract international investment. We need to be competitive, and this debate has lacked that point.

We are a world leader in offshore wind, with an ambition to deliver up to 50 GW of offshore wind power by 2030, including 5 GW of floating wind. That is something to be proud of. In my part of the world in East Anglia, the southern North sea is rapidly becoming the Saudi Arabia of wind energy. With proper interconnected offshore grid connectors, we will be able to use off-peak energy to generate green hydrogen. That is an exciting development and it has all been provided by the market—not the free and untrammelled market of the profiteering stereotype, but businesses investing in partnership with Government.

We continue to break records in renewable energy, which has more than quadrupled since 2010, with low-carbon electricity overall now giving us more than 50% of our total generation. It would have been nice to hear Members at least pay tribute to that achievement, rather than attack the profiteering businesses that have been at the frontline of delivering it.

We have installed 90% of our solar capacity in this country since 2010, which is enough for 3 million homes. That has happened—

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

George Freeman: No, I am going to make some progress.

That capacity has happened by harnessing the power of the market. I do not think anyone would suggest we have had an untrammelled free market. I am not here to make that case; others may. It has been a partnership of the private and public sector. That is why the Government continue to believe in properly regulated markets.

I have written and spoken widely about the opportunity Brexit gives us to set our own regulatory standards—not in a race to the bottom, but in a race to the top—and to set the standards in the smart grid, in digital energy and in new forms of energy. There is a huge opportunity for us to use that freedom to incentivise private capital to invest in the energy system, provide the best outcomes for consumers, and promote market competition as the drivers of efficiency, innovation and value.

My party believes profoundly that private ownership of energy assets, properly regulated, improves performance and reliability, and offers consumers greater choice and higher standards of products and services. No market is perfect. There are always pay-offs and balances, but it is very difficult to see how nationalisation would work, particularly as it has been set out this afternoon, with no detail, vague assumptions that there will be lots of money, which would come in the end only from taxation or borrowing, and very little understanding of how it would be done. Anyone listening to this debate has not heard a serious proposal for how nationalisation would happen. They have simply heard a ragtag of arguments against the private sector and against business.

The argument becomes even more important when we look at the global market and the international energy market in which we find ourselves. These days, no energy market exists in isolation. We do not exist in a vacuum. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have revealed painfully the interdependence of our global energy supplies. We are not in a position where we can unilaterally declare independence from the global markets. Any renationalised energy company would still have to buy its gas on the global market at the same price—there is no way round that. But it does heighten the urgency of reducing our dependency on foreign actors, hostile states and those who might use their energy power to exercise geopolitical influence on us.

We are absolutely committed, as we have set out, to diversifying our energy supply and resilience. We understand that sky-high global energy prices, caused by Russia's appalling invasion of Ukraine, are having real consequences for consumer bills across the country, exacerbating the consequences of the pandemic shutdown of the global economy and its refiring up and opening, which has driven inflation into the system. European gas prices soared by more than 200% last year, and coal prices by more than 100%, leading to an inevitable increase in the cost of energy, which drives the cost of living across our economy.

That is why, through our British energy security strategy, we are absolutely committed to—and are already implementing—support for diverse sources of home-grown

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energy to provide greater energy security in the longer term. Let me unpack that: we have set out, first, a comprehensive long-term plan, just as today's motion calls for, to 2050 for our energy system in 2020's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution and the energy White Paper. It needed doing and it has been done. Secondly, the British energy security strategy, published in April this year, charts a pathway to reducing our vulnerability to international energy prices by reducing our dependence on imported oil and gas.

We will achieve our ambitions by accelerating the deployment of wind, solar and new nuclear energy, supercharging our production of low-carbon hydrogen, and within my portfolio supporting next-generation energy sources including fusion and small modular nuclear. We will support North sea oil and gas in the near term for security of supply, and the important work that is being done in Scotland, particularly on the North sea transition, to turn that infrastructure into the infrastructure for clean, green energy.

Thirdly, we will ensure a more flexible and efficient system for both generators and users, undertaking our comprehensive view of electricity market arrangements to ensure that consumers fully benefit from the next phase of our energy transformation. That is why we have committed to publishing, with Ofgem, a strategic framework this year on how networks will deliver net zero. Fourthly, not only are we thinking about reforming energy supply, but we have an ambitious programme of energy efficiency measures to lower demand, and to bring down bills and emissions.

Nationalisation, however, will not solve or help to tackle those challenges, for a number of reasons. First, as I have said, nationalised energy companies would still have to buy gas on the international markets. There is no price reduction that comes with being nationalised. Secondly, if a Labour Government, or perhaps more likely a Labour-SNP-Lib Dem coalition, who were committed to renationalisation came into office, their measures would mean that the British taxpayer would have to compensate directors, shareholders and creditors to the tune of tens of billions of pounds—money that would otherwise be spent on schools, hospitals and public services. Thirdly, the sort of nationalisation that has been talked about blithely but not explained would hugely damage our ability to attract the international investment that I have set out, which is key to delivering net zero.

Dr Whitehead: The Minister is either not hearing what is being said by the Opposition, or he is going out of his way to put it in an entirely different light. Neither the Scottish nationalists nor the Opposition have said that we want to renationalise the whole energy industry; we have said that different ways of working from the complete market fetishism that has been going on would be much better for attracting investment from the private sector. A reliable partner in Government could, among other things, bring the cost of capital down. That is very different from what he is talking about.

George Freeman: It is. It is also different, as the record will show, from what Opposition Members said. For an hour, I listened to a reheated hash of the same old anti-capitalist, anti-business, easy—

Dr Whitehead: Did you?

George Freeman: Yes, I did, and the record will show it. Those interested in how we might build a modern energy economy will observe that there was very little detail on how nationalisation will be done. Very little was said about innovation, new sectors, or how we create exciting areas of innovation, use the smart grid, create a network of incentives, penalties, rewards and points, and empower consumers. There was none of that. It was a litany of the same old Labour and SNP anti-business, anti-capitalist talk of profiteering companies. Those are, by the way, the same companies that pay dividends into the pension funds of our constituents—and probably the trade union barons who are lobbying for this nationalisation. It is old-fashioned economics that has been proven not to work. I was hoping to come this afternoon and hear—

Sam Tarry: Will the Minister give way?

George Freeman: No, I have had enough of giving way. All Members are doing is repeating the same points that we have already listened to, and I want to make some progress.

I will turn to the winter support for energy bills, which is a really important issue and relates to the second half of the petition. We are absolutely committed to reducing the impact on people's bills of the terrible global events that I have described, including the impact of the war in Ukraine and of the reopening of the global economy after the pandemic. As this Prime Minister and the two previous Prime Ministers have made clear, we are absolutely committed to helping the British public through this, and we are taking action at an unprecedented scale.

First, our energy price guarantee will save a typical British household about £700 this winter. Secondly, that comes on top of the £37 billion package of support announced earlier this year, which will give all households circa £400 off their energy bills through the energy bills support scheme. That means a typical household saving about £1,100. Thirdly, we are taking further, targeted action to ensure that the most vulnerable can stay warm this winter: the UK's poorest families will continue to receive £1,200 of support—including £400 from the energy bills support scheme—provided in instalments over the year, with additional support for pensioners and those claiming disability benefits.

Fourthly, the Government are investing more than £6.6 billion across this Parliament in critical work to improve energy efficiency and decarbonise heating. We will deliver upgrades to more than half a million homes in the coming years through our social housing decarbonisation fund, home upgrade grant schemes and energy company obligation scheme, delivering average bill savings of £300. Fifthly, we have extended the energy company obligation from 2022 to 2026, boosting its value from £640 million to £1 billion a year, helping an extra 450,000 families with green measures such as insulation.

Sixthly, it is not just households; we are also taking action to support schools, hospitals and businesses. Through the new energy bill relief scheme, the Government will provide a discount on wholesale gas and electricity prices for all non-domestic consumers in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This is not the free-market, laissez-faire, devil-take-the-hindmost economics that has been portrayed this afternoon. This is a Government taking huge and unprecedented steps—on a scale with those we took in the pandemic—to help families, households, businesses and charities to deal with the global cost of living crisis. Again, it would have been nice to hear some reference from Opposition Members to the immensity of that package.

I come now to energy profits—an issue that Opposition Members raised. We are not just cutting bills in the short term; we are thinking about how we can guarantee an affordable, clean and secure supply of energy for this winter and beyond. We have listened closely to the public debate about the profits enjoyed by energy generators thanks to high international gas prices. We have not just listened; we have acted. That is why in May we introduced a 25% surcharge on extraordinary profits in the oil and gas sector, which will raise about £5 billion over the next year. That revenue will support our support for those hardest hit by the rise in the cost of living and cost of energy.

We have brought forward primary legislation to give us powers to deliver a temporary revenue limit for renewable generation in the wholesale market. The details of that proposal will be set out in subsequent secondary legislation, and we are committed to collaborating closely with industry to develop it further. This will return a substantial amount of excess profits—profits made through the price surge—to consumers via suppliers.

Alan Brown: To get some sort of level playing field, why is there not a renewable energy investment allowance that allows tax write-offs for greater investment in renewable energy, when there is one for oil and gas. It just makes no sense if the Minister is talking about having a cleaner, greener system going forward.

George Freeman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the facts as I have set them out. We are attracting billions of pounds of investment into clean energy—into a whole raft of new renewables. I do not think anyone would argue that the UK is struggling to attract international investment. What we need to do, which I completely accept, is not just to accelerate the deployment of wind and solar, but to continue to invest in the technologies of tomorrow to ensure that we are able to increase global and UK energy supply for a modern society and economy in a way that is clean, green and smart and that develops new jobs.

I am surprised that Opposition Members are not more excited by the opportunities in this sector for Scotland, which would be recklessly undermined by an uncosted, unthought-through plan for both nationalisation and independence, without credibility for how those plans are going to be funded. That is why our energy security strategy sets out a long-term plan for the whole UK that reduces our vulnerability to international energy prices by reducing our dependence on imported oil and gas.

We know that this is a very difficult time for families and businesses who are struggling, and that this issue is a matter of genuine public concern—as this petition rightly shows. However, I hope that I have reassured the hon. Members who are present in Westminster Hall and the constituents who they nobly represent that we are addressing this issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous with his time. Recent reports have shown that a lot of people on prepayment meters are not taking up the support. What steps can his Government take to make sure that 100% of people can take up the support that they need, because my big concern is that the most vulnerable people will struggle in this situation?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the particular circumstances of those people on prepayment meters and those who are most prone to energy poverty and vulnerability. Again, I am not the energy Minister so, with permission, I will allow the Minister for Climate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness, to follow up that point with her.

This is a long journey. It is one that we, as a country, started on a little late, but we have led the world in moving at pace, and that is a tribute to all the parties involved, to be fair. The last Labour Government before 2010 began some important measures; we in the coalition took things forward; and the Conservative Governments have pursued things at pace since. I believe that we are on the road to success and I have no doubt that consumers will be at the heart of Government policy every step of the way.

Right now, that means we are focused on doing all we can to support consumers through the very difficult winter ahead, but nationalisation is not the right solution. I will just say that it has been rather extraordinary for me this afternoon to see how strongly the old anti-capitalist politics of the hard left have been shown to continue to thrive in the Labour party and the Scottish National party. We have heard aeons about anti-business millionaires and profiteering, and there has been no talk about companies generating the profits that drive dividends that supply pensioners with revenue, or public sector workers with their pensions, or, for that matter, the trade unions with their pensions.

We have heard nothing serious from the SNP about how it would pay for independence, which has traditionally been based—on its own assumptions—on the revenues from oil and gas. The SNP is anti-nuclear—it appears to be anti-everything that will score a point—but there is no serious and costed plan for how Scotland could be in the vanguard of the new energy economy. The Liberal Democrats, who are not present here today in Westminster Hall, have described Labour's policy of nationalisation as “pointless and costly”.

Dr Whitehead: We have not got a policy of nationalisation. The Minister is not telling the truth.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order.

Dr Whitehead: Sorry—I am getting very annoyed about this.

George Freeman: Thank you, Mrs Murray.

We have heard nothing today about the really exciting opportunities in our energy sector: the new renewables, including those in marine, tidal, geothermal, hydrogen and fusion, that this Government and I, as Minister with responsibility for research, are supporting. There are also opportunities for the UK's cleantech sector—the small and large companies that are in the frontline of developing global solutions for new energy. We have

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heard nothing about the smart grid, the importance of incentives or the digitalisation of the grid to create a micro-market and bring net zero down to the ground in different communities. We have heard very little about energy use. We have heard a lot about generation, but very little about how transport and agriculture—the two big industries on the frontline of energy usage—are making huge strides in decreasing their reliance on energy. Instead, we have heard quite a lot of the old dogma of decline.

To be honest, I think that explains why there are so few colleagues from other parties here this afternoon; most of them are more interested in trying to develop practical solutions. I honestly think that the 100,000 people who petitioned for a proper debate about long-term energy strategy deserve something slightly better than we have heard today, and the Government are determined to provide it.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Mr Martyn Day, you have two minutes to wind up.

6.9 pm

Martyn Day: I am incredibly grateful to the Members who came along today, and I express my thanks to them on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I hope that the

petitioners and those watching feel that we have at least opened the debate on this area. I think we have a long way to go before we satisfy the concerns that have been raised.

The Minister spoke about exciting opportunities, but with families in my constituency and throughout the country perhaps facing a choice between starving to death and freezing to death this winter, that is not exciting—that is terrifying. The energy market is broken beyond repair and it needs urgent action. We are not out of this crisis yet, but we still have no clarification from the Government as to their future plans for energy support past April next year. That is what the public want to know. The Government need to relook at those issues to find a solution that works in the long-term for everyone in this country, not just the well-to-do, the millionaires and the profiteers. We need action that helps people on the ground now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 608056, relating to public ownership of energy companies.

6.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 31 October 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Support Package: Secondary Legislation

The Minister for Climate (Graham Stuart): The Energy Prices Act 2022 received Royal Assent on 25 October 2022. The Act establishes the legislative framework necessary to deliver the Government's energy support package and will ensure that households and businesses receive the urgent support they need to help pay their energy bills this winter.

To ensure these crucial schemes are placed on a secure legislative footing, the Government are tabling a number of statutory instruments (SIs) using the powers in the Energy Prices Act. These SIs contain the detailed regulations necessary to deliver our support schemes. They are essential in ensuring that the entire energy support package can be delivered this winter. To ensure energy consumers receive the urgent support they require, we are laying the majority of these regulations using the made affirmative procedure.

The Energy Bill Relief Scheme Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, make provisions for the effective operation and implementation of the energy bill relief scheme. The GB energy bill relief scheme is established under sections 9 and 10 of, and schedule 1 to, the Act. The regulations provide powers to the Secretary of State to require suppliers to discount business bills, to require regular reporting by suppliers, to request information from suppliers and customers, and to require an audit of the supplier in relation to the scheme. In addition, the regulations will enable Ofgem to enforce the obligations placed on licensed suppliers under the schemes. Additional details of the schemes will be set out in accompanying rules. Guidance will also be issued.

The Energy Bill Relief Scheme (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, make provisions for the effective operation and implementation of the energy bill relief scheme (Northern Ireland) which is established under sections 11 and 12 of, and schedule 2 to, the Act. The regulations provide powers to the Secretary of State to require suppliers to discount business bills, to require regular reporting by suppliers, to request information from suppliers and customers, and to require an audit of the supplier in relation to the scheme. In addition, the regulations will enable the Northern Ireland utility regulator UREGNI, to enforce the obligations placed on licensed suppliers under the schemes. Additional details of the schemes will be set out in accompanying rules. Guidance will also be issued.

The Energy Prices (Designated Domestic Energy Price Reduction Schemes for Great Britain and Designated Bodies) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the negative procedure, designate the domestic electricity price reduction scheme and the domestic gas price reduction scheme in Great

Britain (the energy price guarantee) under the Energy Prices Act 2022. The effect of designation is that the provisions in section 2 and section 3 of the Act apply, including obliging suppliers to apply to join the scheme and, when joined, to remain in and comply with it. Ofgem is empowered to enforce compliance with the obligations set out in sections 2 and 3 using its existing enforcement powers. The regulations also designate district councils for an area in England for which there is a county council as a designated body for the purposes of section 15 of the Act. The effect of designation is district councils can now take action to support steps taken by the Secretary of State to meet energy costs under section 13 of the Act.

The Energy Prices (Domestic Supply) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, provide the definitions of "NI domestic electricity supply" and "NI domestic gas supply" for the purposes of reducing the charges for such supply under the domestic electricity/gas price reduction schemes for Northern Ireland (the energy price guarantee NI), made under section 5 of the Energy Prices Act 2022.

The Energy Bill Relief Scheme Pass-through Requirement (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, will require defined intermediaries provided with the benefit of support from the energy bill relief scheme to pass on that benefit to end users. An example of an intermediary and an end user is a landlord and tenant. The regulations also require intermediaries to provide information to end users on the benefit provided to the intermediary and whether, and how much, they are required to pass on to the end user, including where relevant a justification of why the pass-through amount is just and reasonable. The regulations provide for the ways in which an intermediary can effect a pass-through, as well as the details of enforcement through civil proceedings should an intermediary fail to effect a pass-through.

The Energy Bills Support Scheme and Energy Price Guarantee Pass-through Requirement (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, will require defined intermediaries provided with the benefit of support from the energy price guarantee, and/or the energy bills support scheme to pass on that benefit to end users. An example of an intermediary and an end user is a landlord and tenant. The regulations also require intermediaries to provide information to end users on the benefit provided to the intermediary and whether and how much they are required to pass on to the end user, including where relevant a justification of why the pass-through amount is just and reasonable. The regulations provide for the ways in which an intermediary can effect a pass-through, as well as the details of enforcement through civil proceedings should an intermediary fail to effect a pass-through.

The Energy Bill Relief Scheme Pass-through Requirement (Heat Suppliers) (England and Wales and Scotland) Regulations 2022

These regulations, subject to the made affirmative procedure, will require heat suppliers to pass through the cost reductions they receive via the energy bill relief scheme to their heat network customers and to explain

to consumers their plans to reduce bills. The energy ombudsman will provide consumers with independent redress if heat suppliers do not comply with these requirements. The regulations also require heat suppliers to notify the Government (or an authorised person carrying out regulatory functions) of the address details of all the buildings supplied by a heat network. This will ensure that the energy ombudsman has access to a complete database of heat suppliers when investigating consumer complaints.

[HCWS349]

Bulb Energy Administration and Energy Bill Relief Scheme

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Grant Shapps): I am today updating the House on the mergers and acquisition process for Bulb Energy Ltd ('Bulb') in special administration.

Bulb Energy Ltd ('Bulb') was taken into special administration by an order of the court on 24 November 2021. Ofgem applied to court, with the consent of my predecessor but one, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), based on their determination that the special administration regime (SAR) was the most appropriate route for protecting Bulb's circa 1.5 million customers in the circumstances prevailing at that time—a recommendation which had subsequent BEIS accounting officer and ministerial concurrence.

The court appointed three individuals from Teneo Financial Advisory Ltd ('Teneo') as joint energy administrators and, following an application by Teneo, directed they enter into the circa £1.7 billion funding agreement with BEIS to support the achievement of their statutory objective of ensuring continuity of supply to Bulb's customers at the lowest practicable cost until such time as the company may be rescued, or the business transferred to another company or companies. Bulb's parent company, Simple Energy, was taken into "normal"—not special—administration on the same date by their secured creditors.

The energy administrators and their MSA advisers have delivered a competitive and extensive sales process over recent months, culminating in their recommendation to transact Octopus Energy's bid as the optimal way to achieve their statutory objectives. Their recommendation has been reached after an extensive negotiation process to secure the best terms in the circumstances and detailed analysis of the counterfactual options, all of which show less favourable anticipated outcomes and carry significant operational and execution risks.

I have therefore approved the Octopus bid transaction and associated amendments to the existing funding facility and establishment of their new loan facility.

The BEIS-led consultation process on the energy transfer scheme (ETS) has commenced. Subject to Government approval, the energy administrators will arrange for a court hearing date for commencement of the ETS and to enable the completion of the transaction as all agreements take effect by mid-November.

Energy bill relief scheme (EBRS)

Vital businesses, charities, schools and hospitals up and down the country have seen an unprecedented rise in energy prices following Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, and this new Government will take the difficult decisions when necessary to support our essential British businesses and public sector services. Support has already been introduced to help families with their energy bills this winter, and this new measure will help support growth, prevent unnecessary insolvencies and protect jobs.

The energy bill relief scheme (EBRS) will provide a price reduction for all eligible businesses and other non-domestic customers such as charities, schools and hospitals, who have recently experienced unprecedented rises in gas and electricity prices. The EBRS is a significant Government intervention reflecting the seriousness of the situation we face. It aims to support growth, prevent unnecessary insolvencies and protect jobs.

Subject to the will of Parliament, the price reduction will come into force at the beginning of November 2022 in time to cover energy consumed in October and will apply to the non-domestic customer's actual gas and electricity consumption. It is intended to run for six months from 1 October 2022 until 31 March 2023. The price reduction will be linked to the wholesale element of a non-domestic customer's gas and electricity bill. The actual price reduction received will vary depending on the contract type that a non-domestic customer is on, as well as the tariff and volume used. Government will reimburse suppliers in accordance with the scheme.

Funding for the EBRS will be sought through the estimates process. Any future costs for the delivery of the EBRS can only be projections and will depend upon energy usage levels and changes to the wholesale price of energy. As a result, the EBRS will give rise to an uncapped contingent liability. A review of the EBRS will be published after three months to assess effectiveness of the scheme and consider how support might be extended, further targeted, or revised beyond the initial six-month period for non-domestic customers most at risk from inflated energy prices. The Treasury-led review will determine support from April 2023—an update will be provided in due course.

I have laid before Parliament a Departmental minute describing contingent liabilities arising from the energy bill relief scheme (EBRS). It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

I regret that due to the urgency of this scheme, I have not been able to follow the usual timelines for issuing notice at least 14 parliamentary sitting days before the liability begins to be incurred.

The Treasury has approved spending for this proposal in principle. I will continue to update Parliament on this scheme.

[HCWS348]

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