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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 14 December 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade with Rest of UK

1. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses in Northern Ireland trade with the rest of the UK. [902742]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): The Government have committed to ensuring unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the rest of the United Kingdom market. We have therefore not implemented export declarations on goods moving from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, which has been subject to infraction proceedings by the European Union.

Under the protocol, by the end of the year we will, unfortunately, have spent £340 million helping traders to process 2.3 million customs declarations through the trader support service. That really highlights the need to get on with a sustainable negotiated solution.

David Duguid: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. He will be aware that seed potato imports to Northern Ireland from Scotland are deeply impacted by the protocol. The European Union is being hugely intransigent on the issue, despite high demand from the EU and Northern Ireland for the fantastic seed potato product that Scotland has to provide. What are the Northern Ireland Office and other UK Government Departments doing to address the issue?

Mr Baker: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. It is, of course, unacceptable that essential goods such as seed potatoes, used successfully in Northern Ireland for generations, can no longer reach people in Northern Ireland. That is why I recently met representatives of Wilson's Country in Craigavon to discuss the issue. [Interruption.] I cannot quite make out what Scottish National party Members are saying, Mr Speaker, but I do think it is in the interests of Scotland, Ireland and the wider European Union, as well as Northern Ireland, that this issue should be resolved.

The idea that it should be difficult to get seed potatoes into Ireland is quite absurd. Of course, the quality of potatoes will diminish across the European Union if we do not resolve the issue, which we would like to do by negotiation.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Of course we all agree that there needs to be a deal with the European Union to resolve some of the outstanding issues. Would the Minister care to comment on the data released just this morning that states that trade from GB to Northern Ireland is up by 7% since the protocol was implemented?

Mr Baker: I am sorry to say that I have not seen that data this morning. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting it; I shall be certain to look it up and reflect on it. I am delighted by any increase in trade. As he knows, I am an old liberal free trader, so I think any increase in trade in any direction will suit all of us very well.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The reality is that, notwithstanding any data, many businesses in Northern Ireland are experiencing serious problems as a result of the protocol. The cost of the trader support scheme, as the Minister has acknowledged, is now well over £300 million—the equivalent of almost half a million pounds every single day. That money could be spent on public services in Northern Ireland. What are the Minister and the Government doing to address the issue?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the clear stance he has taken on the protocol—no one, including across the European Union, can mistake it. It has become clear that unless there is a resolution on the protocol that he and his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party can accept, there will not be an Executive in Northern Ireland. We continue to make that clear to our partners. We continue talks with the European Union, and I very much hope that we will reach a solution that is acceptable to us and to him, and will remove the burdens on his constituents and on businesses, individuals and families across Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I appreciate the comments that the Minister has made. We share the same objective, which is to fully restore Northern Ireland's place within the UK internal market. That means that in the future the default regulatory position for trade within the UK internal market should be British law; that British trading regulations and standards should apply across all the United Kingdom; and that EU law and regulations should apply only when goods are moving into the European Union—in any event, businesses are required to meet EU standards if they want to trade within the EU single market. Does the Minister agree that the restoration of our place within the UK internal market is our absolute priority?

Mr Baker: The Secretary of State and I agree that that is what we are trying to negotiate. If we are not able to negotiate it, it will be what we seek to deliver through our Bill, which continues to be before Parliament.

Northern Ireland Executive

2. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the establishment of a Northern Ireland Executive. [902743]

9. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the establishment of a Northern Ireland Executive. [902751]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government remain committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and will continue to work with the Northern Ireland political parties to restore power sharing. One of the things we have done recently is pass the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. That provides a window, until 19 January 2023, for the parties to form an Executive. I encourage the parties to use that time productively to restore the devolved institutions and get back to tackling the issues affecting the people who elected them.

Alexander Stafford: Devolution was created to give the people of Northern Ireland, of both traditions, a voice on regional matters that affect them. However, local politicians are failing people in their Province by refusing to return to Stormont. Now, more than ever, in difficult times, local leadership is needed in Northern Ireland. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that politicians in Northern Ireland are incentivised to restore power sharing? Will he update the House on the progress of talks to that end?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is essential that the devolved institutions are restored as soon as possible, and that is what the people of Northern Ireland need and deserve. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State mentioned, the process also requires an extra dimension of trying to get a negotiated settlement on the Northern Ireland protocol. I remain in close contact with all the leaders in the political parties in Northern Ireland, and indeed I am meeting them all this week as part of the efforts to try to make sure we can have a constructive dialogue that means that the institutions can reform.

Jerome Mayhew: The Stormont Assembly has been recalled five times since the last election but has failed to elect a new Speaker. It is clear that the Democratic Unionist party will not re-enter power sharing until the Northern Ireland protocol is significantly changed. So does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must find a balanced solution to the protocol, one that recognises the aspirations of all communities in Northern Ireland, including those of the Unionists? That approach is set out and enshrined in the Good Friday agreement.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I know my hon. Friend's interest in this is well founded. I am well aware of his strong interest in these matters because I recall that his father was one of the longest serving Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, having served for a whole Parliament between 1992 and 1997, with his tenure having included the Downing Street declaration. We are nearly at its anniversary, as it took place on 15 December 1993 and paved the way for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which we have talked about. Clearly, the protocol has created issues, which we are working urgently to resolve as soon as possible. That is why we created the legislative window until 19 January for talks between the UK and the European Union to develop and for the Northern Ireland parties to work together to restore the devolved institutions. However, we remain of the view that there is no excuse for the Northern Ireland parties not to be in government as soon as possible.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As some Members know, not least the Northern Ireland Members behind me, my wife hails from Northern

Ireland. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thank them. Having had recent experience of accident and emergency in Northern Ireland, it was evident to me that, notwithstanding the finest efforts of doctors and nurses, the NHS there needs ministerial guidance. For that reason, we must all strive to see the Executive restored.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his point, which is absolutely correct. May I also thank those working in the health service in Northern Ireland for the services they are providing at this time, because they are working extremely hard in trying conditions? He is absolutely right; there are issues within the NHS in Northern Ireland, and they are best solved by ministerial guidance from directly elected, locally elected decision makers who are working for the people there—from the Executive.

Mr Speaker: Let's have a shy Member, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for that response. On behalf of my constituents, some of whom are sitting in cold houses today and not receiving the energy help that the rest of the UK is receiving from Government, I encourage him and the Government on the establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive. Vulnerable people need the energy help and the aid now, and I urge him to bring that forward. May I also ask him to bring forward and enact the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which the people of Northern Ireland want to see, with no more delays?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Based on the questions before us, I am sure we will talk a great deal about the protocol in this questions session. On the hon. Gentleman's point about people sitting in cold homes in Northern Ireland at this point in time without the energy support they deserve, energy policy is a devolved matter, with responsibility normally resting with the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. These matters would have been best sorted and more quickly sorted had that been in operation now. However, yesterday I met the energy companies. There are significant difficulties in how they could possibly deliver this support, and the Government are now examining other options as well to try to get this money out the door as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Nurses across Northern Ireland, England and Wales are planning to take strike action tomorrow. That situation has been averted in Scotland because of the active involvement of the Scottish Government in negotiating an acceptable pay deal. What role is the Secretary of State and his Ministers playing in trying to bring a resolution to this situation in Northern Ireland, and what assurances can he give that he and his ministerial team are adopting a more constructive approach to these pay negotiations than appears to be the case elsewhere on these islands?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we recently set a budget for Northern Ireland, because it had not been set at the beginning of the year, to make sure that the money could be spent. No budget had been set by the Executive, and the projected black

hole, as estimated by the Minister of Finance when he was sitting, was £660 million. The negotiations are being facilitated by British Government Ministers of the type the hon. Gentleman mentions, but at the end of the day it is the employers in Northern Ireland who will be making those final negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): At the time of a cost of living crisis, clearly, too many people are feeling the adverse effect of the absence of Stormont. If my right hon. Friend has not seen it, could he look at the BBC's "Spotlight" programme on Northern Ireland produced by Mandy McAuley? It shows the pernicious activities of loan sharks and the paramilitaries and the effect on the most vulnerable people in Northern Irish society, as they await their money to help with their fuel. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and urge my right hon. Friend to give peace of mind to those who are most in need and sort out this pressing issue by Christmas, so that people have that peace of mind and can try to enjoy the festive period.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for his question. I am fully aware of the activities of paramilitary lenders. I know of the programme that he mentioned. I did not see it last night, but I was in a meeting last week, or the week before, with the head of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland who mentioned this very fact to me. There have been dozens of meetings, if not more, between various Secretaries of State, including the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and myself, Ministers of State, energy companies and a whole of host of others to try to get this matter solved. I guarantee that the energy of the whole British Government is concentrating on this one issue. We want to crack this nut in the timeframe that my hon. Friend suggests, but it is way more difficult than it should be.

Northern Ireland Protocol

3. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of political parties in Northern Ireland on the progress of negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol. [902744]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I have regular discussions with Northern Ireland political leaders on Northern Ireland matters, including the protocol. The Government are engaging in constructive dialogue with the European Union to find solutions to the problems that the protocol is causing. We are also proceeding with legislation that aims to fix these problems in the event that we cannot reach a negotiated solution.

Mr Dhesi: The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill takes a wrecking ball to the deal that the Conservatives negotiated, signed and campaigned on. It breaks international law and risks new trade barriers in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Political parties in Northern Ireland have been left in limbo—they have been left out in the cold—by this Government. Given that it was a previous

Conservative Prime Minister who negotiated the protocol, why has the current Prime Minister not even visited Northern Ireland yet to see how it is working, and how he will sort out this self-created Government mess?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As I have said, I meet regularly with the Northern Ireland parties. One issue that always comes up is the Northern Ireland protocol. I believe that it was negotiated in very good faith between the two parties. However, its practical application is demonstrating on a daily basis to the people in Northern Ireland that it is not working. It is not fully implemented by a long way yet, which is why the Government are in talks with the European Union and have their protocol Bill running at the same time.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update us on those talks with the European Union? Are they still at the stage of discussing technical details, or are they actually discussing more substantial issues?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The one thing that I am quite confident that I will not do is give a running commentary on the state of the negotiations or talks between the European Union and the UK Government. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did update the House a bit yesterday, but I think that he maintains that position as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is good news that the Prime Minister has paused the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. Can the Secretary of State confirm that negotiations are on track to deliver an agreement that all communities can support by 19 January?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a "glass half full" man, and I truly believe that a landing zone has been identified by all parties to aim for. Can I confirm a date? No. Can I give a running commentary? I am afraid that I cannot do so.

Peter Kyle: The intended purpose of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill is divergence from the single market. To avoid repeating the political fallout over the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, the Government should be engaging with all communities in Northern Ireland right now, based on a detailed impact assessment. Is that happening?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes.

Electronic Travel Authorisation: Impact on Travel

4. **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): What discussions he has had with organisations and businesses in Northern Ireland on the potential impact of electronic travel authorisation on travel on the island of Ireland. [902745]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): We speak regularly with a spectrum of businesses and organisations in Northern Ireland, and I would like to repeat the assurances that we have given about electronic travel authorisation. The scheme will not apply to citizens

of Ireland or the United Kingdom, and I can confirm that we fully intend to work with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that ETA requirements are communicated effectively to everyone.

Claire Hanna: Last week I asked the Prime Minister about the impact of electronic travel authorisation on Northern Irish tourism, and his answer indicated that he did not understand the topic at all. This rang true with people who believe that this Government do not engage with the impact of their decisions on our region and our economy. Will the Secretary of State please bring the Prime Minister up to speed and push to scrap this unworkable proposal, which tourism chiefs from hotels and attractions across Northern Ireland have indicated would massively undermine our potential?

Mr Baker: We have been engaging with Tourism Northern Ireland. Home Office colleagues have begun that engagement, and of course we will engage widely with everybody who is interested in that issue. There is evidence from schemes in other countries that tourism will not be adversely affected. What we need to do is ensure that we communicate widely what the requirements will be to enter the UK. I hope the hon. Lady will not mind me saying that, having listened carefully to stakeholders in Northern Ireland, we will be working constructively with the Irish Government to ensure that we are supporting people who have a legitimate reason to live in Ireland to get across the border as conveniently as possible.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that for decades we have co-operated and worked with the Republic of Ireland—particularly, for example, with the Republic not joining Schengen—to facilitate movement across the island of Ireland. Does he agree that it is perfectly possible to get the benefits of the ETA system in terms of security, ease of travel and e-visas, while working with the Republic of Ireland's Government to make sure there are appropriate provisions for people who are residents of the island of Ireland?

Mr Baker: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to him as an outstanding former Immigration Minister. Of course, we will be respecting the common travel area. There will be no immigration controls on the border on the island of Ireland, and we will seek to ensure that this scheme works well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Minister just said that there will be no detrimental impact on the Northern Ireland tourism sector, despite 70% of overseas visitors to Northern Ireland arriving via Dublin and the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance saying this morning that she fears that the new system puts around 25% of tourism business at risk. What discussions has the Minister been having in Government to champion tourism in Northern Ireland and address the devastating impact of this additional bureaucracy?

Mr Baker: We will continue discussions with Tourism Northern Ireland, but as I said, clear communication is what is needed to make sure that people meet the requirements to enter the UK. We will continue to work with tourism operators and the Government of Ireland to make sure that that communication takes place. The

evidence from elsewhere is that legitimate tourism is not likely to be heavily impacted by this scheme. Of course, all of us want to promote tourism in Northern Ireland and, indeed, more widely.

Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill

6. **James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to engage with stakeholders on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. [902747]

10. **Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to engage with stakeholders on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. [902752]

14. **Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with (a) victims of Troubles-related offences and (b) community leaders on the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. [902756]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): On the Bill's Second Reading in the other place, the Government announced their intention to introduce amendments in a number of key areas. These proposed changes reflect what we have heard from the significant engagement that has taken place with victims and survivors and their representatives, as well as community leaders and other stakeholders. As the Bill continues its passage, the Government will continue to engage constructively with all interested parties on their concerns, and how they might be addressed.

James Sunderland: Can the Secretary of State please confirm that the legacy Bill will be tightened up before it returns to this place, notably in respect of making sure that protagonists engage fully with the truth and reconciliation process, not assuming moral equivalence and the language of glorification?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can give my hon. Friend assurances of that type. That is why we proposed the changes set out by my ministerial colleague on Second Reading in the other place, which include sanctions for those who refuse to co-operate with or wilfully mislead the information recovery process. We will continue to engage on those and other potential changes, and I assure him that we will do that before the Bill returns to the House.

Sarah Atherton: My constituent Edward Vaughan-Jones's brother Robert, 2 Para, died at Warrenpoint in 1979. Some 43 years later, the family's wounds have not healed due to repeated investigations and a lack of conclusion. Can my right hon. Friend outline when Mr Vaughan-Jones will receive a conclusive report on what happened to his brother so that he can finally have closure?

Chris Heaton-Harris: What my hon. Friend has identified in this very sad case is that the current mechanisms for addressing the past in Northern Ireland are providing positive outcomes for very few people, with many, including the Vaughan-Jones family, waiting decades for answers about what happened to their loved ones and not getting anything. The Bill's information recovery process will

be supported by comprehensive investigative powers and full state disclosure, providing families with a fast route to as full an account as possible about what happened to their loved ones and, as she mentioned, closure, as far as that is possible, because that is what they deserve.

Dan Jarvis: It was good to see the Secretary of State visit the Omagh bombing memorial garden recently. Despite his intention to want to work closely with victims, he will know that there are still concerns being expressed by a range of victims' representative groups and the victims' and survivors' commissioners, as well as by Jon Butcher. Accepting the difficulties and complexities of this, can the Secretary of State say what he will do now to ensure he brings victims with him on this Bill?

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued interest. This is my third question time as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and each time he has asked sensible and realistic questions on legacy. I will deal with the question, but any time he wants to have a briefing in the Department to get clarity on some of these things between question times, he would be more than welcome, because I know he cares a great deal about this particular subject. I can confirm that we are continuing to talk to all sorts of groups and individuals. Government amendments will be tabled in the other place that will confirm that the independent commission will be established by legislation to conduct criminal investigations, where it judges those appropriate, to ensure that individuals who knowingly or recklessly provide false information to the commission can be prosecuted and have their immunity revoked. That is among other such areas where we are trying to improve the Bill.

Northern Ireland Protocol: Assembly Elections

7. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of (a) EU member states and (b) political parties in Northern Ireland on the potential impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol on the upcoming Northern Ireland Assembly election. [902749]

8. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of (a) EU member states and (b) political parties in Northern Ireland on the potential impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol on the upcoming Northern Ireland Assembly election. [902750]

12. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of (a) EU member states and (b) political parties in Northern Ireland on the potential impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol on the upcoming Northern Ireland Assembly election. [902754]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): Since being appointed in October, I have met a lot of representatives from European states, and the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) holds several good relationships with similar.

Owen Thompson: There will clearly be a range of views on the protocol going forward, and in any election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, those views will need to be outlined clearly. We know that the Government do not respect mandates they see coming forward from devolved Assemblies, so can the Secretary of State give an assurance that he will respect the mandates coming forward from any Northern Ireland Assembly election?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think there is one group of people who should not lecture about not respecting democratic votes. However, this Government and, I believe, all parties in this place want to see the Executive and the Assembly restored, and should there be another election, that result will be respected as the last result should be respected.

John Mc Nally: The Prime Minister has put the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill on ice to allow time for a UK-EU deal to be struck. Can the Minister commit to the House that a deal will be struck before April next year and that this pro-Brexit dispute will not hamper the Good Friday agreement celebrations and the UK's international relations with America and the EU?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think—[*Interruption.*] I genuinely did not think the hon. Gentleman's question was that good. He should maybe imbibe a bit of the Christmas festivities, because I think we should be more glass-half-full about the opportunities of a negotiated settlement to the protocol issue, which will benefit everybody and all parties in Northern Ireland.

Patricia Gibson: The Vice-President of the European Commission has said that "if there is political will", issues around the Northern Ireland protocol could be resolved "within a couple of weeks."

Will the Minister find the will to reach a solution and commit to a timeline for a deal, perhaps before the end of the six-week extension to form an Executive in January?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I can genuinely say to the hon. Lady that the atmosphere in the relationships between the European Union and the United Kingdom Government has changed dramatically in recent weeks and months, and that is the basis for all good things.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902827] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 14 December.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I am sure the whole House will share my sorrow at the capsizing of a small boat in the channel in the early hours of this morning, and the tragic loss of human life. Our hearts go out to all those affected, and our tributes to those involved in the extensive rescue operation.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, in addition to my duties in this House, including the visit of His Majesty the King. I shall have further such meetings later today.

John Stevenson: A three and a half hour journey takes six hours; a straight journey ends up with two changes and a diversion; a train is cancelled at short notice. This has become the experience of a west coast rail passenger. If Avanti does not get its act together, will the Government cancel its franchise?

Mr Speaker: A very popular question!

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question, and I share the frustration that this is causing to many in his community and other communities. Our immediate priority is to support the restoration of services before making any long-term decisions on the operation of the west coast franchise, but we will be closely monitoring Avanti's roll-out of its recovery plan and holding it to account for delivering for passengers.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister: our prayers go out to those who capsized in the freezing waters of the channel last night. It is a reminder that the criminal gangs running those routes put the lives of the desperate at risk, and profit from their misery. They must be broken up and brought to justice.

Tomorrow will be the first ever nationwide nurses' strike. All the Prime Minister has to do to stop that is to open the door and discuss pay with them. If he did, the whole country would breathe a sigh of relief. Why won't he?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently spoken to all the unions involved in all the pay disputes that there are, but I am glad the right hon. and learned Gentleman has raised our nurses, because they do incredible work. It is worth putting on record exactly what we have done for our nurses: last year, when everyone else in the public sector had a public sector pay freeze, the nurses received a 3% pay rise. When the Royal College of Nursing asked for more in-work training, we gave every nurse and midwife a £1,000 training budget, and when they asked for nurses' bursaries, we made sure that every nursing student received a £5,000 grant. That is because we do work constructively, and we will continue to back our nurses.

Keir Starmer: Nurses going on strike is a badge of shame for this Government. Instead of showing leadership, the Prime Minister is playing games with people's health, and there is a human cost: Alex from Chester has been waiting for a gallbladder operation for nearly six months. He is in so much pain that he has been off school since then. His operation has already been cancelled twice. His mum, who I spoke to this morning, is worried sick. When she heard that the strikes could be called off, she was massively relieved; she is desperate for the Prime Minister to resolve this. All he needs to do is simply meet the nurses. Alex's mum is listening to this. She does

not want to hear the Prime Minister blaming everybody else; she does not want his usual ducking of the question. She is tuned in now because she wants him to explain: what is he going to do to resolve the nursing strike?

The Prime Minister: It is not just Alex; there are millions of others across this country who will have their healthcare disrupted because of the strike. The right hon. and learned Gentleman says that we should get round the table, but we all know what that means—that is simply a political formula for avoiding taking a position on this issue. If he thinks the strikes are wrong, he should say so. If he thinks it is right that pay demands of 19% are met, he should say so. What is weak is that he is not strong enough to stand up to the unions. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We know it's Christmas, but the party has not started yet.

Keir Starmer: In 12 hours' time, there is a nurses strike. All the Prime Minister needs to do is meet the nurses. His inaction speaks volumes. As ever with this Prime Minister, it is Tory politics first, patients second. We have never seen a nurses strike like this before. They have been forced into it, because the Government have broken the health system. Ask anyone in the NHS, and they will tell you that they do not have enough staff—133,000 vacancies—and there is an obvious solution: scrap the non-dom status and use the money to bring through the next generation of doctors and nurses. That is what Labour would do. Why has he not got the guts to do it?

The Prime Minister: We are already investing billions more in the NHS. We are already hiring thousands more doctors and nurses. The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks about the backlogs and the waiting times in the NHS, but what he always fails to acknowledge is the impact of covid: that is why we are facing pressures. We do have a plan: not just more money, not just more doctors and nurses, but new diagnostic centres carrying out millions of checks and scans and new surgical hubs delivering more elective surgery. If we had listened to him, the backlog would still be growing, because we would still be in lockdown.

Keir Starmer: As usual, the Prime Minister tries to blame everyone else. His Department commissioned a report into the NHS that reported on Monday. It said:

“We have...had 10 years of managed decline.”

It was not covid; responsibility is sitting right there. The reason that he cannot choose nurses over non-doms is because he is too weak to stand up to the tax avoiders. For 12 years, Conservative Governments have not trained enough doctors and nurses, so we have the absurd situation of the NHS spending billions on agency workers to fill the gap. Why should the country have to put up with money that should be spent treating patients being wasted plugging gaps instead?

The Prime Minister: Let me tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman what we are doing. We are actually listening to the independent pay review bodies; the Opposition want to undermine them. We have offered a fair pay deal; they cannot even decide on a number

among themselves. We are actually protecting the public; they are protecting their paymasters. For working people in this country, it is Labour's nightmare before Christmas.

Keir Starmer: There the Prime Minister goes again, pretending everything is fine. Try telling that to those on waiting lists or those who cannot afford to pay for a next day GP appointment. After 12 years of Tory failure, winter has arrived for our public services, and we have a Prime Minister who has curled up in a ball and gone into hibernation. If he cannot act on behalf of patients or nurses, or everyone who wants these strikes called off, then surely the whole country is entitled to ask: what is the point of him and what is the point of the Government he is supposed to be leading?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about covid not having an impact. Ambulance waiting times for category 1—*[Interruption.]* Category 1 ambulance waiting times in February 2020 were actually completely on target. Covid has had an impact, and that is why, as the chief executive of the NHS has acknowledged, this Government are

“serious about its commitment to prioritise the NHS.”

But let us have a look at the NHS in Labour-run Wales, shall we? The worst A&E times in the country!

Keir Starmer: Under the last Labour Government, we had fair pay for nurses and no strikes, so I will not be taking lectures from the Prime Minister about that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Bowie, you promised to behave. Don't make me give you a Christmas present you won't want.

Keir Starmer: Mr Speaker, this is our final PMQs of the year, so I hope—*[Interruption.]* Oh, really. Mr Speaker, what I was going to say is that I hope you will pass on all our thanks, at least from those of us on the Labour Benches, to all those who have kept our House and our democracy working.

I want to finish this year thinking about our friends in Ukraine. As a result of Putin's barbaric assault on their freedom, millions will spend Christmas in sub-zero temperatures, without heating, electricity or hot water. Their suffering is unimaginable, but their bravery is awe-inspiring, so will the Prime Minister join me in saying that, whatever other difficulties and disagreements we have across the Dispatch Box, we are and will remain united in our unwavering support for Ukraine's freedom, its liberty and its victory?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. and learned Gentleman in thanking and paying tribute to all the staff of the House for the fantastic work that they do to support all of us.

I appreciate the right hon. and learned Gentleman's comments on Ukraine. It has been a point of incredible unity across this House and, indeed, the country. It is something we can all be proud of in our country—that we have stood behind Ukraine in its hour of need. As I said yesterday, this Christmas many families will be laying an extra place at their Christmas table. That speaks to the generosity and compassion of our nation, and long may that continue.

Q2. [902828] Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): The A3 connects London to Portsmouth through Guildford, and I was delighted to see the new Solent freeport announced last week, which will increase traffic flows. As the A3 narrows through Guildford, it is sadly the most polluted road in the strategic road network. Short-term sticking plasters such as putting up 9-metre-high air pollution barriers that will entrench divisions in Guildford is not acceptable to me or my constituents. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is time to think big, it is time to think long term and it is time to tunnel the A3 under Guildford?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. I know this is an issue that she has long championed. I am told that National Highways is developing a range of different possibilities and solutions for the A3 through Guildford, and I know the Department for Transport will consider the case as it plans its future infrastructure investments.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the SNP.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I wish to join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in extending my party's thoughts to all those involved in the terrible tragedy in the channel this morning.

Thanks to positive and proactive negotiations between the Scottish Government and the Unite and Unison health unions, a pay settlement has been reached and strike action averted. By stark contrast, the UK Health Secretary appears completely unwilling to negotiate with unions on pay, and strike action is very much still on the table. So may I ask the Prime Minister: when will he see the error of his ways, and follow the Scottish Government's lead?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the UK Government were able to provide £1.5 billion in extra funding to the Scottish Government for public services. The Health Secretary and other Ministers have engaged fully not just with the unions, but with an independent pay-setting process, which takes the politics out of the process and ensures that we can meet those independent requirements with a fair pay deal.

Stephen Flynn: Let us be clear: those words will ring hollow in the ears of people who, unlike the Prime Minister, cannae nip into Waitrose for their shopping, or even turn on their heating at this moment in time. That is particularly true of people in Scotland because, as we know, average energy bills in Scotland are anticipated to be not £2,500 per year, but £3,300 per year. People are genuinely terrified, and that is despite the fact that Scotland produces six times more gas than it consumes, with some 80% of our electricity coming from low-carbon sources. Decades of failed UK energy and regulatory policy are coming home to roost. Is it not the case that Scotland has the energy; we just need the power?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised the question of energy support. It is because of the actions of this Government that we are providing every household in this country with about £900 of support with their energy bills this winter—£55 billion-worth of support. On top of that, next year there will be extra cost of living payments worth up to £1,200 for the most

vulnerable, whether that be those on means-tested benefits, pensioners or the disabled. This is a Government who will always look after the most vulnerable in our society.

Q3. [902829] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, the Mayor of London has decided, despite objections, to expand the ultra-low emission zone across all London boroughs. That will massively impact my constituents and those who share a border with London. Will my right hon. Friend urgently speak to the Secretary of State for Transport and encourage him to use the powers at his disposal to reverse this disastrous decision?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will know that transport in London is devolved to the Labour Mayor of London. It is disappointing that the Mayor, backed by the Leader of the Opposition, is choosing not to listen to the public. The zone is being expanded against the overwhelming views of residents and businesses. I urge the Mayor and the Leader of the Opposition to be on the side of hard-working Londoners.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the comments of others on the tragedy in the channel. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims' families.

Forty per cent. of cancer patients now wait more than two months for treatment after an urgent referral from a GP. That is the highest proportion on record and way above the Government's own cancer waiting target. I lost both my parents to cancer as a child, so like many people across the country and in this House, I know the devastating impact of treatment delays on cancer patients and their families. I ask the Prime Minister two questions. First, can he give a cast-iron guarantee that the dreadful cancer backlog will not get any worse? Secondly, when will the Government meet their own cancer target?

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry to hear about the right hon. Gentleman's parents. I am sure many of us across this House have families that have been tragically affected by what cancer does. He is right to raise the importance of meeting our targets. We are experiencing very high numbers of cancer referrals following the pandemic, as he will be aware, but thanks to the brilliant work of our NHS staff, cancer treatment rates in the most recent month for which we have data are back at pre-pandemic levels, with a plan for them to increase further. Recently, the NHS also announced plans to fast-track patients direct to cancer tests, rather than having to wait for specialist consultation first. Those measures will make a difference, and I look forward to updating him on them in the new year.

Q4. [902830] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): With the closure of the last bank in Cheadle, yet another of my local communities has been left bereft of a high street banking service. I was therefore pleased when I heard the announcement that Cheadle was to get a banking hub. Unfortunately, my delight was short lived, because on closer inspection I saw that it was Cheadle in Staffordshire. Although I remain pleased for the other Cheadle, does my right hon. Friend agree that my constituents also need access to cash and banking

facilities to protect businesses and support our high street? Will he support local calls for post office banking hubs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for Cheadle in Greater Manchester. She will know that the Financial Services and Markets Bill will establish a legislative framework for protecting access to cash. Alongside that, as she mentioned, firms are already working to provide shared services such as bank hubs. I encourage her to contact Link, which can make an independent assessment of a community's cash access needs and determine if shared facilities are appropriate.

Q5. [902831] **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): My constituent Sharon has an 11-year-old daughter who suffers from eating disorders and severe anorexia. She was forced to spend a year in hospital in Sheffield, 40 miles away, because there were no beds in Leeds for children with those eating disorders. That is completely unacceptable. Will the Prime Minister now commit to ensuring that NHS mental health provision for young people is dramatically improved so that no family ever again has to endure a similar trauma?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I say to Sharon and her family that I am sorry about what they have experienced. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Mental health funding, as he knows, is increasing so we can ensure parity of service. He is also right to raise the issue of eating disorders, for which provision is currently expanding. I think 2,000 more children were given the treatment, advice and support they needed last year, and there are plans to go further because it is an issue that needs tackling.

Q7. [902833] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Police Constable Nicola Hughes and PC Fiona Bone were savagely murdered in Manchester while on duty a decade ago. Nicola's dad Bryn is my constituent—he lives in Marsden—and last week he was in Parliament again continuing his campaign for emergency service workers and police officers who die while on duty to be awarded the Elizabeth medal posthumously. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and Bryn that now is the time to commemorate and honour our brave police officers and emergency service workers who make the ultimate sacrifice, by awarding the Elizabeth medal posthumously?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his constituent Bryn for his campaigning. Every life lost in the line of duty is a tragedy, and we remember the lives and service of PCs Nicola Hughes and Fiona Bone. We are determined to ensure that the sacrifice that police officers and other public service officers make is recognised, and we are carefully considering the best and most appropriate ways to do that.

Q6. [902832] **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Across these islands, people are suffering because of the woefully inadequate policies of the UK Tory Government. They have crashed the economy, left millions in fear of the cold this winter and are stoking division over striking workers rather than negotiating fair pay deals. Why is it that the only people who can rely on this Prime Minister are questionable personal

protective equipment suppliers in the House of Lords, bankers and former Prime Ministers who are getting taxpayer-funded handouts to defend their partying through covid?

The Prime Minister: The only people stoking division in our United Kingdom are the Scottish National party.

West Midlands Economy

Q12. [902838] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of the West Midlands on the economy of that region.

The Prime Minister: Our priorities are growth, investing in public services and giving businesses the confidence that they need to invest. I look forward to discussing that with the Mayor of the West Midlands.

Michael Fabricant: When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently visited the National Memorial Arboretum, he was slightly late, but I do not blame him because he had to come by road. My friend the Mayor of the West Midlands is supporting an extension to the cross-city line from Birmingham using an existing freight line to make it into a rail service to the National Memorial Arboretum and beyond. Will my right hon. Friend revisit the National Memorial Arboretum, see the armed forces memorial, and come to Lichfield to see why we need a leisure centre?

The Prime Minister: I would be delighted to visit the National Memorial Arboretum again, and to see my hon. Friend and the fantastic Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, to discuss his plans to drive growth and opportunity in the region.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): It is now well over three years since the Conservatives promised the end of no-fault evictions. Enfield has the highest rate of section 21 evictions in London. Thirty families in my constituency in the past month alone were made homeless as a result of section 21. I have families sitting in my office trying to keep warm as we try to find them emergency accommodation. Will the Prime Minister scrap this shameful legislation, and if so, when?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will know that we have announced plans to do that and we await parliamentary time, but it is not the only thing we are doing to protect renters. We have passed legislation already to protect tenants from rip-off fees and we have capped holding deposits, because we want to make sure that renters have the protections they require and decent homes to rent.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Small modular reactors are a hugely important part of our future energy mix. This Conservative Government realised that when they awarded Rolls-Royce's nuclear section, based in my constituency, a grant of £210 million for development, but there is still no clarity or plan for moving from development to deployment. Will the Prime Minister come with me to meet Rolls-Royce to discuss how to move things forward and ensure that the UK benefits from this exciting opportunity?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am delighted that the Government awarded £210 million to Rolls-Royce SMR last year for research and development. This has the potential to benefit the UK and to support our energy security and climate goals. I look forward to getting updates and to working with my hon. Friend to see this fantastic new technology come to life.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): When my constituent who has dementia was taken ill recently, it took three hours for an ambulance to arrive. He then spent 10 hours in the back of an ambulance outside A&E queuing to get in. The doctor said to him, "I'm so sorry we are treating you out of the back of a truck." But as we have heard, the King's Fund has said that the Government have presided over a decade of neglect and managed decline in the NHS. So, should it not be the Prime Minister, and not that doctor, who should be apologising?

The Prime Minister: That same King's Fund report also acknowledged that there was 40% more funding going into the NHS under this Conservative Government. We need to make sure that that funding makes a difference. That is why this winter half a billion pounds is being deployed to move people out of hospital beds into social care and to speed up those discharges specifically so that ambulances will not be queuing as much as they currently are. That money is already making a difference on the ground.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): The community in Kingshurst, which I represent, suffered an unimaginable tragedy earlier this week when four children fell through the ice at Babbs Mill Lake. Sadly, three of the children did not survive and one, a six-year-old, is fighting for his life. They and their families are in my thoughts and prayers. Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to the community in Kingshurst, who have come together and are supporting each other to get through this tragedy? Will he recognise the heroic efforts of the emergency services, including the police officer who used his bare hands to try to break through the ice and then jumped in the water without personal protective equipment, and fire service personnel, risking their own lives to save the young children?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and send my condolences to the families and friends of all those who have lost their lives. I join him in paying tribute to our emergency services for, as he said, their incredibly selfless actions. This whole event has completely shocked the local community and I know that my hon. Friend will continue to do all he can to support his constituents at this difficult time.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This year, the Tory party has given us five Education Secretaries, four Chancellors, three Prime Ministers, two leadership coups—*[Interruption.]* And, Mr Speaker, the partridge has had to sell the pear tree to pay the gas bill. *[Laughter.]* Is it not the case that, after a year of Tory chaos, incompetence and self-indulgence, the best Christmas present the Prime Minister could give to the British people is a general election?

Hon. Members: More!

The Prime Minister: Labour Members are happier with that than they were earlier. All I would say when it comes to what the British people need this Christmas is that to ease the disruption on their lives the best thing that Labour Members could do is tell their union bosses to call off the damaging strikes.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): After the second world war, Winston Churchill sent British Conservative lawyers to help to draft the European convention on human rights. That is something that we can be proud of in this country, but in an age of mass migration the ECHR is now limiting our ability to control our borders. In the light of the tragedy in the channel this morning, does the Prime Minister agree that he should do as Churchill did and draw up a new framework for refugees and human rights, including legal routes, but that, one way or another, and if necessary alone, we must be prepared to leave the ECHR?

The Prime Minister: As I told the House yesterday, our new legislation will deliver a system whereby a person who comes here illegally will have no right to stay and will be removed to their own country or a safe third-country alternative. That is the system that the British people want to see and that is the system that we will deliver. I look forward to hearing whether the Labour party will support it.

Q11. [902837] **Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD):** As temperatures are plummeting and the cost of living crisis is deepening, ordinary families throughout the country face a Dickensian nightmare this Christmas. Mortgage bills are soaring, household repossessions are up and nearly half a million tenants face the threat of eviction after falling behind on their rent. Too many people are worrying about where they and their children will wake up on Christmas morning, so will the Prime Minister agree to a temporary ban on repossessions and evictions over the festive period so that nobody has to live in fear of losing their home this Christmas?

The Prime Minister: We provide a range of support to homeowners and tenants who are in difficulty already, but the most important thing that we are doing to support them financially during the winter is providing almost £900 of support with their energy bills. On top of all the additional support for those who are most vulnerable, including pensioners, that demonstrates the actions of this Government to help the country to get through what we acknowledge is a challenging time.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Tomorrow, Mr Speaker, at 9.30 am you will lead this House in a one-minute silence to mark 80 years since the British Government recognised that the holocaust was taking place in Nazi-occupied Europe. As we come together to mark that moment, will the Prime Minister join me in praising the Holocaust Educational Trust and the extraordinary survivors who continue to do amazing work to ensure that the next generation understands and learns the lessons from the past?

The Prime Minister: Eighty years ago, Parliament listened in stunned silence as the truth of the holocaust was spoken in this House for the very first time, so it is absolutely right that you, Mr Speaker, lead a moment of

silence in which we will stand together to remember and reaffirm that truth. I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust. It could not be more fitting that Britain's holocaust memorial and learning centre should be built right next door to Parliament. We must never forget the holocaust and we must stamp out antisemitism and prejudice in all its forms wherever we find it.

Q14. [902840] **Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op):** Caerphilly County Borough Council recently announced a £3 million cost of living hardship fund to help those most in need in Islwyn and across our county borough. Does the Prime Minister think it is right that local authorities are forced to cover the costs of 12 years of economic mismanagement by this Tory Government?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman fails to acknowledge that because of the actions of the UK Government not only are we supporting people in Wales and across the United Kingdom with help with their energy bills, but we have provided £1.2 billion of extra funding for the Welsh Government to use to give to local authorities to support their constituents. The hon. Gentleman would do well to acknowledge the benefits of the United Kingdom and the actions of the UK Government.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is excellent that a record 4,000 newly qualified doctors are training to be GPs, but we have an issue with retention, which is made even worse in areas like mine that have extremely high housing growth. As the son of a GP, what will the Prime Minister do to fix this?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has talked about and championed this issue for a long time, and he is right to do so. We do have record numbers of GPs in training at the moment, and we are also making sure that we support primary care appointments and access. My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Chancellor are looking at how best we can increase retention, particularly with regard to pensions, and I look forward to getting their suggestions.

Q15. [902841] **Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** In a written response from the Department for Work and Pensions, it was confirmed to me that an unpaid carer earning more than £132 a week from their job is classed as being in gainful employment and as a result loses their carer's allowance of £69.70 a week. Caring never stops, so can the Prime Minister explain to me the rationale behind that decision, given that we are trying to get economically inactive people back into work? Can he explain why it is his Government's position that £132 is enough for people to live on?

The Prime Minister: I start by paying tribute to those up and down the country who give up so much of their time to care for others. I am delighted that the Government are supporting the hon. Lady's Bill, which will give a week of highly flexible paid leave to unemployed carers. That is the right thing to do and I am grateful to her for taking it forward. Carer's allowance is a means-tested benefit, and is part of many other benefits that are available to support people. As I have said, significant support for energy bills is in place right now for people through Christmas.

Small Boats Incident in the Channel

12.37 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about an incident in the channel this morning. This is an ongoing search and rescue incident, but I can confirm that at the time of making this statement, tragically, there have been four fatalities. It would be inappropriate for me to go into further detail at this time.

There is a multi-agency response to this terrible tragedy. His Majesty's Coastguard, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, South East Coast Ambulance Service, the Ministry of Defence, police and Border Force, together with French vessels, a commercial fishing vessel and contractors at Western Jetfoil, have responded. This morning, I have spoken to Border Force officials based at Dover and Manston who were involved in the search and rescue effort. I have also spoken to my French counterpart, the Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin. A full statement will be provided to the House in due course, once the facts have been fully established and the necessary investigative work completed.

I know that everyone in this House and across the country will join me in expressing our profound sadness and deepest sympathies for everyone affected by this terrible event. I know they will also join me in offering our profound gratitude to those working on the search and rescue operation. That very much includes those who are responding to the incident. Commander Dan O'Mahoney and his team work tirelessly, with military colleagues and other partners, day in, day out, to try to prevent this type of tragedy. They are undertaking immensely difficult work and we should all be extremely grateful to them.

These are the days we dread. Crossing the channel in unseaworthy vessels is a lethally dangerous endeavour, and it is for this reason, above all, that we are working so hard to destroy the business model of the people smugglers—the evil, organised criminals who treat human beings as cargo.

As the Prime Minister told the House only yesterday:

“It is not cruel or unkind to want to break the stranglehold of criminal gangs who trade in human misery and who exploit our system and laws.”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 885.]

He was right. This morning's tragedy, like the loss of 27 people on one November day last year, is the most sobering reminder possible of why we have to end these crossings.

We recently agreed the largest ever small boats deal with France, with more boots on the ground patrolling France's beaches and with UK and French officers working together in both countries. The Calais group of northern European nations works to disrupt trafficking and smuggling all along the migration route and has set an ambition for a UK and EU-wide agreement on migration.

Since 2015, we have welcomed 450,000 people here from across the world via safe and legal routes, making these dangerous crossings totally unnecessary, but it is evident that we have to go much further, which is why the Prime Minister announced a new package yesterday. The package includes a new, permanent, unified small boats operational command, bringing together the military,

civilian capabilities and the National Crime Agency. It will co-ordinate intelligence, interception, processing and enforcement using advanced technology, including drones. We are adding more than 700 new staff and doubling the NCA's funding for tackling organised immigration crime in Europe.

The Prime Minister announced a new agreement with Albania yesterday. For the first time, Border Force officers will be embedded in Tirana airport, helping to disrupt organised crime groups and people smugglers who risk people's lives unnecessarily. Early next year, we will introduce new legislation to make it unambiguously clear that someone who comes to the UK illegally should not be able to remain here. Instead, they can expect to be detained and swiftly returned either to their home country or to a safe country, where their claim for asylum will be considered. Late or spurious claims and appeals will not be possible, and once someone has been removed, they will have no right to re-entry, settlement or citizenship. This will act as a deterrent, and it will save lives.

As we grip illegal migration, we will create more safe and legal routes, working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify those most in need, and we will introduce an annual quota set by Parliament. We will work closely with local authorities to determine capacity.

It is not true that our capacity is limitless. We are already spending millions on hotels every day. People do not need to seek asylum if they are already in a safe country. It is vital—literally vital—that we end the illegal crossings of the channel. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

12.43 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

This is truly tragic, deeply distressing news. All our thoughts and prayers are with those who lost their lives, and with the families and friends who lost loved ones in the icy waters of the channel. We are also thinking of those who are receiving support and medical assistance, and who may have been rescued, too.

We all give our thanks to the brave responders and rescuers from Border Force, the RNLI, the coastguard, the MOD, our emergency services and the French authorities. Not only did they respond to today's awful, awful tragedy, but they do such heroic work every single day. It is only because of their brave work that more lives have not been lost.

It was barely more than a year ago that 27 lives were lost when a boat went down, and all of us have warned and all of us have feared that it was just a matter of time before more lives were lost. It is, of course, why the UK and France both need to act to stop these dangerous boat crossings. The brutal truth as well is that criminal gangs have made money from those lives that were lost today; they have profited as people have drowned. Day after day, week after week, criminal gangs are putting lives at risk for money. The other brutal truth is that, far from our stopping those criminal gangs, those gangs have grown and grown. The UK and French Governments and authorities have failed to stop the criminal smuggler and trafficking gangs proliferating around the channel.

[*Yvette Cooper*]

Those gangs have created a multimillion-pound criminal industry, with lives at stake, and the action against those gangs has been too weak. There have been barely any prosecutions or convictions, and barely any inroads into the smuggler gangs. We have seen just three convictions a month for people smuggling, at a time when tens of thousands of lives are being put at risk each month.

That is why we have long called for a major boost to the National Crime Agency, because we do need major action. Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced an increase for the NCA. I am glad that he has made some progress on this, but will the Home Secretary clarify what it means in practice? How much additional funding will there be in practice for the NCA and specifically for the action on the smuggler gangs? How many additional full-time staff will there be? What is the sense of scale on this? I fear, still, that this is too low and too little, given the scale of the problem we face. Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced a small boats operational command? How different is that from the previous clandestine channel threat command, led by Commander Dan O'Mahoney, which has been operation for some time? Will it still be led by him or will it be led by somebody else? Will the Home Office or the Ministry of Defence be in charge? Is it correct to say that the Navy has been told that it will be standing down on 31 January? Will the Home Secretary also update us on the French patrols and surveillance? Has the 40% promised increase in patrols started yet? When will it? Was this boat picked up as a result of increased surveillance? If it was not, what was the reason for that?

The Home Secretary has also referred to safe legal routes. She was pressed at the Select Committee on a lack of safe legal routes for children trying to unite with family in the UK. When will she be taking action to address that, to prevent children who are seeking to rejoin family in the UK from making desperate journeys? She referred also to the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, so will she clarify something? We have also called for the fast track for safe countries and for the backlog to be cleared. The Prime Minister said that he had set a personal target of 117,000 cases to be cleared by the end of next year. No. 10 later said that that target was 92,000. Will she again confirm which of those it is?

The responsibility for the lives that have been lost in the channel lies with the criminal gangs. They need to be caught, prosecuted and jailed for the loss of life in the cold sea, and we need comprehensive action. We gathered in this House just over a year ago to lament the loss of 27 lives. None of us wants to do so again—none of us wants to be here again. That is why we need action, before more lives are lost in peril on the sea.

Suella Braverman: Today is a day to demonstrate our sympathy for the victims and the families involved in this tragic incident. It is a day to express gratitude to our hard-working emergency services, Border Force, search and rescue and MOD colleagues who at this moment are conducting an operation in the channel, in very difficult and challenging circumstances.

The right hon. Lady mentions a few points and I want to respond to some of them in detail. The small boats operational command is going to be a new operational command, which the Prime Minister announced yesterday,

as part of our plan to go further on our action to stop the boats crossing the channel. This means we are setting up a new headquarters, the small boats operational command, in Border Force, with military support for specialist planning and operational advice. As part of that, we will bring in new air and maritime capabilities, including new drones, land-based radar and fixed-wing aircraft, and we will more than double our current permanent staffing levels, with 100 new staff at HQ and more than 600 new operational staff based at Dover. This is a sign that we are strengthening our resolve, strengthening our will and strengthening our efforts to do whatever it takes—as the Prime Minister has pledged—to stop the boats crossing the channel. It will improve our intelligence and information sharing with the French, and will improve and build on the co-operation that we have with our partners in France.

The deal that we signed last month with colleagues in France is a big step forward in our cross-channel co-operation, for we share a common challenge. That new arrangement will see more dangerous and unnecessary crossings being prevented. Last year our joint efforts prevented more than 23,000 unnecessary journeys, and this year, to date, the number is 31,000. That in itself is insufficient, but it is a step in the right direction, and the agreement that we have struck afresh with the French will go further to enhance our joint working.

The right hon. Lady mentioned safe and legal routes. Since 2015 we have made it possible for 450,000 people to come here via safe and legal routes, and that is a record of which I am immensely proud. These are people who have come from countries such as Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan. They are people who have come from all over the world, directly from places of danger—for instance via the UK resettlement scheme, under which people have been selected by the UN Refugee Agency from countries including Ethiopia, Iraq, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. We will extend safe and legal routes once we have dealt with the appalling people-smuggling gangs who are risking people's lives, as we have seen this morning.

The right hon. Lady talked about our track record on this issue. The Government will not stop until we have seen progress—until people understand that taking this lethal journey is not safe, is not lawful, and will not lead them to a better life in the United Kingdom. Millions of people around the world are fleeing conflict and poverty and seek a better life elsewhere, and our capacity in this country is not infinite. We cannot accept everyone who wishes to come here. That is a reality of the world and a reality of life, although the Labour party would suggest otherwise. I hope the right hon. Lady will join us in our strength and resolve to stop this problem by supporting our measures and supporting our legislation next year.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I echo the sympathies expressed by the Home Secretary, and the tributes paid to the rescue services. It is, in fact, a miracle that no lives have been lost in British territorial waters before now—and that is a tribute to the professionalism of Border Force, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Coastguard and others. Let us be in no doubt that the blood is on the hands of the criminal gangs who are responsible for this tragedy.

Of course, it would be best for the boats not to leave the shore in the first place. Can the Home Secretary update the House on any progress that may be taking

place in discussions with her French counterparts that would persuade them either to intercept the boats if they get into the water and bring the passengers back to French land, from where they started, or, when they intercept people on the beaches who are about to get into the boats, ensure that they are arrested and detained rather than being set free and allowed to try again the following night? That is the only thing that will stop this immediately, which is what we need to happen.

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right, and I am proud of the new agreement that we have struck with our French colleagues in this regard. There has already been progress. In the last few weeks there have been initial deployments of embedded offices under the deal, with the first full deployments before Christmas. The joint headquarters function is up and running, with regular operational planning meetings between UK and French law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and we are working together with French partners to achieve the Calais group agreements that we struck last week to deepen our intelligence co-operation with near neighbours.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I first thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) who so ably fulfilled this role before me.

I and my SNP colleagues send our sincerest condolences to the families and friends of those four reported to have died in the early hours of this morning and hope that it will be possible for the rescued to make a full recovery. We give thanks to all those involved in the rescue efforts in such perishingly cold conditions and those still out searching in the channel.

We want to end these crossings; everybody does. The reality is, as it has always been, that while safe and legal routes do not exist, and while people wait years for applications for family reunions, desperate people will continue to take life-threatening journeys, because they feel that they have no choice. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, despite the rhetoric, has not proven to be the deterrent that the Home Secretary expected. Will she finally recognise that safe and legal routes are essential to allow people to get here safely, and that they should be expanded now, beyond the limited Afghan, Syrian, Hong Kong and Ukraine routes, not at some vague point in the future?

If the Home Secretary truly wants to break the lucrative model of organised crime behind this, she should bring in Dubs and Dublin-style routes and allow people to apply from abroad and get on a plane rather than forcing them to get in a flimsy dinghy in the depths of winter. It is cruel to ignore the reality, and dangerous to keep repeating the same mistakes. People are paying not only with money, but with their lives. Will she listen to the evidence, and, instead of just talking tough, act to bring in safe and legal routes for everybody now, because sympathy is one thing, effective action another.

Suella Braverman: As I have said, I am incredibly proud of this country's generosity and, in fact, of this Government's track record on extending the hand of friendship to more than 300,000 people this year alone. Those people have fled persecution, conflict and have come through humanitarian routes to find shelter and safety in the United Kingdom. I strongly dispute the

hon. Lady's suggestion that, somehow, our system is inadequate. None the less, the Prime Minister has committed to going further and ensuring that there is a legitimised, capped, quota-ised system of safe and legal routes, which will be part of our measures after we have tackled the issue of illegal migration.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): May I add my appreciation to that already expressed for the work of those who were engaged in the rescue operation under appalling conditions last night, and also for that of the east Kent hospitals that have been treating the survivors, some of whom are still fighting for their lives, and some of whom, I understand, are women and children.

The House, on both sides, has rightly condemned those who are responsible in peddling the floating death that is the cross-channel traffic. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how many people, following the efforts of the Calais group and the United Kingdom Government, have been arrested and brought to trial?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for all his efforts in supporting the local community, not just following this incident, but throughout, because I know that, particularly in Kent, there is pressure on communities and authorities relating to illegal migration. There has been considerable effort and focus by the police, the NCA and other agencies on tackling organised immigration criminal gangs. So far this year, 55 organised crime groups have been dismantled and there have been more than 500 arrests. I know, having met and accompanied the NCA a few months ago on a dawn raid to arrest a suspected people smuggler, that this work is extensive, coherent and set to increase following the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On behalf of the Home Affairs Committee, I express our sincere condolences to all those families who have lost loved ones. I pay tribute to the emergency services that were operating in such appalling conditions, and carry on doing so today, and I highlight the work of the RNLI and the fishing boats that came to the rescue of the dinghy. Many of us on the Committee have met Border Force officials, immigration officers and contractors who work at Western Jet Foil and at Manston, and we know how distressing these events must be for those people at those places.

Obviously, we need to wait for a full statement about what has happened, but I wondered whether the Home Secretary might be able to share whether she thinks there are any more actions that can be taken to pursue the evil individuals who facilitate and organise these trips across the channel in these dinghies. What more can the Government do to make sure those people are brought to book?

Suella Braverman: What more we can do forms part of the plan that the Prime Minister announced yesterday: focusing on the operational command and our resources at Dover, and working with the French. We want to investigate 100% of the small boats, and we want to arrest all of the pilots that we can identify. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 brought in new offences designed specifically to deal with illegal arrivals, and there have been considerable numbers of investigations, arrests and prosecutions relating to those new offences. But of

[*Suella Braverman*]

course, when there is a tragedy like this, it focuses all of our minds on what more we can be doing so that this does not happen again.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I was awoken this morning to the news that bodies were being brought into Dover, and that the boat had overturned in the channel. It is the news that I, as the Member of Parliament for Dover and Deal, and people across my community fear day after day, particularly in wintry and cold conditions. That boat should not have been in the water in the first place, let alone in those kinds of conditions at this time of year.

Could my right hon. and learned Friend consider having urgent discussions with the French and arranging that summit with President Macron? The bottom line is that, in this case, the boat, I understand, was around the median line in the channel, and this is the second time we have seen such a situation. It is time for joint patrols on the French beaches to stop the boats getting in the water in the first place, and a joint security zone across the channel to make sure that incidents like these cannot happen and that we bring the small boat crossings to an end.

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for all of her work over the past few years, dealing with this issue. I know that she speaks powerfully for all of her constituents who are directly affected by illegal migration.

The agreement with the French was a step forward, but it is not the end point. It will deliver an increased number of personnel and resources, who will be focused on the issues of intelligence sharing, interception, prevention, investigation, and ultimately the law enforcement response, so that the preventive element of this issue is strengthened. We will continue to build on the constructive dialogue that we have with the French, and I know that they share the goal that we have, which is to bring this problem to an end.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Death by drowning at sea must be one of the most horrific ways imaginable of meeting your end. I am sure that is something that is understood only too well in the nation's island and coastal communities, where this news will have been felt particularly keenly.

The Home Secretary has told us, quite rightly, that safe and legal routes are effective in bringing people here—that is why we never find Ukrainians or people from Hong Kong in these small boats—so why does she think that the creation of safe and legal routes for people coming from places such as Syria, Eritrea or Afghanistan has to wait for the Home Office to get its act together? I have been waiting as a Member of Parliament for 21 years to see that happen, and I have not seen any sign of it yet.

Suella Braverman: As I said, we already have an extensive programme of welcoming people to this country through humanitarian routes, and I have listed some of the countries from which people have arrived. The Prime Minister has set out the plan, but it is clear that, fundamentally, we have to send a message to anybody thinking about coming to the UK that they must do it through legal means—through a lawful route—and that

jumping the queue and putting their life and that of others at risk is not an acceptable way of coming to the United Kingdom.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The Home Secretary will be aware that there are plenty of safe countries in Europe that have fully functioning asylum systems. Does she agree that anybody fleeing persecution should claim asylum in the first safe country they come to?

Suella Braverman: That element relates to the Albania agreement that we recently struck, which makes it clear that Albania is a safe country, as the Albanian ambassador made clear recently at the Home Affairs Committee. There is no reason for people from Albania to come to the United Kingdom and claim asylum.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join the Home Secretary and colleagues in expressing my profound sadness at the terrible loss of life and my thanks to those involved in the rescue, but the House needs to ask itself why mothers and fathers are getting in those boats with their children to seek to come to the United Kingdom. It is because they know that, until they are in the country, they cannot claim asylum. I know the Home Secretary is absolutely committed to ending this illegal trade, but let us start with family reunion: one of the reasons that people may want to not stay in France but come to the UK is that they have a family member here, as we would if our families were separated in that way. Does she not recognise that we need to address that and provide safe and legal routes?

Suella Braverman: The reality is that, of course, where we have routes and people have met the relevant criteria, they are enabled to come here. It is not the case, however, that any person across the world who wants to choose the UK as their destination can do so without legitimate grounds. We should make sure that we in the UK are doing our fair share—I think 300,000 this year alone would qualify as a very admirable track record of humanitarian support—but it is right that people should come here only when they have the legal basis to do so.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I associate myself with the Home Secretary's remarks about the tragedy and commend her determination to deal with this issue. Last week, I and other hon. Members met one of those responsible for the Australian sovereign borders scheme to tackle illegal migration there. A key part of that scheme was to challenge the messaging at source used by the people traffickers. Their cruel and callous sales pitch is that Britain is a soft touch and that, when people get here, they will never leave. Will she look at countering that messaging at its place of origin using the intelligence and security services and all other means with the vehemence that she personifies?

Suella Braverman: The harsh reality is that many thousands of people are being sold the lie that, if they hand over large sums of money to criminal gangs, they will have a promise of a new life in the United Kingdom. The truth behind that lie is that they are putting themselves at lethal risk; sometimes, they are entering into unlawful arrangements and exposing themselves to exploitation;

and they are coming here unfairly and illegitimately. That is not the right way to come to the United Kingdom and they are not welcome.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Like all Members, I hold out sympathy to those who died last night and thank those who risked everything to try to save life at sea; they should be thanked for that.

It is obviously correct to condemn people traffickers and all that goes with them. However, there is a reason that people make these dangerous journeys: they are absolutely desperate—they would not do it otherwise. Instead of the ritual condemnation of people traffickers, could we have something more positive about what we are going to do to support those desperate human beings, of whom the Prime Minister acknowledged there are more around the world than ever before, and make a positive contribution to dealing with the causes of flight in the first place—war, environmental disaster, human rights abuses and so much else? Condemning is easy, but holding out the hand of humanity and friendship to very desperate people is what we should be doing today.

Suella Braverman: I think we have to get a reality check here. The reality is that not everybody getting on a small boat—an unseaworthy vessel—and paying thousands of pounds to criminal gangs is a refugee. Not everyone coming here illegally is coming here on humanitarian grounds. There is considerable evidence that people are coming here as economic migrants, illegally. That is what we are trying to stop.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the actions she is taking. Could she update the House on what she is doing to reduce the pull factors that encourage people to risk their lives crossing the channel, and how she is ensuring that the people who take those risks know about them and know what they will receive once they get here, to combat the lie they have been sold?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend makes the right point. We will be taking further action to properly investigate and enforce against things such as illegal working, and my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister will be leading a taskforce set up in Government with other Departments that will make a co-ordinated effort to ensure that we are better policing this issue. Ultimately, this comes down to deterrence and ensuring that we have the right laws in place. That is why it is vital that we introduce and pass legislation which makes it clear that, if you come here illegally, you will be detained and you will be removed to a third country or to a safe country.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On behalf of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I extend condolences to the families and friends of those who have died and pay tribute to the brave emergency services and rescuers.

Nobody in this House wants to encourage organised crime or people smugglers. Two years ago, a Home Office report suggested that deterrent policies are ineffective. Notwithstanding that, yesterday, the Prime Minister announced a legislative package and refused to confirm that he would not derogate from the European convention on human rights if he felt it was necessary in order to

enforce that legislation not against people smugglers or organised crime but against asylum seekers. At the Tory party conference, the Home Secretary was reported as saying that it was her position that, ultimately, the United Kingdom needs to leave the European convention on human rights. Is that still her position?

Suella Braverman: The hon. and learned Lady talks about deterrence, and I disagree with her, respectfully. I am incredibly convinced that deterrence must be an element of our plan to fix this problem. If we look at other countries around the world, such as Australia, which has made huge progress in dealing with a very similar challenge, it is a deterrent element of removal that was integral to reducing the number of illegal arrivals. That is why I am a big supporter of the Rwanda scheme, which is an important element of our plan to fix the problem. I gently urge her to support our legislation, which, as I said, will make it clear that those who arrive here illegally will be detained and removed.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We all feel deeply for those lives tragically lost overnight, which makes the measures announced by the Prime Minister yesterday to break the evil trade of people smuggling even more relevant than they were yesterday. Let us talk plainly in this House. This boat did not magically appear on the median line; it was launched from a beach in France—a safe country. It feels like groundhog day, because a little over a year ago we were having a similar debate when there was an even worse tragedy. Following that, the then Prime Minister made a broad and expansive offer to the French President for UK boots to be allowed to go on the sand and on the ground to stop these launchings. Could my right hon. and learned Friend make that broad and expansive offer once more to the French? It is patently true that they have not managed to stop this evil and miserable trade in human tragedy.

Suella Braverman: We are still establishing the exact facts about what did or did not happen around the incident. However, this year alone the French have been successful in preventing approximately 30,000 attempts to leave their coastline. Is that enough? We would like that number to be considerably higher, and that is why the French Government and the UK Government are working hand in hand to increase our resources and our joint working so that ultimately we have a meaningful, preventive mechanism in the channel.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Our thoughts and prayers have to go to those whose families have been destroyed by the tragedy that occurred in the channel. But our anger, and the anger of the House, ought to be directed at those who callously exploit people who are desperate, or simply people who are misled, for profit. The Democratic Unionist party and the whole House should be supporting the Government in their efforts, first, to prevent the people who are selling places on these boats from getting customers in the first place. Those people should know that, when they come here, there will be no advantage to them and that they will have to leave again. At the same time, what steps is the Home Secretary taking to ensure that safe and legal routes are strengthened for those who genuinely need to seek refuge in this country, and that

[Sammy Wilson]

more resources are put into them, so that there is no need for people to give in to the exploitation of these people smugglers?

Suella Braverman: The right hon. Member is right. That is why the Prime Minister announced yesterday that we will have a capped safe and legal routes programme that will come into force once we have tackled the issue of illegal migration. The right hon. Member is right to highlight the criminality. The criminal gangs are sophisticated and well organised, and they are working across several countries. That is why working with European partners is a core element of our plan to fix the problem. I was pleased with the support demonstrated by international partners at the Calais group meeting of Interior Ministers that I attended last week.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): This is a tragedy from top to bottom, with dozens of souls huddled in an insufficient boat travelling across the world's busiest shipping lane in minus 4° waters. These journeys should not be undertaken at all. Our thoughts are with those who have lost their lives and those fighting for their lives right now, but I would like to pay tribute to those working in the channel to keep people safe and picking them up when boats do capsize. The Home Affairs Committee met some of them in doing its work. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, but does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that what we really need to do is tackle these gangs by going back upstream and going after the money of those who are peddling a lie by wrongly saying that these journeys are safe and that people can live a successful economic life here, as well as by targeting the social media companies that allow adverts to be shared online that promote these routes as being safe and an easy way to access the UK?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is right that tackling the criminal gangs is essential. I struck the Calais group agreement last week, and I am glad we have all committed to the UK supporting resources at Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Many people arriving here, having crossed the channel, come from outside the EU. They travel through the western Balkans and make their way across the EU to northern France, from where they make the journey. Helping to bolster the EU border will have a preventive element.

My hon. Friend is also right about social media, which was also part of last week's discussion.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I add my voice to the condolences to the family and friends who lost loved ones. I also express my gratitude to all the rescuers.

The refugee convention, of which we are not just a signatory but an author, was established at the end of the second world war following the horrors of the holocaust, which we are remembering here tomorrow. Will the Home Secretary publish the minutes of her Ministers' meeting with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees? Does he support the measures that the Prime Minister announced yesterday? In particular, does he think they will work?

Suella Braverman: I am very proud of our track record of welcoming people who are fleeing persecution and who come here for humanitarian reasons. We have welcomed more than 300,000 people this year alone, and 450,000 since 2015. We will consult on the future cap on those coming through safe and legal routes, which the Prime Minister announced yesterday, and on how that cap will be decided. We will incorporate lessons from our successful community sponsorship approach, pioneered through Homes for Ukraine, and we will ensure that, fundamentally, it is a decision legitimised and authorised by directly elected and accountable Members of Parliament.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): What we have heard today is truly a tragedy. My heart goes out to the families and friends of those who lost their lives, and I thank all those who put their lives at risk to rescue them.

We talk a lot about compassion in this place. Is it not the most compassionate thing to make sure we smash these awful serious organised crime gangs? They are not just traffickers, which is awful in its own right, but murderers, as we have heard once again today. We need to legislate and to use every possible avenue to end the pull factors and to end these awful gangs. Will my right hon. and learned Friend please confirm that we will do everything we can to prevent this awful crime and this awful tragedy from happening again?

Suella Braverman: The Prime Minister set out his unambiguous resolve yesterday. I am working hand in hand with him on the plan. We will do whatever it takes. We must make it clear to people who are thinking about embarking on a very dangerous and illegal journey that they must not get on to a makeshift vessel, put their own life at risk and let themselves be exploited by criminal gangs.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Everyone is expressing their condolences to the loved ones of those who lost their lives, but if I understand her correctly, the Home Secretary is saying that the people who were pulled alive from the channel last night, because they came from a safe country, are not welcome in the United Kingdom. Is that really her position?

Suella Braverman: I am not commenting right now on the specific facts of the incident. This is not a time for politics. This is a time to express gratitude to the brave and heroic emergency service workers, who worked in very challenging circumstances, and to express our condolences to those who have been bereaved, but it is also a time to strengthen our resolve to make sure this does not happen again and to successfully combat the evil trade of people smuggling.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): What an unpleasant question.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. I praise the emergency services and commiserate with all those affected by this terrible drowning at sea. May I pick up on a point from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)? He rightly says we have to stop this on the beaches if we cannot stop it before. My right hon. Friend mentions technology. Surely, with satellites, drones and a well co-ordinated operation with French and British personnel

along the French coast, we can stop this. Is that the case, or are there still not enough resources, drones and satellites to pick up on where boats are being launched from?

Suella Braverman: We are increasing the amount of technological capability available to Border Force. We are doubling the funding for the National Crime Agency, which will now be embedded in the operational command at Dover to ensure that drone technology, military capability and sophisticated information sharing can properly take place across the channel, so that we can build the evidence not only to prosecute any illegal activity, but also to prevent it.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Following this truly tragic incident, my thoughts and prayers are with the families of the victims who were desperately seeking to cross the icy waters of the channel in a small boat, given the lack of safe and secure routes. I pay tribute to the incredible work of the rescue services who were risking their lives. Does the Home Secretary agree with me that the RNLI, which is staffed by volunteers and funded by donations, is one of the most selfless institutions in our country and deserves our full support?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in the way he describes the work of the RNLI. It is an incredible organisation, which responds first in many instances to incidents of crisis and emergency, saving lives and helping people in distress. It has my full support.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): First, I commend the Home Secretary on the work she has been doing with our neighbours and allies to tackle this issue. My constituent, Soheila Nowlan, a successful academic of international standing, came to the UK as a refugee from Iran a couple of years ago. For her family in Iran, there is no safe and legal route by which they can come to join her in the UK, but should they travel overland and come in a small boat, they stand around a 98% chance under our laws of being granted asylum in the United Kingdom. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the success of our ambition to break the model of the people smugglers, by ensuring that those who come to the UK by irregular means are not successful, depends entirely on the existence of a safe and legal route, which, if it has not been used, can in our law count against those who come here by irregular means?

Suella Braverman: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work and his previous track record, before he came to this place, in supporting people coming to this country. The reality is that the UK will continue to provide safe and legal routes to those refugees in most need, but the practical truth is that there are 100 million people around the globe who would like to leave their country of residence and potentially come to the United Kingdom. That is simply not possible. Therefore, we need an element of control—combined with compassion and generosity but, yes, control, fairness and legitimacy—that underpins any kind of humanitarian arrangement that we have. I am very proud of the track record that this country and this Government have demonstrated over recent years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next question, I would be grateful if the Home Secretary would address the Chair. When she addresses the House with her back firmly to the Chair, it is not only discourteous but we cannot hear her. It would be very good if she were to face the right way. I must also say that we have time this afternoon, but we could go a little faster. This is a sombre and serious matter to be considered, but that does not mean it cannot be done at a pace.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is indeed a very dark day, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was in the House last year when we marked the deaths of 27 people in the channel, and I heard very similar calls from the then Home Secretary about smashing criminal gangs; however, 45,000 people have since taken the perilous journey to the UK. The Government's approach does not work and it pushes people into the hands of people traffickers, so when will the Home Secretary acknowledge that to avoid more tragedy she has to create safe and legal routes for people to come to UK?

Suella Braverman: We have made some progress in tackling the illegal crime gangs. Since the passing of the Nationality and Borders Act, the number of prosecutions for new offences has increased considerably by more than 200%. That Act created new offences relating to people smuggling—illegal arrival and entry and facilitation—and both those new offences have been used considerably by our enforcement agencies.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. My constituents would like to add their prayers for those affected and we thank the emergency services.

Somebody sold a desperate person a passage in a boat. Somebody encouraged that person to get into a boat on a freezing-cold night when the seas were an appalling temperature. Somebody did that knowing that the person they took the money off—thousands of pounds—could die. That is where our anger should be directed, and it rightly is. Will the Home Secretary update the House on what more she can do to work with the French in the camps to provide practical advice and some messages to warn people about the dangers of making the journey? When does she think that kind of work can start?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the need for greater action to disrupt the criminal gangs, particularly upstream and in respect of how they advertise to and communicate with the people they exploit. They make considerable use of social media to propagate a lie and fuel this illegal trade. They are shameless and, indeed, reckless in their behaviour, selling a journey in life-threatening conditions, putting people's lives at risk and causing nothing but misery. They must be stopped.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I think all our hearts were broken when we saw the news this morning, and grateful for the emergency services being able to save some of the people in the boats. Further to the question from the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood

[Stella Creasy]

and Pinner (David Simmonds), I should point out that 15% of those in the small boats are from Iran, and many of us throughout the House have expressed solidarity with the people there who are speaking up for their basic rights and facing persecution, whether for their religious or political views. The Home Secretary needs to set out exactly—we need a straight answer to this question—how one of those brave people in Tehran or Mashhad, where people have been executed this week, can come to the UK safely to be with a family member. Explain, Home Secretary, because they deserve that. You cannot simply say, “Sorry, we’re full up.”

Suella Braverman: As I have said on several occasions, I am very proud of the track record we have demonstrated not only since 2015 but this year, with more than 3,000 people coming here for humanitarian reasons. There are several mechanisms by which people can get here, whether that is through the UN resettlement scheme, family reunion or the mandate resettlement scheme. Those people who are genuinely in need and who meet our criteria will be supported in the United Kingdom. That is something I am proud of.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Peterborough supports more asylum seekers and refugees than any other city or place in the east of England. We are a caring city and this tragedy in the English channel will hit communities in Peterborough hard, but does this awful incident not demonstrate the need, on compassionate grounds, to stop the boats, destroy the business model of the people smugglers and save lives?

Suella Braverman: That is why we will bring forward legislation to make it clear that if someone comes here on a small boat illegally, they will be detained and removed. That is not just the right thing to do; that is the compassionate thing to do.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Home Secretary herself has just described this journey as “a lethally dangerous endeavour”. How desperate does she think the people making the journey must have been to attempt it? The weasel words she has been using about dealing with safe and legal routes after dealing with the people smugglers are shameful. The UK Government’s approach to this issue is dehumanising and wholly inadequate. I ask her again to think very carefully about why these people are making the journey and about how safe and legal routes can be provided now.

Suella Braverman: I am not going to lower myself to the standards that the hon. Lady invites me to by making this about political point scoring. This is, as I have said, a human tragedy that transcends politics. We are all united in our sympathy and condolences, and we want to make sure it never happens again. That is the aim of this Government and it should be the aim of the hon. Lady.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Today’s awful tragedy is one that many of us predicted. Members are keen to blame gangs, but it is Members in this place, with their zeal to showcase their altruism, who are preventing us from stopping the boats on their perilous

journeys by not replacing aspects of the Human Rights Act that do not work for us or even exiting the ECHR. Let us remember that these are people who willingly put themselves in harm’s way. The criminal gangs would disappear if the demand for their services went. Home Secretary, when will we make the Rwanda plan work?

Suella Braverman: As my hon. Friend knows, I believe in the groundbreaking partnership that the United Kingdom has struck with Rwanda. I believe that it is a mutually beneficial arrangement, it is compassionate, it is pragmatic and it will be a big step forward in solving the challenge with which we are grappling. It is currently in the courts. We are awaiting a judgment from the High Court that is due very soon.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Home Secretary may recall that the former Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), signed an agreement on a Franco-British operational research unit to combat migrant smuggling in the channel with the French Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin. There was a fanfare announcement, a little like we had yesterday, and that was on 12 July 2020. Does the Home Secretary consider that agreement to be a failure?

Suella Braverman: In 2021, the joint efforts of France and the UK prevented more than 23,000 dangerous and unnecessary crossings. This year alone, the figure is 31,000. The UK-France joint intelligence cell has so far dismantled 55 organised crime gangs and secured more than 500 arrests. We would, of course, like to go further, but that is a good start.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): This country has led the way in providing safe and legal routes for those in genuine need, most notably those fleeing Ukraine and Afghanistan. However, does the Home Secretary agree that it would be completely impractical for asylum claims to be made directly to the UK from any country in the world, as our system would simply be crushed under the weight of tens of millions of claims from economic migrants from every corner of the world?

Suella Braverman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are more than 100 million people worldwide who are struggling. While we will do everything we can to support those countries through development, co-operation and Foreign Office work—there are so many ways in which the UK is a great ally and partner of many, many countries around the world—it is simply impractical, unsustainable and fundamentally unfair to have the kind of system to which he alludes.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Yesterday, the Prime Minister rather skirted around the issue of whether the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had been consulted on this plan. The UNHCR has since described the Home Secretary’s plan as “a troubling step away” from a “commendable humanitarian tradition”—one that would

“undermine the global refugee system at large and would be a violation of International...Law.”

Why did the Home Secretary not consult the UNHCR and why is she setting out to undermine the international system of refugee protection?

Suella Braverman: I know that we disagreed about leaving the European Union, but one reason why I voted to leave the EU was to take back control of our borders and our migration policy—to restore sovereignty and supremacy to this Parliament on how our migration policy should be run. It is for this Parliament and the directly elected people running this country to make the decision on how we should run our migration policy, who should come here and how we should apply our humanitarian arrangements.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I share the shock and grief of the whole House at this tragedy.

I was elected three years ago. In my maiden speech, I talked about the issue of child reunion and unaccompanied asylum seeking children seeking refuge here, in the context of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I was told by Ministers that the issue would be addressed in the Nationality and Borders Bill, but such provisions were rejected.

In the light of this tragedy and the shocking situation of many unaccompanied asylum seeking children having to get into boats or being stranded in camps, will the Secretary of State look at the issue of the relatively small numbers of such children who have family members here and could have a safe and legal route, but currently do not?

Suella Braverman: Whenever unaccompanied asylum seeking children arrive in the UK, they are provided considerable levels of support, funding and care. We ensure that their safeguarding is a priority for them and for us.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Rhetoric on this issue is so very important, and that is why what I have heard is so disappointing. This morning, I expected the Home Secretary to tell us about the incident—how many people were still missing and how the survivors were being supported. Instead, we have heard words such as “enforcement” and “deterrent”.

We have heard a lot about safe and legal routes this morning. I have a constituent whose sister and brother were in Afghanistan. The brother, unfortunately, was executed by the Taliban two months ago for the work he did with British forces. The sister worked with an NGO on women’s rights and girls’ education. The sister does not qualify for any safe and legal routes. How should she seek asylum in the UK?

Suella Braverman: We have set up two specific schemes for Afghans. There is the Afghan relocation and assistance policy, or ARAP, which is an uncapped relocation scheme for Afghans who directly supported the United Kingdom Government and military efforts in Afghanistan. So far, approximately 11,000 people have arrived in the UK through that scheme. Many more have come through other schemes relating to Afghanistan.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): This truly heartbreaking tragedy comes immediately after the Prime Minister’s tub thumping “Stop the boats” statement yesterday. This Government’s policy is cruel, inhumane and puts people at risk of danger, exploitation and, as we tragically saw last night, death. It is clear that to stop deaths in the channel we need safe routes for claiming

asylum. Will the Home Secretary consider proposals being made by a number of agencies, including the Public and Commercial Services Union—the Home Office’s union—such as a safe passage visa? Will she meet PCS representatives to discuss that and other effective and humane recommendations in its “Safe Passage for Refugees” report?

Suella Braverman: What is cruel and inhumane is desperate people being conned—it is a trick—into handing over large sums of money and making a treacherous journey on land and sea, in the fruitless hope of a better life in the United Kingdom. That is not lawful, it is not moral and it must be stopped.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Finally, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, may I offer my sympathies to the families who grieve today for their loved ones? May I also thank the Secretary of State for her endeavours to find a solution to the problems? Yesterday, the Prime Minister referred to a deal with the French that will put “more boots on the ground patrolling their beaches”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 885.]

and more boats in the sea. What teeth are behind the patrols to get at the organised criminal gangs and put them in prison, no matter the level of their participation or involvement in these disgusting money-making schemes that have led to death, injury and pain for innocent people?

Suella Braverman: There is a huge amount of operational collaboration pursuant to the new deal that I agreed with my French counterpart last month. It will see, for the first time ever, UK Border Force officers side by side with their French equivalents, looking and analysing, sharing intelligence and working hand in hand to combat, prevent and intercept the departures from France.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Home Secretary did not address my question about the accuracy of what the Prime Minister said in the House yesterday. Obviously, it matters for us to have accurate information. In response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), the Prime Minister said that his target was to eliminate the “initial asylum backlog” of “117,000”. An hour later, No. 10 said that the target was 92,000. The Home Secretary will probably be aware that we assume the 117,000 is the figure that applies to the backlog of initial main applications—including dependants, the figure for the backlog is in fact 143,000. So we do need some clarity on whether this is the 117,000 that the Prime Minister told the House, the 92,000 or some other figure. Obviously, if the Prime Minister has not given accurate information to the House, we would expect that to be clarified and corrected swiftly by No. 10.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order, and I have no doubt that it has been heard by the Home Secretary and her immediate colleagues. As the right hon. Lady knows, the accuracy, or otherwise, of what is said by any Member of this House is not a matter for the Chair. But it is a matter for

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

the Chair to ensure that if there has been a discrepancy in the presentation of statistics, it should be corrected at the earliest opportunity. I have every confidence that, the right hon. Lady having pointed out this alleged discrepancy in the presentation of statistics, the matter will be taken seriously by the Ministers on the Treasury Bench. If there is a discrepancy to be corrected, I have every confidence that that will be done in a timely fashion. [Interruption.] No, I do not need any further advice, thank you; I think I have put it quite clearly.

BILL PRESENTED

GREEN JOBS (DEFINITION AND PROMOTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Ed Davey, Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to define the term “green jobs”; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for their creation, including setting targets relating to green jobs, skills, and training; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on performance in implementing that strategy; to require the Secretary of State to publish a plan to increase take-up of National Vocational Qualification courses related to low-carbon services; to establish a Commission to advise the Government and local authorities on increasing the availability of jobs in the low-carbon economy, including in areas with high levels of deprivation, and on ensuring access to good quality green jobs across the United Kingdom; to require the Commission to consult workers, communities, non-governmental organisations, businesses, and industry representatives; to require local authorities to report to the Commission on the availability in green jobs in their areas; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2023, and to be printed (Bill 217).

Asylum Seekers (Removal to Safe Countries)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.48 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that certain provisions of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 relating to the removal of asylum seekers to safe countries shall have effect notwithstanding inconsistency or incompatibility with international or other domestic law; to require the Secretary of State to proceed with such removals regardless of any decision or judgment of any international court or body; and for connected purposes.

I want to start by saying that my thoughts and prayers are with those who have so tragically lost their lives while crossing the English channel, as well as with their families and our brave emergency service workers who have responded. Today’s awful news makes it clear how we in this place must do all we can to end the vile people smuggling and human trafficking gangs that trade in human misery.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s announcement in the House yesterday that we will begin to fast-track the removal of Albanians, speed up the processing of asylum claims, move away from hotels being used in places such as Stoke-on-Trent and bring in new legislation in the new year to mean that if someone comes here illegally, they cannot stay here, which will help to break apart the operating model of these cruel and heartless gangs.

The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke and I find the number of migrants crossing the English channel from perfectly safe, neighbouring European countries such as France totally unacceptable and deeply concerning. It is a fact that about 70% of those making the crossings are young single men coming over on their own. Over 12,000 of these are economic migrants from Albania, of whom 10,000 are single adult males. We need to bring this national and European emergency to an end, as well as to fulfil our promise to the British people by taking back control of our laws and borders.

When we as a country voted to leave the European Union in 2016—the largest mandate in British political history—we did so to restore our ability to control our laws, money and borders. The people of this great country felt that too much power wrongly lay in Europe and that their voices were ignored. Leaving the European Union and restoring parliamentary sovereignty represented transferring power back to the people who elect their Members of Parliament to represent their views.

I strongly welcomed the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which was brought to this House by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), as a landmark piece of legislation that was supposed to seize on our new-found freedoms post Brexit and implement the robust and decisive immigration system that the people of this country have been so urgently calling for. Along with my Conservative colleagues, I thought it was a welcome new approach to the issues of sovereignty and border control. I supported the Act because I saw it as a real opportunity to deter people crossing the English channel, and therefore to break the harrowing practices of the abhorrent people smugglers who operate not just in Europe, but around the world.

The cornerstone of the Act are measures to offshore to Rwanda illegal economic migrants coming from safe mainland Europe, copying the successful model used by Australia. Some 73% of my fine constituents in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke support that, based on a survey I have conducted on this issue. Unfortunately, the extent to which we can make our own sovereign decisions has been brought into question, as immigration lawyers have been able to block deportations to Rwanda through appeals to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

As recently as July, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister wrote in *The Sunday Telegraph* that where the European convention on human rights is a problem

“I will tackle it. We voted to leave so that we could act as a sovereign nation. The ECHR cannot inhibit our ability to properly control our borders and we shouldn’t let it.”

According to the National Audit Office report on immigration enforcements, only 48% of enforced returns went ahead as planned, due to legal challenges emanating from the European Court of Human Rights preventing the other 52% from going ahead. I agree with the Prime Minister that the European Court of Human Rights should not use its political interpretation of our laws to undermine the will of the British people. The respondents to my local survey also agree, with 68% saying that we should ignore the European Court of Human Rights, as we did with the proposal to give prisoners the right to vote.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) introduced a motion back in 2010 on the right of prisoners to vote in general elections. The European Court of Human Rights at the time ruled that banning prisoners from voting was a breach of their human rights, contrary to decisions made in this House, but my right hon. Friend and this House forced the then Government to block it. The purpose of my Bill is to move a similar motion in relation to offshoring illegal economic migrants, giving us total control over our laws and borders and fulfilling the promises we made to the people of this nation in 2019.

Personally, I think we should seriously consider our position as a member of the ECHR. The Centre for Policy Studies report reflects that view, stating:

“As long as Britain remains a signatory to the Convention and bound by the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, governments will be prevented from adequately enforcing immigration laws.”

Although we have left the European Union and restored powers back to this House, the democratically elected institution that the British people have put their faith in, it should not be blocked any further from being able to defend our borders and enforce our laws, such as those on processing illegal economic migrants in Rwanda.

While we may have freed ourselves from EU control, we still have a quasi-legislative supranational institution that fundamentally undermines decisions made in our democratically elected and sovereign Parliament. That is why I am introducing my Bill today. It would mean that we could get the migrants who have entered the UK illegally on to flights to Rwanda and, in the future, to other safe countries to have their claims processed there, by changing the law to explicitly prevent the European Court of Human Rights from meddling in our sovereignty on this specific matter. The Bill is about

demonstrating that Parliament is on the side of the British public and restoring our great nation’s territorial integrity. I am steadfast in my belief that we can end the ECHR’s trespass on our parliamentary democracy and guarantee this House’s position as the ultimate lawmaking institution of our great country.

1.56 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): At this time—in this moment when four people have died and 40 have been rescued in the channel—the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) has chosen to introduce this offensive, grubby, dangerous wee Bill. He should be ashamed of himself, and if he had any sense or compassion he would have withdrawn it today.

I will take no lessons from him on immigration. Glasgow Central has the highest immigration caseload in Scotland, and I am proud that that is so. In Glasgow Central, I am proud to say, nearly 25% of its people were born outside the UK, and we benefit hugely from that. Stoke-on-Trent North has only 7%, as a matter of fact.

The Tories would have us ignore the European convention on human rights and the 1951 refugee convention. They would have us ignore the very humanity and compassion that human beings feel when recognising the plight of others—[*Interruption.*] I am being heckled with ridiculous comments from the Government Benches. The Tories have form in breaking international law in limited and specific ways, and they want to do so again with this Bill.

I can only assume that the hon. Gentleman has never met anyone who has fled war and conflict. He does not understand the desperation that drives those journeys. His Bill dehumanises others, fellow human beings, and the only way he can do that is by not having the compassion to listen or the imagination to feel what it must be like to stand in their shoes. I see that week in, week out at my surgeries.

This is not what Scotland wants to see. From the Glasgow girls, including my friend Councillor Roza Salih, to the Glasgow grannies, Jean Donnachie and Noreen Real, who stood up against dawn raids in Glasgow in the mid-2000s, to my constituents in Kenmure Street standing up for their neighbours and preventing their removal, we on these Benches understand the plight of our fellow human beings, and we know that we should treat them with the dignity that we would expect if we happened to be in their place.

The hon. Member talks about the Australia model. That model failed. Manus Island cost more than £1 billion a year to run, and it closed in 2017. The model failed and was hugely expensive. Talking tough and acting tough is no deterrent. They all said that the hostile environment would do it: it demonstrably failed. Then they said the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 would deter people, but the small boat crossings are still happening, as we have seen so tragically today. Apparently we need more, harder, tougher legislation. That will also fail: I can tell them that now. It will fail because the people making the journeys are desperate. They are desperate to get here for safety and for family ties, because what has happened to them has been so horrific that they will run and run, and keep running until they get to a place of sanctuary and safety.

[Alison Thewliss]

The hon. Member talked about men. [Interruption.] The men on the Government Benches shouting should listen to this. Men are also vulnerable; men who are forcibly recruited and asked to fight, and men who are forced to rape their family and their neighbours, are vulnerable. They know that they do not want to do that. They are men who we have an obligation and a duty to in this country—men made vulnerable because they supported US and UK activity in Afghanistan. As the Afghan interpreters have told me, “We are here because you were there.”

In his statements on this matter, the Prime Minister refused to confirm his commitment to the European convention on human rights or the refugee convention. The Home Secretary is chuckling away, and she ducked this issue today as well. These are the international rules and norms that protect our right to ensure human rights and the safety of people. They have been hard-won. Their existence should be a source of pride to us all, not an inconvenience to be gotten around by the Tories to suit the headlines in the *Daily Mail*.

The SNP stands firmly against this diminution of rights and diminishing of humanity and this treating of the most vulnerable human beings as if they were some kind of mere cargo to be shipped off. An independent Scotland will take our place in the world, live up to our international responsibilities and ensure that those who do us the honour of coming to Scotland are welcome, supported, made safe and allowed to rebuild their lives. No one is illegal; this Bill just might be. Please object to it.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 69, Noes 188.

Division No. 131]

[2.1 pm

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel	Hayes, rh Sir John
Anderson, Lee	Henderson, Gordon
Ansell, Caroline	Henry, Darren
Atherton, Sarah	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Benton, Scott	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Blackman, Bob	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Brereton, Jack	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Bridgen, Andrew	Kruger, Danny
Carter, Andy	Latham, Mrs Pauline
Cash, Sir William	Lewis, rh Brandon
Cates, Miriam	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Lord, Mr Jonathan
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Loughton, Tim
Crosbie, Virginia	McCartney, Karl
Crouch, Tracey	McVey, rh Esther
Davies, Philip	Metcalfe, Stephen
Drax, Richard	Milling, rh Amanda
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Mills, Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David	Mumby-Croft, Holly
Fabricant, Michael	Offord, Dr Matthew
Fletcher, Katherine	Patel, rh Priti
Fletcher, Mark	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Fletcher, Nick	Randall, Tom
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Redwood, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Roberts, Rob
Green, Chris	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Grundy, James	Russell, Dean
Gullis, Jonathan	Sambrook, Gary
Hart, Sally-Ann	Seely, Bob

Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin

Vickers, Martin
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wilson, rh Sammy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Jenkinson and
Craig Mackinlay

NOES

Ali, Rushanara	Edwards, Jonathan
Ali, Tahir	Efford, Clive
Amesbury, Mike	Elliott, Julie
Anderson, Fleur	Elmore, Chris
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Eshalomi, Florence
Bardell, Hannah	Esterson, Bill
Barker, Paula	Evans, Chris
Beckett, rh Margaret	Farron, Tim
Begum, Apsana	Ferrier, Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary	Fletcher, Colleen
Betts, Mr Clive	Gardiner, Barry
Blackford, rh Ian	Gibson, Patricia
Blackman, Kirsty	Gill, Preet Kaur
Bonnar, Steven	Glendon, Mary
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Grady, Patrick
Brennan, Kevin	Green, Sarah
Brock, Deidre	Greenwood, Lilian
Brown, Alan	Greenwood, Margaret
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Griffith, Dame Nia
Bryant, Chris	Hamilton, Fabian
Buck, Ms Karen	Harris, Carolyn
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Hayes, Helen
Burgon, Richard	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Butler, Dawn	Hendry, Drew
Byrne, Ian	Hillier, Dame Meg
Byrne, rh Liam	Hoare, Simon
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Martin Docherty-Hughes</i>)	Hobhouse, Wera
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Hollern, Kate
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hopkins, Rachel
Carden, Dan	Hosie, rh Stewart
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hussain, Imran
Chamberlain, Wendy	Jarvis, Dan
Chapman, Douglas	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Charalambous, Bambos	Jones, Darren
Cherry, Joanna	Jones, Gerald
Clark, Feryal	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Cooper, rh Yvette	Jones, Ruth
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Jones, Sarah
Cowan, Ronnie	Kane, Mike
Coyle, Neil	Kinnock, Stephen
Creasy, Stella	Kyle, Peter
Cruddas, Jon	Lake, Ben
Cryer, John	Lammy, rh Mr David
Daby, Janet	Lavery, Ian
Davey, rh Ed	Law, Chris
David, Wayne	Leadbeater, Kim
Davies, Geraint	Lewis, Clive
Davis, rh Mr David	Lightwood, Simon
De Cordova, Marsha	Linden, David
Debonnaire, Thangam	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Lucas, Caroline
Dixon, Samantha	MacAskill, Kenny
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Madders, Justin
Dodds, Anneliese	Mahmood, Shabana
Doogan, Dave	Malhotra, Seema
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Martin Docherty-Hughes</i>)	Maskell, Rachael
Duffield, Rosie	Mc Nally, John
Eagle, Dame Angela	McCabe, Steve
Eagle, Maria	McCarthy, Kerry
	McDonald, Andy
	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
	McDonald, Stuart C.

McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
 cast by Martin Docherty-
 Hughes*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pollard, Luke
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim

Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammod
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
**Marion Fellows and
 Peter Grant**

Question accordingly negatived.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to the general debate on Ukraine, but I understand that it will not be moved.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Not moved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The general debate on Ukraine is not moved. Therefore, in anticipation of the imminent arrival—[*Interruption.*] It is really rude to keep on talking when things are being said from the Chair. In anticipation of the imminent arrival here in the Palace of Westminster of His Majesty the King, the House is now suspended until 4 pm or as soon as possible thereafter. The Division bells will ring a few minutes before the resumption of the sitting.

2.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

4 pm

On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Architects Act 1997 (Amendment) Regulations 2022. The Ayes were 303 and the Noes were 42, so the Ayes have it.

[*The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.*]

Opposition Day

[10TH ALLOTTED DAY, FIRST PART]

Scotland's Future

4 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House believes it should be for the Scottish people to determine the future constitutional status of Scotland; and accordingly makes provision as set out in this Order:

(1) On Tuesday 10 January 2023:

- Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that Order) shall not apply;
- any proceedings governed by this Order may be proceeded with until any hour, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted;
- the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private);
- at 3.00 pm, the Speaker shall interrupt any business prior to the business governed by this Order and call the Leader of the Scottish National Party Westminster Group or another Member on his behalf to present a Bill concerning a modification of Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 of which notice of presentation has been given and immediately thereafter (notwithstanding the practice of the House) call a Member to move the motion that the Bill be now read a second time as if it were an order of the House;
- in respect of that Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time;
- any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this Order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (18) of this Order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Tuesday 10 January 2023

(3) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Tuesday 10 January 2023 in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00 pm.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 7.00 pm.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on Tuesday 10 January 2023

(4) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme Order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(5) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would

fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

- (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
- (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
- (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
- (d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a designated Member;
- (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph

(15) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

(8) If on any future sitting day any message on the Bill (other than a message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords, this House shall not adjourn until that message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.

(9) On any day on which such a message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that message—

notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;

proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;

(c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.

(10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:

(a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;

(b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—

“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme Orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

(12) (a) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme Orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

The composition of the committee shall (notwithstanding the practice of the House) be three members from the government party, three members from the largest opposition party and one member from the second largest opposition party.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies.

(14) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(15) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this Order apply.

(18) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.

(19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

(a) the Leader of the Scottish National Party in this House; and

(b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Leader of the Scottish National Party in this House.

(20) This Order shall be a Standing Order of the House.

I start by referring to the Labour party report—it is a shame there are not more Labour Members here—published nine days ago on reforming the constitution. It is a document more remarkable in what it does not say than in what it does say, but it does do us one great service: it makes a compelling argument that constitutional matters should not be debated in the abstract and that there is a great connection between how we are governed and what happens as a result of that governance and the public policy that ensues. I am grateful to Labour for that, because I hope it means we can avoid jibes along the lines of, “Why is this the SNP’s priority, rather than talking about the cost of living crisis?”

This debate and this motion are absolutely about the real issues that face families in this country right here, right now. Tomorrow, throughout England and Wales, the nurses who saw us through the pandemic will be on strike for a living wage. But not in Scotland. Scottish Ministers have negotiated a settlement with the trade unions that allows the wages of those on the lowest pay to rise by 11%. There will be no strikes by nurses in Scotland tomorrow, and I am pleased about that. But let me be clear: we are not satisfied with the situation for our nurses and our health service. We want to do more. We want to do better by our nurses. We want more of them and we want more investment in our health service. We want to build a 21st-century health service based on the wellbeing of our people, rather than on fixing ill health. We want to have the choice over whether to raise revenue and borrow money to make that happen. To do that, we require the powers of a normal independent country.

Or take the absurd situation with energy supply in our country. We have people looking through the windows of homes they cannot afford to heat at wind turbines on the horizon providing abundant, cheap renewable energy that they cannot afford to buy because of the ridiculous system of energy ownership and regulation in this country. We want the power to turn that system upside down and change it forever. But to do that, we need the powers of a normal independent country.

Thirdly, take the debate we had yesterday in this Chamber about migration. We had, to my mind, the sordid and unsettling spectacle of the Conservative Benches rammed to the gunwales, as Members brayed and cheered on their leader’s anti-migrant rhetoric. They make the case that migrants are not welcome in this country. Well, not in my name and not in my country. Migrants are welcome in Scotland, because we need people to come and live in our country. We say that not just because we wish to discharge our international responsibility to provide security for those who flee persecution, but because we know that, if those people come to our country, they will invest in our economy and pay their taxes to sustain our public services. Every study that has ever been done shows that the net effect of migration is positive, and that is why we require the powers of a normal independent country.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about immigration as a whole, but yesterday the Prime Minister was speaking specifically about illegal immigration. There is a massive difference between the two. We do need the doctors and the dentists of tomorrow, and there are pathways for people to come and bring those skills into the country

The key point yesterday was the illegal aspect of immigration, and we on this side of the House do not want to see illegal immigration.

Tommy Sheppard: I know that that is the fig leaf that Conservative Members apply to the argument, but it would have more logic and rationale were it not for the fact that this Government have closed down every legal means of coming to the country. It is the Government who are creating illegal immigration to these shores. But that is something of a digression from the topic that I wish to talk about.

The point I am trying to make—I know the Labour party agrees with it, and I think that, in their hearts, so does nearly everyone else—is that the way we are governed and what we do with that government are two sides of the same coin. This debate about how Scotland is governed is critical to what Scotland’s future is. We desire self-government because it would improve our country and allow it to play a much bigger and more positive role in the world.

It is worth recapping how we reached this point. I know there are people who think, or who believe and assert—we may hear this during the debate—that the SNP never accepted the result of the 2014 referendum and that, from the hour when the vote was announced, we began campaigning for a second independence referendum. I see the nodding heads. It is a popular myth, but it is a lie. Members may want to look at what my colleagues and I said at the time of the 2015 general election, when we were first returned to this Chamber following a landslide victory in Scotland. It is clear from the content of our leaflets, and indeed from the content of our maiden speeches, that we did not come here to press the case for another referendum. We came here accepting a result that bitterly disappointed us, determined to try to protect those who had voted for us as best we could within the constraints that we were given. That was the mission we gave ourselves.

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

Tommy Sheppard: I will take an intervention on that point.

David Duguid: On that point, I—uncharacteristically—completely agree with nearly everything the hon. Gentleman has just said. Those election leaflets in 2015 did indeed say, “This is not about independence; we are not going to fight for independence; we accept the result.” However, in that election, the SNP won 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland. What happened after that? Did the party continue its non-calls for independence, or did things change straightaway?

Tommy Sheppard: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I am about to come to my next point. I have a number of things to say; it might be better for him to listen to them and then reflect on the totality.

When we came here in 2015, it was not in our minds to campaign for a second independence referendum, but something changed. What changed? What changed was not that the people who had lost a referendum cried foul and did not accept the result. The people who won the referendum broke the promises that they had made to win it, and the biggest promise of all that they broke was in relation to Brexit. When this Conservative Government took the United Kingdom out of the

[Tommy Sheppard]

European Union, dragging Scotland along with it despite a popular vote to maintain our European citizenship, that began to turbocharge the arguments for having a re-look at the vote that was taken in 2014.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman keeps turning his back to the Chair. He should face in this direction.

Tommy Sheppard: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. In simple terms, the options that were presented in that 2014 referendum no longer existed. They had changed, and it was felt to be legitimate that we should have another look at Scotland's future.

Now, I know opinion has been divided on this question ever since and there is a raging debate about whether it is legitimate to have a second referendum—I am surprised I have not already had a once-in-a-generation intervention, to be honest—but the truth is that there is only one group of people who can decide whether there should be a second independence referendum and that is the people who live in Scotland. It is not down to Nicola Sturgeon, the Prime Minister, me or anyone else—it is a matter for the people. If the people had given up on the idea, we would not even be having this discussion. But they have not. A majority of people want to look at this question again. You might say, “How can you be sure that that is their opinion? Is this an opinion poll, or what?” No, we had an election in May 2021.

You may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that six weeks before that election we had another SNP Opposition day debate speculating on what this Chamber's response might be to the results of that election. That was a hypothetical discussion because the election had just started. This is our first chance to consider properly in this Chamber the results of that election just 18 months ago. Remember that, while it was taking place in the throes of covid and the pandemic, the central political question at that election was whether there should be a further referendum on Scotland becoming an independent country. I know that that is the case.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will give way in a second and the hon. Gentleman can correct me if I am wrong. I know that that is the case because not only was it front and centre of my manifesto and my leaflets, but the hon. Gentleman's party put it front and centre on its leaflets. Conservative party leaflets, every single one of them, said, “If you vote SNP, you will get a second referendum.” Is that true?

Douglas Ross: Nicola Sturgeon said in that election that a vote for her and the SNP was not a vote for another independence referendum. Was she telling the truth, or was she lying to the people of Scotland?

Tommy Sheppard: It is quite clear that the First Minister and all of us gave a commitment during that campaign, and indeed after it, that the priority of that election would be dealing with the pandemic. But it was also absolutely the case that we said that, once that was

dealt with and circumstances allowed, we would advance the case for a second referendum. That was clear. We can go back and look at exactly what was said, but I am very confident in what I say.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: No, I will not give way. I have already given way once. Let me try to make the point.

Let us consider, because we have not done so yet, the results of the 2021 general election in Scotland, where this was a central campaign point. I am sorry for those who perhaps have not been following it, but we won. Not only did my party win the election, but it won it with more votes than it has ever received in a Holyrood election.

Dr Luke Evans: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out that Scotland may well have managed the covid pandemic and used that as a No. 1 priority. A voter in Scotland could have quite happily voted for the SNP knowing full well there was no way of having a referendum because there was no mechanism to be able to do so. So they could support the SNP wholeheartedly, knowing full well that it was about your positive record on covid, the NHS or education, for example, with independence falling down that list. Is that not the case?

Tommy Sheppard: I appreciate the political skill of improvisation, but sometimes it is just not enough to make it up as you go along. What has just been said is completely at variance with what your party said during the election—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am very keen that we do not get into a conversation down that end of the Chamber with everybody calling each other “you”. It has happened a few times, but I am now going to put my foot down and say it is important to speak through the Chair, as the hon. Gentleman knows very well because he is very experienced.

Tommy Sheppard: As I almost always do, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let us move on. The results were quite clear: the SNP won that election in any normal terms. In fact, it was the best election result we have had in terms of the number of votes we received, and our colleagues in the Scottish Green party, who stood on an almost identical platform in terms of the referendum, did exceedingly well too. Together, the Scottish Green party and the SNP had 72 seats out of 129 in that legislature, and they have formed a governing coalition in order to discharge their mandate.

That is a bigger pro-independence majority than we had in 2011, when Alex Salmond had the first independence referendum. So the question arises, why was a response to that result from David Cameron that was good enough in 2011 not replicated in 2021 by the then Tory Prime Minister? I wonder why that could be. Could it be because back in 2011, they thought there was not a snowball's chance in hell of us ever winning a referendum and that having one would be a good opportunity to humiliate the SNP and those who supported independence, whereas 10 years later, they fear that if there was another referendum, they would most certainly lose it? That is undoubtedly the case.

In any normal circumstances—in any normal democracy—that would have been the end of it. A party would have got elected, it would have formed a secure majority in the Parliament and it would have been allowed to discharge and implement its manifesto. That is how these things normally work, but not so in Scotland. In Scotland, the UK Government went out of their way to try to prevent the implementation of the desire to have a second referendum—so much so that, apart from not even granting the section 30 order that is required under the Scotland Act 1998, they also made it clear that, should the Scottish Parliament pass a Bill in order to have a referendum, the UK Government would take the Scottish Government to the Supreme Court, and we would be caught up in legal wrangles for a very long time. Rather than waste the time and money and then have to have the case examined in the Supreme Court, the Scottish Government rightly took the decision to refer the matter to the Supreme Court and have it adjudicated on first, before tabling the Bill.

I should say, in case there are people who have not been engaged in the debate, that it is not clearcut what the outcome of that judgment would have been. Opinion was divided on whether the Scottish Parliament had the competence not to legislate on matters to do with the Union but to consult people on what they thought the future government of the country should be. That did not always cut across party boundaries; it was not the case that everybody on this side of the debate was confident that they had the powers, and everybody on the other side was confident that they did not. In fact, one of the people who made a very eloquent case that the Scottish Government did have the power to organise a non-binding consultative referendum was no less than Adam Tomkins, a professor of law who until relatively recently was a Conservative Member of the Scottish Parliament. He judged that it would be within competence.

But we know what happened. The Supreme Court, in the end, decided that the Scottish Bill as written was not within the competence of the 1998 Act and it related to a matter that was excluded and reserved as defined in schedule 5 to that Act. I disagree. I would have come to a different outcome and a different judgment, but then I am not a High Court judge. I am disappointed by and do not like the judgment, but I accept it, and I accept that it is the Supreme Court's role to make that adjudication.

It seems to me that the problem is not the judges but the law that they were considering. I say this in all candour to colleagues on the other side of the argument: the Supreme Court judgment presents a problem not just for those who advocate the cause of Scottish independence; it also presents a problem for those who believe in the integrity of a voluntary Union of nations within the United Kingdom.

I know that there are plenty on the Back Benches of both the big parties who know little and perhaps care even less about the historical nature of the constitution of this country we live in, but it is worth recapping that this is not a single central state. The polity that we live in of the United Kingdom is a multinational state based upon serial Acts of Union that have given it quite a unique character. It is something that, until very recently, we had assumed required the consent of the people in the component nations of the United Kingdom to be part of. It seems that following the Supreme Court judgment, we now have a situation where that is not the

case—that it is not possible for one group of people in one nation of the United Kingdom to consider reviewing the relationship with the others without their consent. That means that the idea of it being a voluntary Union of nations is dead in the water, until such time as the law is clarified or fixed. It is in an attempt to clarify and fix the British constitution that we present this Bill to the House today, because if we pass this motion, it will then allow for the leader of my party to do what the leader of the Government ought to have done: bring forward amendments to the 1998 Act to allow the Scottish Parliament the power and competence to do the things that the Supreme Court ruled it could not do, which everyone previously thought it was able to do.

I know that there are people—perhaps in the Conservative party, perhaps in the Labour party—who pretty much regard Scotland as just another British county, much the same as Essex, Cornwall or wherever, and probably quite quaint. Those people do not have any understanding of the fact that Scotland is historically a distinct country—a distinct nation with its own history, tradition, culture, character and aspirations. That is not really part of their mindset, and I suppose that if I was not living there and did not grow up there, I might think the same way. But what those people need to understand is that this notion of Scotland being a partner nation within the United Kingdom is what most of the Unionists in Scotland believe. That is what they think they are part of; that is why they voted no in 2014. If that is removed, and we are now told that Scots live in a political system that they cannot change and cannot leave, we will very shortly see many people saying, “In that case, I do want to consider the prospects of Scottish independence, because this is not the partnership we were promised in 2014 and it is not what I voted for in 2014.”

Much of this is bound up with the notion of the claim of right for Scotland. As colleagues may remember, we had a big debate in 2018—again, on an Opposition day motion put forward by my party—where there was a surprising degree of support from all sides of the House for the claim of right for Scotland. The claim of right, by the way, simply asserts the right of the Scottish people to determine the form of government best suited to their needs. That declaration was formulated in its current form in 1989, and has been referred to ever since. The last time around, the then Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), and the current leader of the Scottish Tories, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross)—I am glad to see that one of them is present—stood up in that debate and said that they endorsed and supported the claim of right for Scotland. Well, we cannot have the claim of right for Scotland and a situation in which we do not live in a voluntary Union and that claim of right can never be exercised.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Obviously, a sizeable minority of the people of Scotland wanted to be independent. That number may or may not have increased—opinion polls go up and down, as we on this side of the House know very well—but in light of what the SNP is proposing through the modification of schedule 5, does the hon. Gentleman think that there should be a limit to the number of times that we can

[Aaron Bell]

have such referendums? I am not trying to make the “once in a generation” point; I am trying to make the point that it is reasonable for the people of any country to have a period away from constitutional matters, focusing on the things that really matter to people—their lives, their education, and their health system.

Tommy Sheppard: That is a good point, and I will address it in just a moment.

On the claim of right, it is remarkable how uncontroversial its assertion has been over the years, from 1989 onwards. It underpinned the 1997 legislation that led to the referendum on devolution; it was asserted by the Calman commission that followed that; obviously, it underpinned the 2014 referendum; and it was asserted by the Smith commission that came about as a consequence of that referendum. We have never had it seriously challenged. In fact, I added it up the other day, and I have been debating these matters about the government of Scotland for 45 years since I was a student at Aberdeen University, campaigning in the first devolution referendum in 1979. In all that time up until now, it has been understood that the claim of right exists, so it is important that we reassert it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Perhaps I can help the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell). Does my hon. Friend agree that democracy is not a one-time event? We cannot put limits on what happens in politics and in democracy. If the Conservatives or the Labour party decided that the mood in the UK was such that they wanted to have another referendum on, say, our EU membership, and they put that in their manifesto and won an election, they would be entitled to do that.

Tommy Sheppard: Indeed so. It has been said that during those 15 hours between 7 am and 10 pm on 18 September 2014, the claim of right was being exercised, because the sovereignty of the people of Scotland was in their hands as they went to the ballot box. The difference between us and our opponents is that we believe that that claim exists in perpetuity and should be exercised any time people want to exercise it, rather than existing for only one day.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman wants Scotland to pull out of the UK but join the European Union. How easy does he think that would be, given the EU's stubborn attitude towards the Catalan claims and its support of Spain resisting even a referendum?

Tommy Sheppard: The difference, of course, between the EU and the United Kingdom is that Scotland can leave one but not the other. I can imagine how the right hon. Gentleman might have felt if he and his Brexit colleagues, who wished for Britain to leave the EU, had been told, “Well, you simply can't do that. You have no right to do that,” because that is the situation that is being presented to Scotland with regard to the UK.

In my view, which I think is accepted, Scottish independence requires two things. First, it requires the majority consent of the people who live in Scotland, and they need to express a wish for that to happen. Secondly, it concerns a negotiated settlement with this

place and it will eventually require an Act of this Parliament. Those two things were fused together in the 2012 Edinburgh agreement, but because of the UK Government's reticence, we will have to decouple them and take them separately.

Our ambition now is to find some means to allow people in Scotland to express their view. It does not sit well for the UK Government to take a stance of actively trying to frustrate and deny that happening. This motion, if they were to vote for it today, fixes the problem, because it gives the Scottish Parliament the power to organise the first of those things—to determine the view of the people. We are asking for the Scottish Parliament to have the power not to legislate on the Union or on becoming an independent country, but merely to consult the people and to articulate on behalf of those who elected the Holyrood chamber. That is the opportunity that is offered by the motion's proposed Bill, and I hope that hon. Members will take it.

The more that we tell people that they cannot have something, the more they want it. We have seen that in recent opinion polls with the surge in support for independence. Most significantly, in last week's opinion poll, we saw a clear majority of people saying that there should be another referendum on this question before the end of the Scottish Parliament's term in 2026—that is the first time that there has been a clear majority on the timing of the referendum.

All that is happening as a result of the UK's obstinance, insistence and denial of the democratic mandate in Scotland is that the case for independence is being fuelled. If it comes to a situation where there is a conflict between the British constitution and the claim of right of the Scottish people, it is our responsibility, which we will not shirk, to make sure that the latter triumphs over the former.

4.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for his opening remarks.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) on his election as Scottish National party group leader—for an MP relatively new to Westminster, it has been quite a coup. Let me start on a point of consensus. We seem to have one thing in common: neither of us seems to be very close to Nicola Sturgeon and we both seem to want the First Minister to do things slightly differently. At that point, however, we start to disagree. While I want the First Minister to focus on the problems in Scotland's NHS, the hon. Gentleman wants her to focus on the problems in her de facto referendum plan.

I welcome one thing in particular about the hon. Gentleman's election: the brand new approach that he promised when he was elected. We were promised a new tone, more vibrancy and a fresh way of doing things. Look how fantastically it has turned out already! Instead of pushing the usual SNP agenda of provoking grievance, picking fights with the UK Government and obsessing endlessly about another referendum, the new look SNP group are here today provoking grievance, picking fights with the UK Government and obsessing endlessly about

another referendum. There is a new, younger front man, but it is the same old SNP pushing division and grievance at every turn.

The SNP group is still focused only on division. It is obsessing over the constitution and distracted from the real priorities of the people across Scotland. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South and the SNP group could have chosen to debate Scotland's NHS and its record waiting times or to speak about the £250 million ferries that still do not float—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) was listened to respectfully and in relative silence. I hope that the same courtesy will be extended to the Minister, rather than there being a constant barracking, which is not a good look.

John Lamont: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. This provoked a reaction, so I will repeat it: the SNP group could have chosen to speak today about the £250 million ferries that still do not float or about the lack of support from Nicola Sturgeon for Scotland's oil and gas industry—an issue that really matters to the constituents of Aberdeen South. But no: it is the same old SNP with the same tired message that Scotland has heard every year since 2014. We could have been talking about how to improve schools, hospitals and our economy.

Tommy Sheppard *rose*—

John Lamont: I happily give way.

Tommy Sheppard: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman heard the points I made about the health service, energy and migration, and whether he has any reflections about them.

John Lamont: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to exercise some patience. His debate today is about Scotland's future. Those of us who represent Scottish constituents are concerned about schools, the NHS and the economy when it comes to Scotland's future—not about the debate today, which is about further division in Scotland.

We debated the SNP's plan, such as it is, to separate from the UK, just six weeks ago. We debated the Supreme Court's confirmation that the constitution is a reserved matter, just three weeks ago. Yet here we are again, and this time the SNP are going round in the same circles in the hope that they can do it all again next month, in the early part of 2023—that is if they do not somehow manage to fit in another debate some time before Christmas about leaving the United Kingdom. No wonder they thought that a generation was just a couple of years: the weeks must fly by when you say the same thing over and over again.

John Redwood: The SNP was very critical of the electricity and energy regulation in the UK, and said that it wanted change in it. It did not seem to realise that all our current regulations are those of the European single electricity market, and that it is only because of Brexit that this Government are now consulting on changing those unsatisfactory regulations.

John Lamont: That is a useful reminder that, while the SNP advocate breaking away from the rest of the UK and breaking away from Westminster and London,

it wants even closer ties with Brussels and all the challenges and bureaucracy around that. I always welcome the opportunity that the SNP gives us to talk about the benefits that we all get from being part of the United Kingdom, and all the positives and strengths that come from working together across the whole country. The United Kingdom is the most successful political and economic union that the world has ever seen. In challenging times, we are stronger together. We are better prepared to deal with any crisis, particularly an issue on the scale of the energy crisis, or of the very thing that created the energy crisis—Vladimir Putin's awful war in Ukraine.

In these volatile times, I continue to believe that the last thing people need is greater uncertainty. This is a time for unity behind a common purpose, not division that would split us apart. The challenges facing all of us across Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom demand all of our attention.

On the substance of the motion, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East well knows, the Scottish people do not see another referendum as a priority. There is no consensus across Scotland on another referendum and all the division and distraction that that would bring. We already know the process by which a constitutional question can be asked, because it happened back in 2014. We had a referendum and the people of Scotland decided our future by an overwhelming majority. That happened after there was consensus across political parties in the Scottish Parliament, in civic society and among people across Scotland. That is not where we are today.

If SNP Members want to focus their arguments solely on opinion polls, then what do they have to say about the polls, including recent ones, that show that people do not want another referendum on Nicola Sturgeon's timetable? No matter how many polls there are that show a majority of Scots against another referendum, the SNP still wants us to go through the distraction of an all-consuming constitutional debate. It is all it cares about—another referendum at all costs.

Dr Evans: Does the Minister have any thoughts on this: if the result had been different in 2014, would we be going round this debate again, several years on, to bring us back, if that is what Scotland wanted?

John Lamont: The SNP is simply not very good at respecting referendum results—whether it is the 2014 independence referendum result or the 2016 Brexit vote. The SNP seems to like election results only if they suit its own narrative.

People in Scotland are fed up with these diversions away from the issues that matter to them. People in Scotland want to hear what their Government are doing to improve education and health. People in Scotland and across the UK want both Governments to be fully focused on issues such as the cost of living, working together to reduce NHS waiting times, and the challenges posed by Putin's aggression in Ukraine. That is why we continue to work constructively with the Scottish Government in tackling all the shared challenges that we face. This Government's relentless focus will remain on the issues that matter most to people across this country.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the constant constitutional debate that is taking place in Scotland undermines the

[Alun Cairns]

prospect of attracting investment not only from the UK, which wants certainty, but from foreign direct investors, who want stability in where they place their money?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is right. When we speak to employers, businesses and investors, they tell us that the last thing they want is further constitutional upheaval, which is exactly what the SNP is focused on.

The Scottish Budget, which will be announced tomorrow at Holyrood, gives the SNP a chance to show what it will focus on.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

John Lamont: The hon. Member for Edinburgh East spoke for approximately 30 minutes, and a number of SNP Back Benchers are scheduled to speak, so I will make a little progress. I will take further interventions later.

The Scottish Budget, which will be announced at Holyrood tomorrow, gives the SNP a chance to show Nicola Sturgeon's real focus and priority: another referendum above all else. So far, the SNP Scottish Government have budgeted £20 million for another divisive referendum next year. Even after the Supreme Court ruling, they have refused to put that money where it belongs by supporting Scotland's frontline services. They have refused to halt planning for another referendum, and they believe civil servants should keep spending their time on the flawed case for independence. I know that many Scots will view this as a glaring waste of taxpayers' money. Scotland's public services need every penny of funding to be directed towards the frontline, not towards the SNP's front-of-centre obsession.

Alan Brown: That £20 million for a referendum is £9 million less than the profits Michelle Mone took for not supplying personal protective equipment. Energy, pensions, the civil service and even the Union are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. As a Minister for Scotland, why does he think it is good enough for the Northern Ireland Assembly to have these powers but not good enough for Scotland?

John Lamont: The SNP Scottish Government are continually demanding more powers, yet they do not use the powers already available to the Scottish Parliament, which is one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. Rather than using the powers effectively for the betterment of our constituents and for the betterment of Scots, you continually beg for more powers even though you do not use the powers available to you.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a little reminder: I am not using any powers, apart from the powers I have as Chair. The Minister should direct his speech through the Chair, rather than referring to the SNP using "your powers."

John Lamont: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I think you would use the powers much more effectively than some SNP colleagues.

I challenge the whole SNP group, especially its new leader, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South, to stand up to Nicola Sturgeon by telling her that Scotland's NHS needs that extra £20 million, that Scotland's schools need that extra £20 million and that struggling Scottish families need that extra £20 million. [Interruption.] I see SNP Members shaking their heads because they do not agree with more money going to the NHS, schools and hard-pressed families. If they do not stand up to the First Minister, their words about working to improve Scotland are empty and meaningless. Their flawed priorities are clear for the people of Scotland to see.

Let me turn to the positive case for Scotland's remaining part of the United Kingdom. The SNP's argument for another referendum has become incredibly negative and divisive, and its language is increasingly irresponsible. SNP Members are grandstanding about democracy, just eight years after one of the biggest turnouts at a free and fair democratic vote anywhere in the world. They complain that we do not vote enough, yet this country has had at least 10 major votes in the last decade—from two referendums to general elections, Scottish Parliament elections and local elections—but facts do not matter to the SNP, because all it does now is ramp up its bitter, negative rhetoric to try to divide people further.

Instead of focusing on the SNP's negative message, let us consider the positive case for our United Kingdom: our response to the covid pandemic; our Union dividend paying more than £2,000 a year to every man, woman and child in Scotland; our energy price guarantee saving the typical household more than £900 on its heating bill this winter; and our winter fuel payment providing pensioners with an extra £300. I could go on, as there is a positive case for our United Kingdom, as seen in our record of investing in Scotland's future, delivering support for Scotland's economy and helping Scottish people through whatever challenges we face together.

People in Scotland want their Governments to be focused on the issues that matter to them. People in Scotland want to talk about Scotland's future, but they want that debate to be about the future of our schools, our hospitals and our economy. Instead, today, the SNP's debate is about the one issue that SNP Members truly care about: breaking up the United Kingdom. Tomorrow is the Scottish Budget in Holyrood, and the SNP will once again show that it is focused on dividing people with another referendum that the people of Scotland just do not want.

I hope that SNP Members will reflect that our time here in this Parliament could be spent debating any number of issues that are vital to people across Scotland. If only they would set aside their obsession, we could focus solely on working together to improve the lives of our constituents. I urge the House today to reject the SNP's motion.

4.45 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), as the Minister did, on bringing this motion to the Chamber and on his introductory speech, although I am not sure he spoke about the motion at all in the near half hour he spoke, so we are not any the wiser about what it is trying to achieve or what would happen on 10 January were it to pass.

This is the first opportunity I have had to congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) on becoming the SNP group's new leader. I suspect he will be the family favourite to carve the turkey on Christmas day this year up in Aberdeen, seeing as he is proven to be quite adept at wielding a knife. His experience of knifing large turkeys should stand him in good stead.

The House may recall that the last time Parliament took control of an Order Paper, it was the first time since the 19th century, and it was on an amendment tabled by the former Conservative MP Oliver Letwin, also in the names of my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). That amendment was to conduct indicative votes on the way forward for the Brexit deal, all the way back in 2019. I am surprised that the SNP would want to remind the House of that historic occasion—a process that would have resulted in this House backing a customs union with the EU—when the SNP abstained and that particular proposition fell. The SNP then pushed for an election, and we all know how that ended. Then, almost three years ago to the day, the SNP backed no deal on the Brexit deal on the table.

Today, SNP Members have brought forward a motion that they know they cannot win, instead of a motion that would put pressure on this disastrous Conservative Government, which is where the guns have to aim. That is what Opposition day debates should be used for, like the vote that the Labour party brought about on fracking, which contributed to the demise of a Conservative Government.

Alan Brown: While the hon. Gentleman is trying to rewrite history, will he confirm that the SNP voted to stay in that customs union, rather than some arbitrary notion of a customs union? We not only want to go back into the EU, but appreciate the benefits of the customs union, the single market and the freedom of movement of people, which the Labour party has thrown to the wind.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman needs to realise that when a Division Bell goes in this Chamber, Members have a choice, and the choice the SNP made was not to back the customs union in a vote that was subsequently lost by a handful of votes. When the Division Bell rang on, I think, 19 December 2019 on the very thin and poor trade and co-operation agreement, the SNP made the decision to back no deal, which would have been even more disastrous than the deal we got from the Government at that time. [*Interruption.*] They chunter from a sedentary position, but *Hansard* and the voting record of this House are clear.

I was saying that Opposition day debates should be like the one we brought about on fracking that brought down the former Prime Minister's Government. The truth is that SNP Members could seek to take control of the Order Paper to take extra powers, if they wished—the extra powers they have talked about today, perhaps on national insurance, corporation tax or immigration, which the hon. Member for Edinburgh East mentioned in particular. It is not like they even use the powers they have at their disposal already. Instead they are doing it to get another referendum. Clearly, they have changed the piper, but not the tune. I hope Santa brings them a new song sheet, but that might be a tall order, given that

many SNP MPs have been very naughty this year in plotting against the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

On the topic of Christmas, what SNP Members are failing to grasp when they are busy banging the drum for another independence referendum is that one in five working-age Scots are in poverty, one in four Scottish children are in poverty and 14% of Scottish pensioners will be spending Christmas in poverty. That is a shameful record for the UK and Scottish Governments when previous Labour Governments lifted millions out of poverty.

I would say what a pleasure it is to be involved in this debate, but that would not be entirely true. Yet again, when the SNP has precious time to use on any issue they wish to debate, they choose this one. It is like the famous film "Groundhog Day", in which Bill Murray relives the same day over and over again, but in this place we relive the same debate over and over again. Every single time, the SNP chooses the same debate topic. We are in the midst of the worst cost of living crisis in generations, we have the worst Conservative Government in history, and we have the most appalling economic conditions, created in Downing Street by a party that has failed on economic stability, growth and living standards. We have poverty rising, fuel poverty rocketing, an inflation crisis, a war in Europe and the most incompetent, out-of-touch and out-of-time UK Government, but the SNP wants to let them off the hook by reverting to type. Nobody likes that more than the Conservative Government.

We could have debated the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report published this afternoon that shows that 7.2 million people are going without the basics. This is Britain in 2022. Some 4.2 million are in arrears with their bills, 2.4 million people are borrowing to pay bills, and there are 5.7 million who are hungry, cutting or skipping meals. The cost of living crisis that is engulfing the country is the biggest worry by far for Scottish families, but the hon. Member for Aberdeen South and his party trundle on in blind pursuit of something that the Supreme Court confirmed was, as we all expected, just a matter of law. Dealing with the crisis requires both of Scotland's Governments to move quickly and decisively and, as 70% of the Scottish people consistently say, to work together.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I agree with the hon. Gentleman's excoriating denunciation of the failings of the Conservative party; will he explain why it is that in my Fife, his Edinburgh and all over Scotland his party is doing dirty deals to keep the Tories in power after the people have tried to vote them out?

Ian Murray: It is extraordinary that that is the hon. Gentleman's intervention. There is no Scottish council where Labour is in coalition with the Conservatives, and SNP Members know that. What upsets them more than anything else is the fact that they threw their toys out of the pram in Edinburgh because they could not get their own leader elected as leader of the council. I am grateful to the Labour group for stepping up to run Edinburgh Council when nobody else was able to command the authority of the council in order to do so.

Opposition parties of all—[*Interruption.*] SNP Members are chuntering and bantering from a sedentary position; wait till they find out who propped up the minority

[Ian Murray]

SNP Administration at Holyrood from 2007 to 2011. They might want to look that up. Opposition parties of all colours are rightly demanding more from this Tory Government, but the party sat to my left seems quite content to ignore the significant powers it has in Scotland that could be used to help people now. The grim reality is that I have had, as I am sure we all have, constituents attend my surgeries in tears, asking what more help they can get to ensure that their children do not go to school hungry and how they can pay their bills, heat their homes and put food on the table.

It is easy for the SNP to pass the buck, given the circumstances, but have SNP Members forgotten that, thanks to the devolution that the hon. Member for Edinburgh East mentioned, the Scottish Government have the power to introduce new support? They could top up the Scottish welfare fund, write off school meal arrears, cut the cost of commuting, offer a water rebate paid through the cash reserves of the water companies, and spend the £2 billion underspend they had last year on helping Scots now. Those are just some of the things they could do. We would have been delighted to have debated those particular choices in the Chamber today, because politics is always about choices.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Member for presenting an array of policy options that could have been pursued in Scotland, but those options also exist in Wales, largely, so why have the Labour Administration in Wales not taken them up?

Ian Murray: I was delighted to take an intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, because I expected him to stand up and apologise for what his Government have done in giving the SNP all the grievance it requires to rip this country apart. The bigger threat to the Union is not the nationalists; it is the wretched Conservative Government.

As I was saying, the Scottish Government have the power to mitigate some of the cost of living crisis, but, importantly, they also have the choice. What we are seeing is not just a dereliction of duty; they are simply blaming everyone else. We should just remember that when he was the party's business spokesperson, the new SNP leader here, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South, whipped his SNP MPs so that they did not support the vote to introduce a windfall tax on the oil and gas sector to help to freeze energy prices—a position that he was forced to reverse when he realised how ridiculous it was that he was standing up for the excess profits of the oil and gas sector over the interests of Scottish bill payers.

What is clear is that the SNP does not want to have a debate on any of the hot topics of the day—priorities being discussed around every single dinner table in homes across Scotland—because its own record in government for the last 15 years is utterly deplorable.

Too many Scots are having to make the choice between heating and eating. In fact, heartbreakingly, too many Scots do not have that choice at all because they can do neither. That is the sad indictment of both the UK and the Scottish Governments, but, rather than debate those issues, we have another SNP stunt. It is a stunt, because SNP Members know that it will fail, but it will create the grievance that they thrive off.

While SNP Members play these games, the big issues do not get discussed. This morning, I was on the *Daily Record* news website and the first thing that popped up was a headline saying, "Scots patient spent 15 hours in ambulance outside hospital in freezing temperatures." The news article immediately below that was "SNP announces plans for new bill on Scottish independence vote." That in a nutshell shows why SNP Members choose to talk about nothing but independence.

This week, the Homeless Project Scotland group has been tweeting pictures of homeless and vulnerable people queuing up in freezing conditions in Glasgow, waiting for hot food. Last night, there were even children in the queue, grasping a bread roll in anticipation of being fed. I wonder what those shivering, vulnerable people would say to SNP MPs if they went down that queue and told them what they had chosen to debate today in the Chamber. They have the power to help those people and the platform to be their voice, but they walk by on the other side.

Perhaps SNP Members are worried that the debate will become about how the SNP's Westminster group organised a coup against the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber and then did not back the First Minister's pick to replace him. Perhaps they are so riven with division that all they can talk about is the one issue that binds them together. Whichever it may be, we can conclude that, true to form, they are putting their party before the needs of ordinary Scots.

Today, we could have debated education and the First Minister's "defining mission" to close the educational attainment gap in Scotland, but we cannot do that because her defining mission has been abandoned. Just this week, damning figures were published showing that the attainment gap remained wider than it was pre-pandemic for both primary literacy and numeracy and that the gap in primary numeracy attainment was wider than at any point since the First Minister made her commitment. In March 2021, the SNP promised to

"provide every child in Scotland with a device to get online, including a free internet connection and the support to use it",

but in December last year it emerged that fewer than one in 10 had been supplied.

The first full teaching strike in Scotland since Margaret Thatcher's reign is due to the SNP's incompetence and dereliction of duty on the education sector. To have an eleventh hour pay offer rejected so comprehensively, provoking real anger among teachers in the process, is an indictment of the Scottish Government's woeful planning and negotiations on pay. I congratulate them on getting a deal with the nurses—they should be congratulated because they have got people around the table when the UK Government refuse even to talk—but only a few weeks ago we were told that they could not do that and that they had no money to do so, blaming everyone else. It appears that they did have the money and, if only they had had the will, they could have had that concluded. I hope that they have that will with other public sector workers.

We could have been debating health. Well, SNP Members cannot do that, either, because they preside over one in seven Scots now being on a waiting list, the worst A&E waiting times in history, thousands of patients languishing for more than 12 hours on trolleys or ambulances—[*Interruption.*]. I can hear sighs; there will be more

sighs from the people on trolleys for 12 hours. Only 45% of people are seen within the four-hour target at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in my constituency. One in 11 beds are taken by people who should not be in hospital, despite the First Minister promising to abolish delayed discharge, and the SNP has not met its own 62-day target for cancer referrals since it introduced the policy more than a decade ago. There is also a GP and dentistry crisis of the SNP's own making, so it is little wonder that SNP Members do not want to debate the national health service.

We could have debated the biggest issue for our planet: climate change. SNP Members will not do that, either, as the Climate Change Committee said this week:

“The Scottish Government lacks a clear delivery plan and has not offered a coherent explanation for how its policies will achieve Scotland's...emissions reduction targets”.

So we will not debate climate change.

Perhaps SNP Members would like to debate energy and the First Minister's pledge to set up a Scottish national energy company, but they will not, because that plan has been dropped. The statistics that they have been bandying around on renewables have been trashed by the UK Statistics Authority, and Scottish civil servants have been telling them for a long time to stop using them. The only way to get a national energy company is through a UK Labour Government delivering on GB Energy, which would reduce bills, provide energy security, create jobs, contribute to our climate goals and be owned by the people, for the people. So, nothing on energy.

What about a debate on Scottish Government spending, after the Auditor General called on the SNP Government to drop the spin and improve their transparency, with better controls to ensure that financial decisions deliver value for money for Scottish taxpayers, or perhaps a debate on the £2 billion underspend from last year? I wonder why SNP Members will not debate the building of ferries and transport services to Scotland's island communities.

Maybe we could have debated the substance of SNP propositions for independence. We have had hours and hours of debate in this House, but still no answers on its ludicrous and contradictory currency position, and still nothing on pensions. We have heard a bit about a confirmed hard border between Scotland and the rest of the UK, but zero on how a country can be an EU member without abiding by EU rules, and absolutely nothing on how to deal with the deficit or the debt required to set up a new currency. SNP Members have not even mentioned in this House their economic paper for independence, which the First Minister launched a few weeks ago, but everyone else rubbished. They do not want to talk about it, because arguing about process is all they have left.

SNP Members could even have debated how the Tories have crashed the economy, the country's historically low growth over the last 12 years, the fact that this Prime Minister has created the highest tax burden on working people in 80 years, or how there is now a Tory premium on everyone's mortgages, rents, energy bills and food shop, as well as their dreadful response to the immigrant boat tragedies and how the Tories have presided over the largest fall in living standards on record since the 1950s, but nothing.

The fact is that the SNP is treating the Scottish public like fools, with a failing Scottish Government hiding behind the veil of an empty and failing independence policy—[*Interruption.*] I hear from a sedentary position, “But they keep voting for us”. That is the excuse I got from the Scottish Health Secretary when I said that we needed £6 million for new GP practices in Edinburgh South. He said, “There isn't a problem, and by the way, if there was a problem, people would stop voting for us.” That is SNP Ministers' attitude to people raising legitimate concerns about the way they run their Government.

SNP Members want to take control of the Order Paper not to take more of the powers they always call for or even to condemn this Government, but to get another referendum, which few Scots want. The truth is that this is just a game to them. They could, if they were successful today, just take control of the Order Paper and dissolve the Union, but, no, they want to create grievances when people just want to be able to turn their heating on, feed their families, get a GP appointment or an operation, or go to A&E and not wait 24 hours on a trolley. They have also forgotten that they would still have to get their legislation passed by this House, even if they could get control of the Order Paper.

Nobody wants another referendum any time soon, let alone the First Minister herself. Less than 30% agree with a referendum on the First Minister's timetable, and only a third think there should be one in the next five years. It barely polls as a priority for Scots. SNP Members are always very good at talking about polls when they go in their favour, but the one they were championing yesterday shows that less than 20% of Scots see independence as a priority.

This charade today says to the Scottish people that their concerns and issues are of no relevance to the SNP Members who are supposed to be here to represent them. They are not standing up for Scotland, but are disregarding Scotland's interests. It says to Scottish voters that, at the next election, they have a choice—to continue with these games from MPs sitting on the Opposition Benches, or have Scottish Labour MPs on the Government side of the House, having kicked the Tories out of power. It is a real chance to transform the UK and a real chance to transform Scotland. Scotland deserves much better. Scotland deserves change, and that change is coming with a Labour Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I would prefer not to put on a time limit—let us see how we go—but that requires everybody to speak for eight minutes, and I am sure Douglas Ross will lead the way in showing us how to do that.

5.3 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Absolutely, Madam Deputy Speaker. I always follow what the match official tells us to do.

It is a pleasure to be in this Chamber to be a representative of Scottish constituents and to debate issues of importance to the people of Scotland. It is just sad that that is not what we are doing today.

Alan Brown: I am intervening just to ask why the hon. Member has turned up. He does not come here that often, so why is he down here complaining about the debate he is taking part in? [HON. MEMBERS: "Touché!"]

Douglas Ross: Well, it is not really. We have seen despicable behaviour from SNP Members throughout this debate. The fact that they have already been warned by you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for their behaviour today just shows that this is a game. The shadow Scottish Secretary, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), was right: this is all a game for them. They think this is fun. [Laughter.] The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who led this debate, is laughing. I do not find anything funny in the fact that hours of parliamentary debating time here in the UK Parliament are being dedicated to the separatist cause, not to Scotland's cause. The hon. Gentleman said that he spoke about immigration, energy and the NHS. Yes, he did, for 30 seconds. For the remainder of his 30-minute speech, it was all about division, all about separation, all about dividing Scotland all over again. I wonder why he did not want to speak more about health. Was it because this week we heard that cancer waiting times in Scotland are at their worst ever level? [Interruption.] SNP Members are sighing. They barrack us for raising the issues. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the NHS, but he did not want to mention cancer waiting times in Scotland.

Last week, I raised the issue in the Scottish Parliament and the case of someone who waited almost two years from diagnosis to starting treatment for cancer in Scotland. Why would that not be an important issue for us to debate in this Parliament? Today in Moray we have finally had a report from NHS Grampian on—[Interruption.] If SNP Members are going to speak over me when I am speaking about an issue—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) says "Diddums." Say that to the Moray mums who have to travel across the A96 from Elgin to Aberdeen or Inverness in labour in the back of an ambulance. The proposal made today by NHS Grampian says that that could continue for up to nine years. We were first told that it would be a temporary downgrade for a year until the reintroduction of full, consultant-led maternity services in Moray. The hon. Gentleman says "Diddums." I say "Shame on you."

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Perhaps it is because the hon. Gentleman has so many jobs that he has forgotten which Parliament he is in. If he wants to make that argument, he should go to the Scottish Parliament where he is also a Member. This is an Opposition day debate on the transfer of powers under a section 30 order and holding a referendum on Scottish independence. Perhaps he should address that issue, instead of the grievance that he is sharing with us. Why does he not address the issue at stake—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The intervention is a little long.

Douglas Ross: So it is a grievance for a Member of Parliament to raise an issue on behalf of pregnant mums and families in Moray who are struggling. SNP Members say that we cannot mention the NHS here. Well, the SNP spokesperson who introduced the debate mentioned the NHS and, if I remember correctly, the

leader of the SNP raised it with the Prime Minister at PMQs today. They are happy to speak about the NHS when it suits their argument, but they are not happy to speak about record cancer waiting times or Moray mums struggling for almost a decade with substandard maternity services—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) waves that away. I wish I could wave away the concerns of my constituents, but I cannot, and they will be disappointed and frankly insulted by the responses from the SNP today.

Hannah Bardell: Nobody on the SNP Benches seeks to insult the hon. Gentleman's constituents. All of the issues he raises are serious, but the reality is that we have limited powers in Scotland, and we spend our limited budget cleaning up the mess that his Government make and filling the black holes that they have created. If we had independence and the full powers that it would bring, we would be able to do more.

Douglas Ross: Health is fully devolved to the SNP Scottish Government, and they have a record block grant from the UK Government. But the SNP Government are wasting money hand over fist, and that is why we have record cancer waiting times in Scotland. Delayed discharges are at record levels, although the SNP told us it would get rid of delayed discharges eight years ago.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that immigration is not devolved to Scotland, and that in leaving the EU because of his Government's hard Brexit, we are no longer able to recruit people from Europe to the NHS as we did before? That is one of the levers. If he is not happy with how the health service is being run, he could devolve powers over immigration to allow us to do that.

Douglas Ross: I have seen how the SNP fails when it gets extra powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so I do not want to see it have any more, because the people of Scotland suffer. I am mentioning these points about health and all the other issues we could debate in here because they are of importance to people right across Scotland. We heard not a single word from those on the SNP Front Bench about ferries, although I heard about them from the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State. Why would the SNP not want to speak about ferries and its dismal failure to deliver those lifeline services to our island communities? Why would the SNP not want to speak about education in Scotland, which, as others have said, was once Nicola Sturgeon's No. 1 priority but where there is now a dismal performance under the SNP? Why have we not heard from SNP Members about Scotland's drug deaths shame? I lead the Opposition party in the Scottish Parliament and I would love to take control of debating time there to introduce a Bill for a right to recovery to help people who are struggling and losing their lives in record numbers—numbers that have gone up year after year. There is a Bill ready there and if I get the opportunity to have debating time in the Scottish Parliament and push something through, I would use it to do something good: to save lives. What we get here in the UK Parliament from SNP Members is timewasting; they are literally wasting the time where they could be focusing on issues of importance to the people of Scotland. So I am sorry that we have had to debate this today and that the SNP

want to use all its time to stir up the division all over again, but it shows that it is absolutely out of ideas on any positive message for the people of Scotland.

5.11 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): This debate is entitled “Scotland’s Future”, and we are having this debate in this Chamber today about process because the people of Scotland sent a majority of Members to the Scottish Parliament—to our Parliament—who were elected on a mandate of delivering an independence referendum, and we need to ensure that that happens. It has to happen because there is a burning desire and there is anger about the economic circumstances we are facing within this Union. If I were to take the House through every decade right back to the 1850s, we would see that in every decade since then Scotland’s relative population in this Union has declined. We must ask ourselves why that is. It is largely because of economic opportunity. It is about the scandal today, in the middle of this cost of living crisis, that so many of our citizens are in poverty and have to ask themselves whether they can turn on the heating and whether they can send their children to school with full stomachs. Many of us have come down to this place this week with the harsh reality of a cold winter beginning to take root, and we know the despair that our citizens face.

When we consider energy, we think of the lost opportunities of the bounty of North sea oil that have been frittered away and a lack of legacy for future generations, but now we face the bounty of green renewable energy. Just a few weeks ago, my party published a report on green energy and we talked about the potential in Scotland to increase our energy output fivefold between now and 2050; to create as much as four times the green energy that Scotland needs; to take our responsibilities as citizens of the world to deliver net zero in Scotland by 2045; and to deliver the cheap energy that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) talked about. Is it not a disgrace that in energy-rich Scotland, when we have this opportunity of the economy of scale not just to power Scotland, but to generate energy for our friends in the rest of the UK and indeed throughout Europe, people are paying the price of the Westminster control of the energy market. Let us not forget that the pricing regime is based on the wholesale gas price, yet in Scotland, only 14% of our electricity comes from gas. We are being penalised by a market that is not fit for purpose, at a time when Scotland has that abundance of energy. That is the cost of being in the Union today and because of that we need to inspire and lead people in Scotland by saying what an independent Scotland would look like. Just from energy alone, by 2050 we could deliver 385,000 jobs in the energy sector, which vastly outnumbers the jobs we have today in oil and gas, but in doing so we would be creating the opportunities for a green industrial future and using that surplus energy to attract energy-intensive industries.

That is the hope—the vision—that my party and my Government have for an independent Scotland. I want us to have that debate and, yes, to hear those on the other side putting the case for the Union, but let us do it in a respectful manner. We can have that debate and deliver that future in Scotland only when we have the right to have that referendum and when the people in Scotland have the right to have their say.

Let me put this debate in context. In 2015, David Cameron had a manifesto that delivered a Brexit referendum. We did not want Brexit and we still do not want Brexit. The people of Scotland want to be part of the European Union. However, it is right in the context of the United Kingdom that David Cameron was able to enact his referendum. He did not have to go to the European Union to ask permission to put the referendum to the people of the United Kingdom. Of course, after that referendum, which we rejected wholeheartedly in Scotland, all that the UK Government had to do was enact article 50. They had the right to say to the European Union that they had decided that their future lay elsewhere.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is getting straight to the heart of the material cost and opportunity cost of remaining—languishing—in this Union. He talks about how the United Kingdom went straight ahead with its referendum to leave the EU. Has he ever considered, as I have, what would happen if the boot was on the other foot and England wanted to leave this Union? Who would block England leaving the Union the way we are being blocked?

Ian Blackford: Indeed, that is correct.

Let us put this debate in the context of the claim of right, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East. The claim of right was, by the way, accepted by every party in this House in a debate that I secured in 2018. Let us remind ourselves of what was said in court in Edinburgh in the 1950s: that parliamentary sovereignty is a purely English concept that has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional history. It is the people of Scotland who are sovereign. Of course, the claim of right in 1989 stated that it is

“the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs”.

The all-party Smith commission concluded, after the 2014 referendum, that nothing in its report

“prevents Scotland becoming an independent country in the future should the people of Scotland so choose.”

But what is the mechanism? We are told that this is supposed to be a voluntary Union, but we now know, because the Scottish Government have tested the legal case in the Supreme Court, that the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to enact a referendum.

I would prefer it, and my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament would prefer it, if the Government in London accepted the will of the people of Scotland in electing a Parliament with an independence majority. We could then do what we did in 2011 and allow a referendum to take place. However, what we have is a Tory Government, propped up by their Labour friends, denying democracy to the people of Scotland. That is the reality.

It is on that basis that we had to come to the Chamber today to seek to give the power to the Scottish Parliament to enact the manifesto on which the Scottish Government won the election and call a referendum. If it is a voluntary Union, I remind the parties on the Government and Opposition Benches that there was a joint statement on 17 June 2014 by the Scottish leaders of all three main Westminster parties. They signed the pledge that said the following:

“Power lies with the Scottish people and we believe it is for the Scottish people to decide how we are governed.”

[*Ian Blackford*]

Well, I absolutely agree, and it is right if that statement is true, and it is right if the other parties accepted that, for the Scottish Parliament to have a mechanism to enable itself to call a referendum on Scotland's future.

David Duguid: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I am going to wind up now, because I was asked to take no more than eight minutes.

I am standing here today in front of the very seat that Charles Stewart Parnell used to occupy in this House. Let me remind the Government of the words of Charles Stewart Parnell when he spoke in Cork on 21 January 1885:

“No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country—thus far shalt thou go and no further.”

5.20 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is an honour and a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). He has led us with diligence and dedication, and he will continue to be a champion for Scottish independence and an icon in our movement.

We have heard it all today, have we not? “Scotland, get back in your box. You have had your democracy, you have had your referendum—it only happened once.” The lies that were told to the people of Scotland, and the promises that were made during both the referendum in 2014 and the EU referendum, are now coming home to roost. It is precisely because we care so passionately about our education system, about our health system, and about the citizens in Scotland on whom the decisions and the mess that is being made in Westminster are having a such profound impact, that we want independence. It is because Westminster has failed Scotland so abjectly that we so desperately want independence, and more and more people in Scotland want independence as well. Every six days a country in the world celebrates Independence Day. Those countries are celebrating independence from Great Britain, and not one of them has gone back. Independence is normal, and I cannot wait for Scotland to join that list of independent nations.

Here is another list: free prescriptions, no tuition fees, free bus travel for the under-21s and over-60s, free personal care for the elderly, a game-changing Scottish child payment of £100 a month, baby boxes, no hospital parking fees, no bridge tolls, mitigation of the UK bedroom tax, and world-leading climate policies which include an energy transition fund, a green jobs fund and a just transition fund. Then there is redeploying Syrian and other refugees in our NHS and other public services, standing up to this Tory Government against Brexit, which Scotland did not vote for, and introducing some of the most progressive policies for LGBTQ people, including the trans community, while many members of this Government demonise them. I could go on. Those are just a few of the life-changing and life-enhancing policies that the SNP has pursued since coming to power in Scotland—and we do that with limited devolved powers and with one hand tied behind our back.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Lady has listed what she believes are achievements. Are there any areas in which she feels that the Scottish Government have failed?

Hannah Bardell: I think that one of the biggest challenges we face is the fact that we are still governed, by and large, by Westminster, with so much of the power lying here. I am not saying that we are perfect—no Government and no leader is perfect—but we are doing our very best to fill the massive holes in our budgets that are being created by this Westminster Tory Government. Imagine what we could do if we had the full powers of independence. After all, Scotland is the country that invented the modern world.

Today is an opportunity for this Tory Government to reflect on the realities of democracy and, indeed, on that Supreme Court judgment. It is an opportunity for them to listen to people in Scotland, and to respect democracy and facilitate Scotland's right to decide her own future. It is interesting, is it not? If Labour, or the Tories, or indeed other parties, came forward at the next election with a proposal to rejoin the EU and put it in their manifesto, they would be allowed to have a referendum if they wanted, but although the SNP keeps winning elections and keeps being given mandates, the Tory party keeps denying the realities of democracy. It is a sad reality that Labour has joined the Conservative party in that dash to deny democracy.

There is such a poverty of ambition, but Labour has at least had the good grace to roll out some of its greatest hits and ancient acts—enter one Gordon Brown. That is up to and including, “Let's reform the House of Lords—again—except we won't, because we promised it before and it's never happened so we'll just keep sending more people there.” It has also promised tighter, stricter rules for this broken system—give me a break. My favourite top 10 hit from the Labour party is more devolution—great; more scraps from broken Britain's table—to which I say, “No, thank you.” In Scotland, we like our democracy to be done in the same way that we like our decisions to be made: with maximum transparency and close to the lives of the people whom it affects.

I grew up under a Thatcher Government who destroyed Scotland's economy and left a nation riven with inequality and hopelessness. I am from a working-class family with a single mother who was demonised by the famous first female Prime Minister. Representation, we find with the Tories, does not equal greater equality. In my teens, I grew up with new hope under new Labour, only to see disappointing and dismal leadership on issues such as the illegal invasion of Iraq and the cash for honours scandal. The reality is that it does not really matter who is in power in this place or who is at that Dispatch Box—the system is broken.

We have heard the Lords reform song from Labour for a long time. If anyone reads the memoirs of one of my predecessors, the late great Robin Cook, they will understand how appallingly he was treated by his own party for his attempts to reform the Lords, so I am sorry, but I do not buy it, and neither do folk in Scotland. Increasingly, poll after poll puts support for independence at over 50%. We in Scotland are frankly sick of funding the UK Government's mismanagement and failed endeavours in government, for which a majority of people in Scotland have not voted for most of my lifetime. In the words of Robert Burns,

“We're bought and sold for English gold—

Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!”

Speaking of rogues, let us talk about what the UK Tory Government have done in office. They have lied to people about Brexit and continued to rip up the workers' and human rights that we had under our membership of the EU. They have ridden roughshod over the Good Friday agreement, threatened peace in Northern Ireland and abandoned its people for their narrow anti-EU ideology.

The Tory Government have destroyed the UK's global reputation, cut benefits to the poorest and brought forward policies such as the abhorrent rape clause and two-child cap, which makes the lives of many vulnerable women even more precarious. They have crashed the economy with their ill-judged mini-Budget and failed austerity; they have cut international aid and turned their back on those most in need, just as the world faces a global climate catastrophe and many horrors of war and famine; and they have lined the pockets of their cronies and pals with the PPE VIP lane.

The Tory Government have done absolutely nothing to reform the Lords and get rid of the other unelected Chamber, which still has some of Putin's allies in it, whom they put there. When they stand there and talk about the war in Ukraine—and yes, the money that they have given for defence spending and support—they forget the river of dirty Russian money that has flowed through the UK financial system for decades while they have sat on their hands and done nothing. There has been a revolving door of Prime Ministers who were too incompetent to deal with the basics of leadership and government, and who were soaked in scandal and impropriety, to put it mildly. This place does not serve anyone other than itself.

A significant number of the UK's biggest exports are indigenous to Scotland, such as oil and gas, whisky and salmon to name but a few. We produce six times the amount of gas that we consume and 80% of our electricity comes from low carbon sources, but we are trapped in an energy market and a UK system that has profit squeezed from it at every turn and creamed off for the wealthiest at the top. While our constituents starve and freeze in one of the richest parts of the world, the few are raking it in; the rich get richer and the poor die under this system and this Tory Government. Scotland has had enough.

According to the National Grid, as Scotland's energy market booms, our energy flows from north to south to keep the lights on in England, so it is clear why the British state does not want Scotland to become independent. I am sure that, when we get independence, we will be happy to negotiate in good faith and supply its energy at a reasonable cost, because I want better not just for people in Scotland, but for people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. I genuinely believe that the broken system of Westminster Government is serving every nation in this family of nations very poorly. The powers that be are scared that Scottish independence will lead to a recalibration of relations between the nations of the UK and how the UK is governed, and that is no bad thing.

The culture of this place is broken. The standards and the rules are frequently broken. Britain is broken and it needs a fresh start. We look forward to a brighter, greener, healthier future as an independent nation in the European Union, standing proudly on the world stage shoulder to shoulder with other nations to do our bit.

To our friends and family in the European community I say, as my colleague and friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) once did, "Europe, please keep a light on for us." In the meantime, to our friends here in the UK, we will keep the lights on for you.

5.30 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I take this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn)—he is not in his place, but I am sure he will be speaking later—and to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) sincerely for his friendship and co-operation since I became leader of the Plaid Cymru group in Westminster. It has been an honour to work with him. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important matter today and fully support the motion in the name of the SNP, as well as the principle that Scotland should be given the right to decide when an independence referendum should be called.

Westminster's refusal to guarantee the right to self-determination for all the devolved nations demonstrates the fundamentally undemocratic and therefore broken nature of this Union. It exposes the well-worn narrative that this is a voluntary association of four nations that somehow choose to pool sovereignty as the flagrant falsehood it truly is. There is no doubt that this is a UK Government who are politically and openly hostile to devolution. They have consistently disregarded the Sewel convention, rendering that supposed constitutional protection almost meaningless. They have shut out the devolved Governments from key economic decision making on post-Brexit funding and are more than happy to ignore the Welsh Government's warnings that their trade deals will devastate key Welsh industries in their pursuit of glossy headlines.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way, but I cannot let her get away with such inconsistencies. She says the UK Government are hostile to devolution, but the most powerful devolved Administration in the world is the Scottish Parliament. As the Secretary of State for Wales who took forward the last Wales Act—the Wales Act 2017—I know that Wales is much more powerful now than under the Labour Government, when it even had to ask Westminster for powers to change the law on an individual basis. Now a Parliament has been created. There is significant inconsistency in what the right hon. Lady is saying.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for turning towards the Labour party, but what is striking in the responses from both major Westminster parties is the sheer lack of a convincing, gripping, emotionally valid and economically rational argument in favour of the Union. Time and again, we hear these remarks. In all honesty, this is politicised in the sense that we are talking about health in relation to England and health in relation to Scotland. If there were proper respect for devolution, that would not be a political football, because the devolved nations would have the proper means to answer those problems with powers given to us 20-odd years ago. But we do not. It is fair to throw at us the argument that we should be looking after the day-to-day bread and butter matters, but the real point is that we do not have the powers to sort out the problems left to us under the influence of this Government from this place.

Alun Cairns: The facts are clear. In 2010, Wales had a legislative competence model for devolution left by the Labour party, with which the right hon. Lady's party is now working closely in Government in Cardiff Bay. We now have a Parliament in Wales, which the Conservative Administration delivered in spite of the opposition that came from her party.

Liz Saville Roberts: It is very interesting that there are Conservatives in England questioning the devolution model proposed by Gordon Brown. None the less, those of us who are politicians must try to do the best we can for our people. That is what I believe we are doing in Wales. Unfortunately, looking at the powers for Wales put forward by the Labour party in Gordon Brown's proposals, we do not really see the biggest transfer of power away from Westminster that he proposes referring to the people of Wales. In recommitting to the principle of parliamentary supremacy, his report reminds us that for Labour, the Senedd will always be subservient to Westminster.

Not only would the proposals put forward by Brown do nothing to change the fundamental inequalities of the UK, but he has back-tracked on previous Labour promises to devolve policing to Wales. In addition, and despite the Labour-run Welsh Government's Thomas commission recommending that justice should be wholly devolved, Brown's timid proposals offer only piecemeal powers over youth justice and probation. The level of disdain that the central Labour party holds towards the only Government that it currently runs beggars belief.

Indeed, last week, the deputy leader of Labour in Wales, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), directly undermined her leader in Wales, the First Minister Mark Drakeford, on the devolution of policing. Although full devolution of policing was included in Welsh Labour's winning 2021 manifesto, its deputy leader rejected the idea outright, despite evidence of poor outcomes in a structurally broken system. And her reason: "I just wouldn't". The anti-devolutionists are still in control of the Labour party but their arguments are being crushed under the weight of evidence.

The Brown report also fails to support the Welsh Government's request to be empowered with stronger economic levers. The Institute of Welsh Affairs recently warned that a combination of Wales's limited taxation powers, its inability to influence its block grant from Westminster and its exceptionally limited borrowing powers is having a chilling effect on Welsh policy, and that the England-led nature of the fiscal framework is restricting Wales's ability to deliver transformational projects that would really make a difference to people's lives in Wales.

To paraphrase a former Conservative Mayor and the current chair of the eastern powerhouse writing in *City AM* this week, devolution is a "sham" while the UK Government continue to hold the purse strings—from the mouths of babes. The Labour party in Westminster seems quite content to leave the situation as it is.

Plaid Cymru's co-operation agreement commits Labour's Welsh Government to the devolution of five powers—policing and justice, the Crown Estate, welfare administration, gender recognition, and broadcasting—yet Gordon Brown's report makes no mention of the latter two policy areas. The consistent way in which Labour in Westminster undermines their colleagues in Wales raises

questions about whether a UK Labour Government would ever properly implement the recommendations of their Welsh Government's independent constitutional commission.

That commission, chaired by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and Professor Laura McAllister of Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre, was established as part of the co-operation between Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Government. Last week, it published its interim report, which set out clearly that the status quo simply is not working for Wales. The commission argued that Wales is

"trapped within a UK economy that is overwhelmingly shaped in the interests of the South-East of England and the City of London".

It came to the conclusion that

"this broken UK economic model does not deliver prosperity to Wales and"—

importantly—

"offers no prospect of doing so."

The commission made it clear that the answer to those issues does not lie in unwinding devolution. Indeed, it concludes that in this context, independence is one of three viable future constitutional options available to Wales.

As part of Plaid Cymru's work to build the road to independence, we have published our submission to the commission entitled "The Road to Independence", and we are working with the Wales Green party to establish a future Cymru forum, which will explore key questions surrounding independence more deeply, including the central question of how a new Welsh economy would work. Working together, we can show that there are positive and hopeful alternatives to the destructive agenda pursued by the Conservatives here in Westminster.

The present devolution arrangements are dysfunctional and they cannot hold. It is time to acknowledge that federalism is dead—it is a dead end—and that only independence can deliver the greener, fairer and stronger economic futures that the communities of Wales and Scotland so urgently need and deserve.

5.39 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I will happily support the motion. All efforts to ensure Scottish sovereignty and Scotland's independence deserve to be backed, but I fear that the likelihood of seeking salvation through Westminster's procedures is as likely to be as forlorn as the debacle in the United Kingdom Supreme Court. The reference there, especially without even the authority of a Bill having been supported by the Scottish Parliament, was supreme folly, compounded by the advocacy of a Lord Advocate who had all the passion and appetite for it of someone eating a bowl of cold sick.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman noticed that since the supreme folly—as he describes it—of going to the Supreme Court, the polls have rocketed in the direction of pro-independence support across Scotland? If that is failure, I do not know what success looks like.

Kenny MacAskill: I very much welcome the increase in the polls, as I will come to, but we have to find a route and a method to get there. So far, the courts have ruled that out, and indeed, it looks like the political options—certainly in this place—are limited.

The overreach in the dictum in the Supreme Court judgment that Scotland was neither a colony nor had resorted to violence was both absurd and perverse, which is why a route for Scottish independence needs set out, but that route must neither be subject to a UK court nor be beholden to a UK Parliament. Legally, historically and politically, the people of Scotland are sovereign, not a UK court or a UK Parliament. That has been part of our constitutional history, as other Members have mentioned: it was set out to me as a law student by Lord Justice Cooper's judgment, which was passed on. It was the accepted wisdom—politically, it was the accepted position of even Unionist opponents of independence—that the Scottish people could achieve independence if they voted for it, but that is being denied.

So what is to be done when—not if—this procedural wheeze fails to deliver independence, as the procedural wheeze of referring the matter to the UK Supreme Court failed to deliver the referendum? It is about taking back sovereignty to the Scottish people. On Saturday, as well as attending a political meeting in the afternoon, I went to a concert of the Proclaimers in Edinburgh on the Saturday night. The crowd fair enjoyed the song "Cap in Hand":

"We fight, when they ask us

We boast, then we cower

We beg for a piece of what's already ours".

As support for independence rises, as the thermometers and temperatures plummet, and as energy costs soar in energy-rich Scotland and people go hungry and go cold, that absurdity must end. Now is the time Mr Nicolson might wish to be aware of: no more cap in hand, so what is to be done?

First of all, we can endorse our historical claim of right. As Canon Kenyon Wright said—I paraphrase—"Some may say no, but we are the people, and we say yes." I hope SNP Members will sign my colleague Neale Hanvey's St Andrew's day declaration, early-day motion 633.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that there should be no mention of Members' Christian names or surnames. Please refer to them by their constituencies.

Kenny MacAskill: My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The independence convention requires to be supported. It is necessary to bring together the democratically elected representatives of Scotland, our MPs and MSPs, for two reasons: first, as a rebuttal—it is not the UK Supreme Court that is sovereign, but the democratically elected representatives of the people of Scotland—and secondly, to drive home the point when this motion fails and is defeated tonight that it is not this Parliament, but the elected representatives of the people of Scotland who are the democratically elected voice of the people of Scotland. I hope Members on the SNP Benches will support the call for an independence convention; after all, it was a call made and supported by the First Minister in February 2020. We are now approaching three years on, and it is time that convention was delivered.

Thirdly, we should support the call for a plebiscite election, one that could be triggered next October and deliver us our referendum—the no ifs, no buts referendum that we were promised by Members on the SNP Benches.

That can be achieved by collapsing the Scottish Parliament; a member of the SNP has already set out a way there. That could be done, and could deliver the referendum that the people of Scotland were promised would happen in October of next year by the First Minister and others. That must be done.

Finally, support must be given to all demonstrations, all international legal actions, and all peaceful and democratic actions to drive forward the position that the people of Scotland are not prepared to accept diktats supinely, either from a UK Supreme Court or from a Tory Government unelected by the people of Scotland since 1955. The need is great; the time is now. I will support the motion, but this question needs to be answered by SNP Members when they are defeated: when will they actually stand up and take powers back for the people of Scotland, and ensure that it is Scottish sovereignty and Scottish democracy that rules, not the diktat of a Tory Government further impoverishing the people of Scotland?

5.45 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I echo the welcomes given to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and the tributes paid to the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

It was, interestingly enough, on 4 July 2018 that this House endorsed, without a Division, the principles of the claim of right for Scotland, acknowledging the sovereign right of the people of Scotland to determine the form of government best suited to their own needs. The Supreme Court decision about the limits of the Scottish Parliament's power with regard to legislating on reserved matters does not change the validity of the claim of right or the reality that it expresses.

It is a simple matter of fact that when a majority of people in Scotland are prepared to vote for independence, Scotland will become an independent country. The best way to demonstrate that majority would be through a referendum on a simple question, along the lines of the referendum held in 2014. Incidentally, the way to prove the opposite would also be through a referendum; if the Unionists are so convinced of their cause, why are they not allowing a referendum to happen and so settle the question? The reality is that they are running scared.

Today's motion would allow the Scottish Parliament to legislate for a referendum at a time of its choosing—any time of its choosing. That arrangement is far more in keeping with the claim of right than Scotland's Parliament having to go cap in hand to this place whenever a majority of MSPs are returned with a mandate for a referendum. If the UK Government, backed up by their Better Together allies, continue to veto or ignore the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government, it stands to reason that a different kind of electoral test will be needed.

The 2019 general election, three years ago this week, was an effective—we might even say a de facto—referendum on Brexit. The Conservatives sought a mandate to implement the hardest possible Brexit short of a no deal. If memory serves, the Liberal Democrats, none of whom appear to be here today, sought a mandate in that general election to completely overturn the Brexit referendum result. The SNP manifesto supported a UK-wide second EU referendum with remain on the ballot paper, while making it clear that the best option for Scotland is and always has been independence in Europe.

[Patrick Grady]

Political parties are absolutely entitled to put their proposition to the voters, and the voters make up their minds. Labour, apparently, intends to stand at the next election on a platform for sweeping constitutional reform: abolition of the House of Lords and a new devolution settlement, even though Labour established the current devolution settlement through a series of referendums. The position now seems to be that a Labour Government, elected on maybe 40% or 45% of a UK-wide vote, would have a mandate to completely reform both the United Kingdom constitution and the current devolution settlement. However, an overall majority of votes for pro-independence candidates in Scotland would not constitute a mandate for anything. I am not sure how they make that add up.

During this debate, we have heard from the Better Together parties that it is a waste of parliamentary time and that constituents want us to talk about the cost of living crisis, supporting public services and the challenges facing the economy. But as the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) laid out right at the start, the responses needed to really tackle all those issues in Scotland require the full powers of independence. It is Westminster that still holds the purse strings, embarking on yet another round of austerity, continuing with the absolute folly of Brexit, and increasingly oblivious to the climate emergency and its own commitments to emissions reductions.

It is independence that will truly liberate Scotland's Parliament to invest in Scotland's people and places and to have the chance to build the fairer, greener, healthier society that we all know is possible—a society that welcomes people, wherever they have come from around the world, and seeks to build peace and justice across the globe. Those are the opportunities that inspired me to join the campaign for independence 25 years ago, and those are the opportunities that an increasing—and eventually unstoppable—majority of people in Scotland are now starting to reach for.

5.49 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Today's motion, if agreed, would allow the people of Scotland, and they alone, to determine the future constitutional status of Scotland. If the people of Scotland decide that our future should be as an independent country, and as an equal member of the European Union, that is what it should be. It is not for this place or anyone else to say otherwise.

As much as the Unionist parties have tried to make this a debate about the merits of independence, or even the record of the Scottish Government, this debate is not about that. Do not get me wrong, I am more than happy to argue the merits or otherwise of independence, but this is not the forum for that debate. Although the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), is not in his place, I congratulate him, because his speech was far more powerfully in favour of Scottish independence than anything I could say.

After Brexit, the worst cost of living crisis in decades, spiralling energy prices and the threat of power cuts for the first time since the 1970s, and with millions of working people relying on food banks and the Government

engulfed by yet another scandal after allowing their wealthy mates to become even wealthier by plundering the public purse to the tune of billions during the pandemic, believe me that making the case for Scottish independence has never been easier, but this debate is not about Scottish independence; it is about democracy. It is about self-determination and who has the right to decide what our constitutional future will be. Is it the people who live and work in Scotland, and who call Scotland home, or does that right belong to this Parliament and a governing party that has not won an election in Scotland since 1955 but has the power to hold a referendum because that power is constitutionally reserved to this place, thereby denying the democratic will of the Scottish people?

We have heard this afternoon that the Supreme Court confirmed the position that only this place has the power to hold a referendum, which remains by far the SNP's preferred option for settling this constitutional logjam. Given how both the Government and the official Opposition behaved in the aftermath of that Supreme Court ruling, however, it is fair to say that it would require a road to Damascus-like change of heart. I recognise that is unlikely to happen.

Bizarrely, it appears that the Government and the official Opposition thought that the Supreme Court ruling would somehow settle the matter—that the demand for a referendum on independence would miraculously disappear—and that they could double down on their dogged refusal to accept the mandate given to the SNP at the Holyrood election to hold that referendum. That was never going to happen, and opinion poll after opinion poll since the ruling has shown that the demand for a referendum has intensified and that support for Scottish independence has hit an all-time high.

The Government's position, which is enthusiastically shared by the Labour party, is completely untenable and simply cannot hold. The more they deny Scotland's right to choose its own constitutional future and the more they say, "No, you can't," the more Scotland will say, "Yes, we will and, yes, we can." Both the Government and Opposition Front Benchers would do well to heed the words of Professor Sir John Curtice of Strathclyde University, who warned the Unionists just the other day that simply saying no to a referendum does not necessarily constitute an effective strategy for maintaining support for the Union.

Of course, it does not have to be this way. All we are asking is for this place to recognise that Scotland has a democratic right to decide its own future. If this Parliament will not allow it, the least it should do is allow our Parliament to do so. This motion simply seeks to amend the Scotland Act 1998 to give the Scottish Parliament the power to hold the referendum that the people elected their Government to deliver.

The people of Scotland have continually backed the SNP at the ballot box, the democratically elected Scottish Government have voted for a referendum and the opinion polls show that it is the will of the people. There is a clear mandate for an independence referendum and that case is getting stronger by the day.

If this is a voluntary Union, as we have always been told that it is, then there must be a mechanism for one or more of its member nations to decide that it no longer wants to be part of it. We have always been led to believe that the Union of the United Kingdom of Great

Britain and Northern Ireland was a voluntary Union, and that should at any point a majority of one of those constituent parts seek to become independent, the least we could expect was that the UK Government would not seek to frustrate that desire. People having the ability to amend the constitutional position of their country is a fundamental of democracy. It really does ill behave the so-called, self-styled mother of Parliaments to now stand in the way of the democratic demands of one or more of its constituent parts should they decide to take a different path.

I believe that the leader of the Labour party was genuine last week when he said that he opposed independence because he believed in our “Union of nations”. I have to ask him: what happens when one of those nations no longer believes in that Union? Whose wish trumps whose? Does he believe that his desire to lead a United Kingdom is more important than the wishes of the Scottish people should they decide no longer to remain in that United Kingdom? When I was listening to him last week, I was reminded of an interview that he gave to the BBC last month in which he spoke about Labour’s electoral failures in recent years and how he believed that the Labour party had lost elections because the party had listened to itself and had put its political priorities above the priorities of the voters. He said that, in his opinion, Labour lost because it did not listen to the people and what they wanted. Is that not exactly what he is doing to the voters of Scotland right now? He is putting his priority, and his party’s priority, ahead of those of the Scottish people as expressed in the ballot box just last year.

At a time when the demand for a referendum is rising, when support for independence is reaching an all-time high, and when the latest polls show that support for the Union at an all-time low of just 42%, the truth is that, whether Unionists like it or not and whether they want it or not, the people of Scotland have decided that this is their priority and that now is the time for the people of Scotland to choose their own future.

Finally, I believe that Scotland’s future will be as an independent nation and as a full and enthusiastic member of the European Union. That process has been accelerated by Brexit—an act so reckless and so ill-conceived that history will record it as being the day that the United Kingdom effectively signed its own death warrant. With that decision, as never before, those opposed to Scottish independence are now having to explain why we should stay in the Union—a Union in which our democratically expressed wishes are routinely ignored and our economic best interests thrown to the wind. I repeat: the position of both the Government and the official Opposition is simply untenable. Hiding behind the Scotland Act 1998, and relying on the provisions contained in it to deny the democratic wishes of the people, can be seen only as an act of sheer desperation, and one that betrays a fundamental lack of confidence in the ability to hold this Union together in any other way.

5.58 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I rise from the unfamiliar terrain of the Back Benches for the first time in 21 years. I hope you will be gentle with me, Mr Deputy Speaker, as you always are, as I get used to this new environment.

It is only three weeks since the Supreme Court made that important ruling on whether the Scottish Parliament had the necessary powers to bring in a Bill to have a referendum on an independent Scotland. We have seen what has happened since then. There have been several responses, but, most notably, what Unionists thought was going to happen did not happen. They thought that, when this judgment was made, somehow the call for Scottish independence would be diminished and support for the Union would go up. That did not happen. If they did have that view, I am pretty sure that they are quickly disabused of that notion now. It was four opinion polls, but I have just checked, and a fifth opinion poll has come through as we have started to debate this issue today. Narrowly though it may be, that is five opinion polls showing majority support for independence.

I have an opinion about why that is the case, and I will share it with the House: it is because the Scottish people just will not be telt. There is something about the Scottish character that just takes badly to being told they cannot do something or to feeling they do not have the necessary ability to do something they feel they have a legitimate right to do. That comes down to the Scottish character and the Scottish personality. *[Interruption.]* It is thrawn, as an hon. Friend says from the Front Bench. We just do not take well to being telt.

We have been telt by the Supreme Court, which says that with the powers that have come to reside in Scotland, there is no particular legal way to have an independence referendum, and we all accept that. I think everybody has said that their lordships had the opportunity to have a look at that, and they did so fairly and came to their own conclusion, decision and judgment, but the Scottish people are not prepared to accept this UK Government telling them that there is now no legitimate means to secure an independence referendum and that our road to it has now closed. That is something that the Scottish people refuse to accept or go along with.

The Scottish people returned a Government with the biggest vote ever secured for a party in the Scottish Parliament. They secured more independence supporting MSPs than we have ever secured in any Parliament since 1999. That is why we now have increased support for independence. It reminds me of the day during the independence referendum—I am sure my colleagues will remember this—when the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, together with all the other Unionist shadow Chancellors, got together to tell the Scottish people that they could not use the pound, which they believed they had the right to and shared with the rest of the people of the United Kingdom. Those politicians thought that that would kill the calls for independence stone dead in the independence referendum campaign.

In fact, the exact opposite happened, because support for independence rose from something in the mid-20s to something approaching 40% as a result. It was probably the most important point in the last independence referendum, and from that point onwards, it was always going to be close as to who would win the subsequent independence referendum. This is why we are going to see such a rise in the opinion polls as we go forward. It is five in a row, as we have just said, but we are where we are.

We are trying to find a way forward with all these issues and trying to design a way to deal with the situation in which we find ourselves. My colleagues have repeatedly

[Pete Wishart]

asked Government Ministers from the Prime Minister downwards, “How do we now get that independence referendum, when we supposedly and notionally are in a voluntary Union?” We have not had any real answer or response to that, save for one thing: a duck. That was the response I got when I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland in the Scottish Affairs Committee, “How do we do this now?” His response was the duck test. I think what he was trying to present was that we would just know when we had got to the position where a referendum on independence would be reasonable and legitimate. Of course, he now has that fabled duck test, where if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck—Members know how the rest of that goes.

What the Secretary of State for Scotland was saying was that if it looks like it is time for an independence referendum, and it sounds like it is time for an independence referendum, it will be time for that independence referendum. The only thing is he did not tell us how that democratic test would be met. I presented a few options to him, which were all rejected. It is now incumbent on the Government to tell us how we get there. They have conceded that there is a way to an independence referendum, albeit under the guise of our aquatic feathered friends. What they now have to do is to sit down reasonably and constructively and tell us exactly what the test will be, but it has to be a democratic test that satisfies the democratic aspirations and ambitions of the Scottish people. It has to be based on actual results in ballot boxes as we go forward.

There is this idea that somehow, in 2011, civic Scotland and all the political parties in Scotland got together and agreed a way forward for an independence referendum, and that is right. I was here, and I remember exactly how that deal was concocted, and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) put his finger on it. The Government agreed to all this because they profoundly believed that they would win it and kill any notion or idea of Scottish independence for a generation, as we keep on hearing about in the context of these debates. They are not prepared to do that now, because they know they will lose. They are looking at the opinion polls and seeing the trends in Scottish public opinion. The reason why they are failing to engage in a process towards a second independence reference just now is that they know they start from a position that assumes we would win, they would lose and Scotland would become an independent country. There is no doubt whatsoever that if an independence referendum was held tomorrow, Scotland would vote to become an independent nation. Every shred of evidence is telling us that. It is the trend we are moving towards just now. The Scottish people will not be telt about how they will engage in democratic affairs, particularly when they voted for a Scottish Government committed and obliged to deliver an independence referendum.

I really do hope that the Government get round the table and discuss this issue positively and constructively with the Scottish Government. We have presented today a proposal and an option to devolve the powers to the Scottish Parliament to allow it to democratically decide how this issue is taken forward. If the UK Government are not happy with the idea, which I sense they are

not—they are failing to engage with this as a constructive way forward—it is now up to them to tell us and design a way forward.

We cannot go on like this. Year after year we come back to the issue of how we decide and settle Scotland's constitutional future. We have been doing this for nearly 30 years. We have had one referendum already that has proven to be non-conclusive. Everybody knows that and I think we all agree that somehow this has to be settled. Let us settle it, for goodness' sake. Let us put this issue to bed. Let the people of Scotland come together to hear the arguments for and against the Union. We are looking forward to making the passionate arguments for why Scotland should be an independent nation; the Government should be looking forward to putting the case for their Union. Let us put those two competing visions together and let the Scottish people decide. Let the Scottish people on their own determine their future.

Now is the time to constructively debate and design a way forward. It is now up to this Government. I hope they get the message that this issue is having to come to a head. We have to deal with it constructively, so let us all agree today that we will go forward and let the Scottish people decide.

6.6 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker:

“That this House believes it should be for the Scottish people to determine the future constitutional status of Scotland; and accordingly makes provision as set out in this Order”.

It is hard to believe that we even have to make that request. It is galling to think that my nation is expected to ask permission from another country to have control over its own constitutional status. It is frustrating, too, to witness the damage being done to individuals, families and communities in Scotland by the austerity policies of the current Conservative and Unionist UK Government. The SNP Scottish Government have mitigated the damage to the tune of billions of pounds; all that could have been spent elsewhere if this place had truly, as it claims, been compassionate when legislating. But it has not, and time and again the Scottish Government take the strain.

As has already been pointed out, there is of course a range of topics that we could have debated today: the damage forced on Scotland by Brexit; the austerity policies forced on Scotland by this Government; the dreadful immigration policies that they continue to ramp up; the fact that in the 21st century our constituents have to decide whether to heat or eat; and so on. We know that the outcomes of each and every one of those things is determined by the actions taken by the Conservative and Unionist UK Government here at Westminster. There is no point in us continually addressing the symptoms when the cause is staring us in the face.

We would love to debate all those issues in a Holyrood with the powers to address them. Westminster will deny us this request—we know that—and that is indicative of their fear: “Why do the SNP keep asking? It knows we won't allow it.” They just do not get it. That is partially because some MPs who represent Scottish seats will back up the UK Government when they pronounce their intention to rule over Scotland. That servile attitude only empowers Westminster.

I noticed yesterday that the front page of the Scottish edition of *The Times* newspaper had a quarter-page story with the headline “Scots back independence for

fourth poll in row”, but the edition that I saw in the Tea Room had a different story in that space: ironically, it was “Last-minute talks to halt nurse strike break down”—not a story *The Times* could have run in Scotland as the SNP Government have successfully come to an agreement on that issue in Scotland. The lack of the independence poll result on that front page reminded me how little engagement Members here have with Scotland and Scottish issues—as can be seen today by the empty spaces on their Benches. Unless we bring it to the table, it is not on the menu. So rather than retreating to a bunker and repeating the line, “You had your referendum, and it was once in a generation,” the UK Government would do well to engage with the devolved powers in an equal and respectful manner. Share the platform with us and respect our right to ask the people of Scotland.

The pressure is building up behind the UK Government's dam of denial, and when the dam bursts, they do not want to be standing under it. It will wash them away and they will be replaced with an independent Scottish Government working for all of the people in our free, sovereign nation. The UK Government's choice is not, “What is the direction of travel?” but whether they want to be part of that democratic process, or whether they still live in fear of democracy?

6.10 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. Let me start on some of the comments made by Government Members and by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) about the SNP's choice of subject. They should know full well that we cannot bring forward a debate on education in Scotland, and they should know full well that we cannot bring forward a debate on the NHS in Scotland, because those matters are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and not under the competency of this House. If they do not know that, shame on them.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South denied the facts about Better Together and Labour still working with the Tories up and down councils in Scotland. He should remember that one of his colleagues was on national TV bragging about doing deals with the Tories to keep the SNP out of the councils. It really is Better Together.

The motion is about democracy for Scotland. Everyone here claims to believe in democracy, but the Unionists seem to have no problem with denying the voters of Scotland their right to choose their future. It is untenable and, going by current opinion polls, completely backfiring.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman says that the SNP would not be allowed to debate education, health and so on. Could he try that? At the next SNP Opposition day debate, will he propose debates on those issues that are important for our constituents and leave it up to Mr Speaker to decide whether that is within competency or not?

Alan Brown: It is not for me to decide. We respect devolution and we will decide what we want to debate in our Opposition day debates.

We all know that Government Members like to use the throwaway remark about a “once in a generation opportunity”, but that is not a credible way to override

the outcomes of elections. Indeed, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), told the *Daily Express* that the 2019 election was

“a critical once-in-a-generation election.”

No one has since used that to justify delaying another general election—although the way the polling is for the Tories at the moment, they might want to revisit that argument and try to use it. The former Prime Minister also did not die in a ditch rather than sign an extension to stay in the EU, so I think we need to recognise political rhetoric for what it is.

Let us look at timings for repeating referendums. For Northern Ireland, it is explicitly stated that repeat referendums can be held after a seven-year period has passed. So the whole “You had a vote in 2014” thing does not stack up, given that Unionists have no problems with a seven-year timeframe for Northern Ireland. I also pointed out earlier that the power to choose a referendum on the future of Northern Ireland is devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, so if decisions on Northern Ireland's future are devolved, surely what the UK Government tell us is the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world should also have the right to choose when to have a referendum. Why pretend that it is a voluntary Union while refusing to set out processes to allow voters to demonstrate that they consent to being in that Union?

In other latest developments, as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said, the Scotland Secretary now thinks that we should apply “the duck test”—whatever that means. At the Scottish Affairs Committee, he also argued that there needs to be a “sustained majority” for a referendum and, in relation to knowing when the right levels of support had been reached, he said that “they knew back then”—in 2014—

“that they had reached it, but we do not believe we have reached it now.”

Who is the “we” in that aspect of not believing that a referendum should be held in accordance with the wishes of the voters of the 2021 election?

If we look back to 2011, we see that the SNP won 69 out of 129 seats. When we add in two Greens and Margo MacDonald, there were 72 pro-indy MSPs, which was a clear parliamentary majority, although the pro-referendum votes did not exceed 50%. In 2021, we got 72 pro-indy and pro-referendum MSPs, and the SNP achieved a record number of votes and the highest constituency vote of any party in the history of the Scottish Parliament. The pro-indy parties achieved plus-50% on the last vote. The 2021 results were actually better than the 2011 election results that delivered the 2014 referendum. I think that the duck test that the Secretary of State for Scotland spoke about has been met.

Let us not forget that the EU referendum was justified when the Tories won a parliamentary majority in 2015 with just 37% of the UK-wide vote. If parliamentary democracy is an argument for implementing manifesto commitments at Westminster, it is high time that principle was recognised in Holyrood.

Given the denial of a democratic vote despite the number of elections that have been won by the SNP and the huge pro-independence majority secured in 2021, it is no surprise that people are fed up and show support

[Alan Brown]

for the alternative of using an election as a de facto referendum. Democracy cannot be denied forever. People are getting more frustrated with the attitude that Westminster somehow knows best and that we should just get on with it.

Clearly, the biggest imposition on Scotland against our will has been Brexit. That was compounded by the deal agreed by the Tories—a deal that saw the end of free movement, which has had a significant impact on the health and care sector and the hospitality trade. We could and should have more nurses, more doctors, more porters, more cleaners and more care staff. That would ease the pressures in the various NHSs. With the free movement of people, we could have a bigger tax base, more businesses would be profitable and there would be greater food production, rather than crops rotting in the fields. But no—we are left suffering due to Tory ideology and because Labour is too afraid to do anything different. The Labour leader stated recently:

“We don’t want open borders. Freedom of movement has gone and it’s not coming back.”

In Scotland, we want free movement of people, and we can have it back with independence in Europe.

Even with Scotland’s renewable energy success story, Westminster decisions have held back our energy policy. When onshore wind subsidies were removed in 2015, it killed investment in the sector. That was done just to appeal to the Tory shires. The carbon capture scheme at Peterhead was pulled twice and is now only classed as a reserve. By no coincidence at all, the carbon capture clusters in red wall seats have been given track 1 status. Scottish bill payers are being forced to pay for nuclear power stations and they have the highest grid charges in Europe. The windfall tax is levied on Scotland’s energy sector, yet a renewables tax allowance to incentivise further investment is not allowed. All the precious oil and gas revenues have been squandered, rather than being used to create a wealth fund. Those are bad decisions made in Westminster and imposed on Scotland.

It is clear from the Scottish attitudes survey that the people of Scotland trust Holyrood more than Westminster to make decisions for the benefit of Scotland. It is also clear that a majority of people believe that Scotland will become independent, regardless of which way they would vote themselves. Recent polling shows that a majority of voters would vote for independence and that, significantly, younger generations are consistently in favour of independence. It is only a matter of time before Scotland becomes independent. I suggest that the least Westminster could do is to respect the concept of allowing the people of Scotland to make up their own minds. If it has confidence in the strength of the Union—“the greatest political union the world has ever seen”—let us have that vote and that debate, and let the people of Scotland decide.

6.18 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Earlier today, I had the great privilege of standing a few yards away on the Floor of the House and announcing that the House had followed the lead of the SNP in voting against a proposed Bill that would have been an affront to human rights and the rule of law. I am very grateful for the cross-party

support we were given to do that. I greatly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for the outstanding and passionate speech she made in that short debate.

I hope that this evening, the House will again follow the SNP’s lead by voting to start to put right a situation that is an affront to democracy and the sovereignty of the people of Scotland. Today’s debate is not strictly speaking about whether Scotland should be independent, although that is something I am happy to debate any time. I understand and respect the fact that people hold different opinions from mine. Today’s debate is about whether the people of Scotland have the right to decide their own future. There is no debate about that and there is no compromise or dispute about it. Sovereignty over Scotland is inalienably vested in the people of Scotland. That means we do not just have the right to decide our own future: we, and we alone, have the right to decide for ourselves when we want to be asked the question about our future. Yes, we also have the inalienable right to change our minds and to decide that we want to be asked the question again to give us the opportunity to give a different answer, in the same way as the electorate get to change their mind in between elections.

It has been said:

“Power lies with the Scottish people and we believe it is for the Scottish people to decide how we are governed.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the leaders of the Conservative party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in 2014. They might have changed their minds since, because 2014 was a long time ago; indeed, nobody would dispute the possibility that they might have changed their minds. But the right that they espoused then belonged to the people of Scotland in 2014 and it belongs to them just as much today. The will of the people of Scotland as expressed at the ballot box must prevail, and it will prevail.

The whole purpose of our constitutional political institutions, like them or not, is to give effect to the will of the people. If our political institutions do anything else, we are no longer a democracy. History tells us what happens to institutions or politicians who seek to block the legitimate will of the people—they become history themselves.

We heard again from the Minister earlier, and we have heard it previously from the shadow Secretary of Scotland, the claim that Scotland is one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments, or perhaps the most powerful. It is a wee while since we have had any interventions, so I invite an intervention from any of the Unionists left in their places to name just one devolved Parliament anywhere in the world that is less powerful than the Parliament of Scotland—apart from Wales, obviously—[*Interruption.*] We have an offer: let us hear it.

Douglas Ross: We know that health, education, transport, local government, the economy are all powers that the Scottish Government have that makes them the most powerful devolved Administration anywhere in the world.

Peter Grant: I have no doubt that *Hansard* got that. The hon. Gentleman was given the chance to name one less powerful devolved Parliament in the world and he could not think of one. I doubt if anyone else in here can either.

If Members do not want to take note of the words of the party leaders in 2014, perhaps they will note the words of a previous party leader, who said that the Scots

“have an undoubted right to national self-determination; thus far they have exercised that right by joining and remaining in the Union. Should they”—

that is, us—

“determine on independence no English party or politician would stand in their way, however much we might regret their departure.”

What have we come to when the late Margaret Thatcher, for those are her words, showed more respect for the rights of the people than the Scottish Labour party?

The motion is not a plea to our superiors from a subservient people. It is a clear statement from a sovereign people about the direction that our country intends to take. It is an opportunity for those who claim to support the British constitution to allow that constitution to do its job. The result of any vote tonight will not decide whether or when we become independent. It will not even decide whether Scotland's people get the chance within the lifetime of the current Scottish Parliament to decide their own future, because that will happen, with or without the consent of this place. What it would do is offer a chance to find a way to deliver the will of the people that leaves the British state and its institutions with some shred of political and democratic credibility, because the option before the Conservative party and the Labour party tonight is not, “Do we allow or do we stop Scotland having its say?” It is, “Do we allow Scotland to have its say in a way that would maintain some kind of international credibility for this place, or do we try to stop it and take the consequences that happen to Parliaments and politicians the world over when they try to stand against the declared will of the people?” I have no doubt as to my preference.

I saw it suggested on Twitter earlier that by tabling this motion we were somehow looking for a different route from the preferred choice of the First Minister and others. I want to see our independence delivered with the consent of our friends and neighbours in the rest of the United Kingdom. I want us to start on our first day as an independent nation knowing that our bigger neighbour to the south has recognised and respected the rights of our people. Let me be clear, however, that withholding that consent and respect will not stop Scotland settling its own future. In fact, as has been made clear in earlier contributions, the further the British state tries to stand in Scotland's way, the more certain it is that the decision day will be soon and that the decision on that day will be yes. At that point, when there is a clear expression of the will of the Scottish people that we will be an independent country, the ball will be back in the British Unionist institutions' court, and it will be up to them to find a way to make it work.

Can I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill)—I hope I can still call him my hon. Friend—for the passion with which he spoke today? He set out some other tactics that may need to be used. This is not the time to talk about the tactics that we use. It is a time to give the British state its chance to do the honourable thing, the decent thing, the democratic thing, and to give it a chance to put its politics where its mouth is. Nobody in this debate has argued that the sovereignty of Scotland lies anywhere other than with the people of Scotland. Nobody in this debate has claimed that the people of Scotland do not

have a right to set our own future. The challenge to the Unionist parties—all of them, or at least the ones that have bothered to turn up, but in particular the present Government and the would-be, wannabe Government—is to accept this offer tonight and to find a way that allows Scotland to chart her chosen course in a way that leaves some shred of credibility to this place. The British state has never—never—successfully and permanently stood against the independence of any nation when independence was the settled will of the people of that nation. We are not going to do that to Scotland.

6.26 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I start by saying that I envy my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—in fact, I am right jealous—because she gets to sum up today's debate following the speeches from the Government and Labour Front Benches. Holy moly, talk about fantasy stuff. It is quite incredible. They would have been hilarious, were the matter not so serious, getting to the heart of democracy in this precious Union of ours.

I have recently been rereading Ian Hamilton's books on his mission to liberate the Stone of Destiny, and on his incredible life before and after the event that was to make him a household name across Scotland and, for a time, the Met police's most wanted person. Ian was many things—an incredible intellect, a top-tier advocate and a political one-off—but what comes through again and again in his writing and character is his unshakeable belief in the people of Scotland. It was not about whether they should choose self-government, although he continually argued that they should, but about his absolute conviction, rooted in his very soul, that no one had the right to stand in the way of their choice if it was arrived at fairly and democratically.

That should be a completely apolitical and unremarked upon state of affairs, and it reflects appallingly on the two major UK parties that they have turned a matter of basic democracy and decency into a constitutional bunfight. Indeed, prior to the 2014 independence referendum, the SNP and the main Unionist parties all agreed the following joint statement:

“Power lies with the Scottish people and we believe it is for the Scottish people to decide how we are governed.”

That is not a new concept. Many, or at least some, Conservative Members may have grown up with a poster of Maggie Thatcher on their bedroom walls. She said, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) recalled, of the Scots:

“As a nation, they have an undoubted right to national self-determination... Should they determine on independence no English party or politician would stand in their way.”

Brendan O'Hara: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and I thank him for bringing up my late constituent Ian Hamilton, a wonderful man. He is talking about the change of heart from 2011 to now. Would he care to speculate as to why that change of heart has taken place? What possibly could have occurred in those intervening 10 years to make that change of heart so dramatic?

Gavin Newlands: I appreciate my hon. Friend's intervention, but I have to say he has got me stumped. I have no clue—no clue whatsoever. I could hazard a guess. It might be because they are feart: the Conservatives are

[Gavin Newlands]

now fear that they would lose the referendum. It is now five polls in a row that show support for Scottish independence.

Mrs Thatcher's successor, John Major, said of Scotland that

"no nation could be held irrevocably in a Union against its will".

David Cameron said:

"I felt, as the prime minister of the UK, I had a choice. I could either say to them"—

"them" being Scotland—

"well you can't have your referendum, it is for us to decide whether you should have one."

He went on to say:

"So I did what I thought was the right thing, which was to say 'you voted for a party that wants independence, you should have a referendum that is legal, that is decisive and that is fair.'"

The former Secretary of State for Scotland, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale said:

"If the people of Scotland ultimately determine they want to have another independence referendum, then there will be one... Could there be another referendum? The answer to that question is yes."

The UK has had literally hundreds of referendums over decades. Many like to pretend that they still live in the age of Bagehot and Dicey, when this place could legislate to turn the sky pink and theoretically change the laws of physics, but the simple fact is that popular democracy is not a novelty; nor has it unleashed anarchy in the land. We have had referendums in the UK to solve internal disputes in the Labour party—in the days when Harold Wilson knew some things about heading a broad church that should be studied by the current Leader of the Opposition.

We are still picking up the pieces of the last referendum, which many say was designed as a manifesto commitment by a Prime Minister to silence his Back-Bench awkward squad of arch-Brexiteers and hopefully to trade off in a coalition negotiation with the Lib Dems. That entirely self-created time bomb went off, as did that Prime Minister, in the entirely accurate words of Danny Dyer, "with his trotters up" while the rest of us count the cost. We even had a referendum to keep the Lib Dems happy, which—surprisingly for the Lib Dems—did not.

Back in 2017, the current Prime Minister said:

"It seems hard to block a"—

second—

"referendum but we should push the timing until after Brexit so the choice is clearer for people."

He also described the Union as being "there by consent" and said that it exists democratically and voluntarily. When asked many times in recent weeks, however, he has been signally unable to tell us how that is the case. How can it be democratic or voluntary when Scots continually give the SNP and our partners an electoral mandate to seek an independence referendum, only to have that denied time after time?

Peter Grant: We have heard a lot about mandates recently. Clearly, as my hon. Friend mentioned, in 2021, the pro-independence parties got more than 50% of the vote on the list vote, which is when people vote for a party rather than candidates. Does he recall that the party that

told us that voting for it in the list vote was the only way to stop an independence referendum managed to get 23.5% of the vote on that occasion? Does he think that there is a lesson there about respecting mandates that the Conservative party perhaps should be listening to?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. He will probably recall, as I do, that not just in that election, but in every election, whether it was for the Scottish Parliament, councils or Westminster, every single leaflet that the Scottish Conservatives put out was about saying "no" to indyref2. That was essentially their only policy in every election, whether it was relevant to that election or not, and they have been soundly defeated every time. Given that the Prime Minister could not tell us, perhaps the Minister or indeed the shadow Secretary of State can explain to us how Scotland or Wales can leave this voluntary Union. What is the route map to democracy? How can we get it?

John Lamont: I do not know where the hon. Member has been, but if he had cared to listen to my opening speech, he would have heard that I made clear the mechanism by which there could be a second referendum. We experienced it in 2011 when there was consensus between both Parliaments, civic Scotland and all the political parties. That consensus is not currently here.

Gavin Newlands: To be clear then—the Minister can intervene again if I am wrong—everything else is in place, essentially. If we look at the situation in Scotland, the votes in the last 2021 Parliament are in place, as is the role of civic Scotland. The only bit that is missing is the consensus of this Government and this Parliament. Is that correct? Perhaps he will confirm that that is the case when he sums up. You are vetoing Scotland's right to democracy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am not vetoing anything and this is not a chat, so can the hon. Gentleman please continue with his speech?

Gavin Newlands: To be clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, you are not vetoing anything, but this Government certainly are.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend has exposed what we already knew, which is that the Government will not tell us what the route is because there is no route. In effect, they are vetoing it because we have had our democracy. Before he became the Prime Minister, the current Prime Minister said of the First Minister of Scotland that,

"I want to take her on and win the argument on the union because I passionately believe in it".

Does my hon. Friend share my view that the Prime Minister has changed his mind on that, because he knows that it is an argument that he cannot win?

Gavin Newlands: Well, if he started the argument, he is doing a pretty good job, given that the independence polls have been so good for Yes. However, it would appear that he has now walked away from that, because he is feart: he is feart of the voice of the people of Scotland. The Minister shakes his head. Perhaps he will now allow an independence referendum, and allow that debate. If he is so sure and the Prime Minister is so sure, let us have that debate—but I see that he is unmoved.

We expect nothing else from Conservative Members, but those in the Labour party—a party that owes its lineage to R.B. Cunninghame Graham and the home-rulers who founded it alongside Keir Hardie—who are still, at least publicly, keen to get the Better Together band back together are setting themselves up for a very graceless fall.

The UK has seen referendums on congestion charging, licensed premises, water authorities, council tax rises, creating directly elected mayors, abolishing directly elected mayors, English regional devolution and neighbourhood plans, as well as a referendum on whether to hold another referendum. Yet we are told that the future of Scotland—the potential self-government of a country that dates back 1,000 years, and the restoration of our relationships with our international friends and allies—is a no-go area. The smallest parish council in England can hold a vote any time it pleases, but a national Government and Parliament elected yet again on a mandate to ask the people what they think are told that now is not the time.

This has not been true of previous referendums and the parties who have called them, but there is no internal dispute in the SNP about independence. It is what we have stood for throughout our 88 years of existence. It is what we have stood for through good times and bad, from the days when saving our deposit in a single constituency was considered a triumph to more recent times. I was there, Mr Deputy Speaker. I may have been young, but I was there. It is the parties who have used referendums to solve their own self-created intramural conflicts who now stand in the way of the democratically expressed will of the Scottish electorate and the will of our democratically elected Parliament.

Alan Brown: Is it not strange that the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who is vehemently opposed to Scotland having a referendum, was advocating referendums to allow fracking?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. The double standards on the Conservative Benches are unbelievable.

As has been already mentioned a few times by my hon. Friends and me, we have seen the polls shift quite strongly over recent weeks following the Supreme Court ruling, and, more pertinently in my view, the UK Government's stubborn and shameful refusal to accept the democratic mandate of the Scottish Government. There have been five polls—I wrote "four" in my speech, but now it is five—with a significant lead for Yes, with utterly disastrous polling for the Conservatives in Scotland thrown in for good measure. I say this to the UK Government: change course now, so that when the inevitable happens and Scotland has its say, they have a sporting chance of making it a contest rather than being faced with the prospect of being the side that has nothing other than no to say to a country that wants to say yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Kirsty Blackman.

6.38 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I was slightly distracted. I was clearly listening to everything that was said by my hon. Friend

the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), but unfortunately I missed the last few sentences.

We are here talking about Scotland's future, because we are stuck in a constitutional conundrum. We are in a situation that we cannot get out of, because there is no way out of it. That was proven by the Supreme Court judgment, which effectively said, "There is no current democratic way for the people of Scotland to get out of this Union, even if they want to." Even if the people of Scotland vote for parties that support an independence referendum, as they continually do, there is no way out of the situation without the UK Government's granting a section 30 order. There is no way out of this voluntary union of nations. We are stuck in this voluntary union whether we like it or not.

The opposition—that is, both Labour and the Conservatives—seem to think that it is some sort of oddity—an unusual situation—when people in this place are keen to talk about constitutional reform. In some odd way, apparently, SNP Members are the only ones in this House who have any interest in constitutional reform. We have a party in this place that passed the recent Elections Act 2022, which changed the way in which people vote, and is changing the parliamentary constituencies, reducing their number. We have a party that is desperate to abolish the House of Lords—we have heard that before—and a party that previously said that it would abolish the House of Lords. These parties have spent decades tinkering with the constitution, making changes to it, and they are still doing so; they are still talking about the Bill to repeal EU law, and about Brexit and what a wonderful bonus it has been. Those are all constitutional changes.

The only difference between our party talking about constitutional change and their parties talking about constitutional change is that we are doing so consistently, pointing in the same direction, with all of us standing up and fighting for independence for the people of Scotland. That is the constitutional change we are speaking for with one voice. The fact that we can consistently do so is very different from the warfare that is happening within Better Together about the best way forward for the constitutional future. That is why it riles them so much that we are able to come here and speak with one voice, because we on the SNP Benches act together in supporting Scotland's right to choose.

The reality is that, under the UK constitution, Parliament is sovereign—that is the way that it works. That has never worked for us, as colleagues have said; that has never been Scotland's constitutional set-up. Our set-up is that the people of Scotland are sovereign. The people of Scotland are the ones who have the right to choose our form of government; the people of Scotland are the ones who should be making this decision, and we should not continue to be stymied by Westminster.

I want to talk about ducks. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for mentioning the duck test. He has said that there is a duck test in relation to the referendum, which is apparently the position of the Conservative Front-Bench team: if it looks like it is time for a referendum and it sounds like it is time for a referendum, it is time for a referendum. I hope Mr Deputy Speaker will not mind my saying that the Conservative party does not have a very good track record on determining whether or not something is

[Kirsty Blackman]

a duck, because if it looks like a party and it sounds like a party, it is in fact a work event. If it looks like a drive to Barnard castle and it sounds like a drive breaking covid rules, it is in fact completely legitimate and perfectly normal for people to do that—[*Interruption.*] An eyesight test, indeed, and definitely not against covid rules.

I have some questions for the Minister about his plan for how Scotland could choose to determine its constitutional future, and exactly what he has said about this issue. To move away slightly from the duck test, he has said that we need all of the parties and civic society in Scotland to come forward in order to have a referendum. Thinking back to the Brexit referendum, is it possible that not all of the parties supported having such a referendum? Is it possible that that dramatic constitutional change was not supported by every single party in this House? I think it is possible that that was the case—that every party in this House did not come together and support constitutional change. I assume that prior to the Scottish Parliament election in 2011, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party did not put in its manifesto that it would support an independence referendum. It is incredibly odd for the Minister to suggest that there should be support from every party. Does he mean the Labour party, the Conservatives and the SNP? Does he mean the Labour party, the Conservatives, the SNP and the Lib Dems? Does he include Plaid, the SDLP and the DUP? Would every party across the UK need to have a referendum on Scottish independence in their manifesto in order for that referendum to happen? What does he mean by “every party”? Does he really mean it? It would be great if he could provide some answers. Does he mean every party that gets over a certain percentage of the vote? If so, what is the threshold? Would they have to have it in their manifestos or simply have to make the agreement afterwards?

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: I am not going to give way.

On the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and the decisions made by them, I was confused to hear Front-Bench Government Members talking about devolved matters, given that they have chosen to be elected to Westminster. They put themselves forward as Westminster parliamentarians when they knew that such issues were devolved. It got even more bizarre when the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) stood up. Does he realise that he is in the wrong Parliament? Does he realise that he could ask those questions in his other job?

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way; I have been trying to intervene for some time. I want to take her back to her point about what things look like and what they are in reality. Can she tell us what it looks like when the chief executive of her party gives a personal donation of £107,000? What is that in reality?

Kirsty Blackman: The Conservative party talking about donations! We have seen £29 million go to somebody who took the VIP covid lane—people in that lane have private jets. The Conservative party agrees that the

taxpayer can pay the bills for the former Prime Minister's defence against allegations of having a party during covid, so I do not think it has any ground to stand on.

There has been talk about the powers of the Scottish Parliament and how it is managing. The reality is that we do not have all the flexibility over our finances that we should have. Even the Labour party is not suggesting devolving workers' rights, which seems most bizarre given the continued attack on workers' rights and trade unions by the Conservatives. If we devolve those rights to Scotland, we will not be doing that to trade unions.

The Scottish Parliament has to subsist on the fixed budget given to us, over which we have no flexibility. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) said earlier, it is like trying to set a table when all we have is spoons. We cannot make all the decisions we would like to make if we continually have to mitigate Tory policies and exist on whatever budget the UK Parliament decides is relevant for Scotland when it is unwilling to give fair pay deals to public sector workers.

We are stepping up and making the change—mitigating the bedroom tax and the rape clause and doing all we can in Scotland with our second anti child poverty strategy, which is making a massive difference. We have increased the Scottish child payment and widened the eligibility massively. All those things are making a difference to the lives of people in Scotland, but we do not have full control over them. The issue is about the democratic right of the people of Scotland to choose their own future. Westminster is doing everything it can to sink this ship and go harder and harder in support of policies that make Scottish independence all the more likely. We need that route out of this Union. This is a democratic trap that we are shackled in and we cannot get out of it. The UK Government have failed to give us that route. That is why we are here today arguing for the future for our constituents.

6.49 pm

John Lamont: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate. I start by thanking all right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions to the debate. I will address as many of their points as I can.

As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Moray (Douglas Ross) and for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), the SNP chose to focus today's debate on the constitution instead of the pressing priorities of the people of Scotland. It should have used this time today to raise matters of immediate importance to Scotland's future. It should have focused on what families and working people across Scotland are focused on right now, such as the standard of our education system and many other policy areas.

Before the SNP came to power, Scotland's schools were among the best in the world. We are proud of our education system in Scotland. It is not just a vital public service; it is a part of our national identity. Being Scottish has always meant going to a great local school and getting a first class education. Under the SNP, however, our schools have slipped down international league tables. Nicola Sturgeon does not even try to claim that education is her No. 1 priority anymore, because it obviously just is not true.

If the SNP did not want to focus on the future of Scotland's schools, it could have focused on the rising cost of living globally. The UK Government announced

in the autumn statement a further £26 billion to protect the most vulnerable from the cost of living, but the SNP did not want to talk about that today either. It could have made the debate about Scotland's healthcare system. Many of my constituents in the Scottish borders are struggling to get access to the NHS. Waiting times for treatment are regularly hitting record highs. It is difficult to get a face-to-face GP appointment. Local surgeries are shutting every year. That would have been a worthy issue to bring here today for debate.

Schools, the cost of living, hospitals—those are the issues that matter to my constituents in the Scottish borders, those are the key priorities of people across the country, and those are the pressing issues the SNP should focus on in their Budget in the Scottish Parliament tomorrow, not spending another £20 million of taxpayers' money on another referendum.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

John Lamont: I want to make a little more progress, if I may.

We have heard a lot from SNP Members, including the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), the hon. Members for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and various others, who made it very clear that instead of focusing on what matters, the SNP has come here today to try to create new grievance with the United Kingdom Government. Despite the clear ruling of the Supreme Court, division remains the SNP's only goal.

As we have heard, the Scottish Parliament is one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. Instead of using those powers to improve the lives of people across Scotland, the SNP focuses on irresponsible, overblown and flawed rhetoric about democracy. We have heard so much from SNP Members today. They might be trying to rewrite the record by pretending to care about education, the NHS and the cost of living, but they have chosen today to talk about the constitution, referendums and independence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

John Lamont: SNP Members have had their chance this afternoon and they have missed it. I am going to respond to the points they have made.

The SNP ignores the fact that Scotland has been at the polls for a major election just about every year in recent years. The SNP ignores the fact that we had a referendum on the country's future and people turned out in record numbers to vote decisively for what they wanted. At this moment, we should be focusing on pulling together as one United Kingdom, not splitting apart. Now is a time for unity, not division. The Prime Minister set out clearly that he wants to bring people back together and unite the country. He said that we are committed to working constructively with the Scottish Government to tackle all the challenges we share and face.

Instead of the SNP's negative and divisive arguments, we have heard a more positive case for the United Kingdom in both speeches and interventions, including from my hon. Friends the Members for Banff and Buchan, for Moray and for Bosworth (Dr Evans) and my right

hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns). For instance, the UK Government have delivered a record block grant settlement for Scotland of £41 billion a year over the next three years. We have made a multimillion-pound investment in Scotland's defence and shipbuilding industries, safeguarding UK security and thousands of jobs on the Clyde and beyond. We have committed to the landmark £1.5 billion city and growth deals programme, which is investing in Scotland's infrastructure and future industry. We have delivered real devolution by levelling up communities and bringing local projects to life, such as the redevelopment of Inverness castle and the construction of a new marketplace in Aberdeen.

I thank hon. and right hon. Members again for their contributions. Scotland's bright future as part of the United Kingdom is better served by focusing on the issues that matter. This is the wrong time to obsess about another divisive referendum, when we ought to be drawing on our collective strength to tackle the issues that really matter to the people of Scotland: school standards, the cost of living and NHS backlogs.

People want to see the SNP Government in Edinburgh focus on the issues that matter to them, not on constitutional division. They want to see both of our Governments working together. This Government remain as determined, focused and committed as ever to getting on with the job of delivering for the people of Scotland. I urge the House to reject the SNP's attempt to take control of the Order Paper and to let this Parliament and this Government get on with the issues that really matter to the people of Scotland.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 265.

Division No. 132]

[6.56 pm

AYES

Bardell, Hannah	Mc Nally, John
Blackford, rh Ian	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Blackman, Kirsty	McDonald, Stuart C.
Bonnar, Steven	McLaughlin, Anne
Brock, Deidre	Monaghan, Carol
Brown, Alan	Newlands, Gavin
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Martin Docherty-Hughes</i>)	Nicolson, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Martin Docherty-Hughes</i>)
Cameron, Dr Lisa	O'Hara, Brendan
Chapman, Douglas	Oswald, Kirsten
Cherry, Joanna	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Cowan, Ronnie	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Sheppard, Tommy
Doogan, Dave	Smith, Alyn
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Martin Docherty-Hughes</i>)	Stephens, Chris
Flynn, Stephen	Thewliss, Alison
Gibson, Patricia	Thompson, Owen
Grady, Patrick	Thomson, Richard
Hendry, Drew	Williams, Hywel
Hosie, rh Stewart	Wishart, Pete
Lake, Ben	
Law, Chris	
Linden, David	
MacAskill, Kenny	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Peter Grant

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Aldous, Peter
Afriyie, Adam	Anderson, Lee
Aiken, Nickie	Anderson, Stuart

Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Choqe, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark

Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 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
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heapey, rh James
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia

Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 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
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Solloway and
Jacob Young

Question accordingly negated.

South Staffs Water: Cyber-attack

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

7.10 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing this Adjournment debate.

In July this year, South Staffordshire PLC, the parent company of both South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water, experienced a criminal cyber-attack. The incident involved the theft of data from its IT systems. Following the incident, it found evidence that some of its staff and customer data had been accessed. With investigations still ongoing, it has now been confirmed that at least 249,000 customers who pay by direct debit—pretty much all of my Dudley North constituents and myself included—have now seen their personal contact and banking details available on the dark web.

The incident took place in July this year, and customers have only in recent weeks been made aware of the real scale of the damage. I did meet virtually with the South Staffs team yesterday, ahead of this evening's debate. To their credit, they are seemingly taking the issue much more seriously than initially perceived. It is clear that no business wants to harm its customers or be the victim of a cyber-attack.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I, too, have constituents who have been affected by this issue. I am a South Staffs Water customer myself, although my bank account details have not been breached. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must be concerned about the amount of time that it has taken between this issue being apparently found out by South Staffordshire PLC and customers being informed? I sincerely hope that South Staffordshire is able to reassure its customers that, when it comes to data, it will continue to take this matter incredibly seriously and do all it can to rectify the matter and continue to protect both my hon. Friend's constituents and mine.

Marco Longhi: My right hon. Friend is correct. In fact, one aspect of the conversation that I had with the chief executive of South Staffordshire PLC was to challenge that very point. The response was that, at the time of the cyber-attack, it was not aware of the damage that had been caused and how extensive it might have been. It has taken time for it to understand the extent of what had happened. Then it had to respond within a certain timeframe under a duty to its customers. I have to say that it does feel like a long time, and, of course, during that time we have seen what has happened to customers' data.

As I was saying a few moments ago, it is clear that no business wants to harm its customers or be victims of a cyber-attack, particularly those with a proven long and positive relationship with their customers, as in fact South Staffs Water does have. Not only were cyber-defences not strong enough, but I have been clear, and the company recognises, that the communications and response from the company were not as appropriate or as user-friendly as many of us would and should have expected.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I, too, was a victim of this situation as a Cambridge Water customer. On the communications point, it was lengthy and detailed,

but for many customers I suspect it was intimidating. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be better if the company had just said, "There is a problem. You can find out more here, but don't worry, whatever happens, we will sort it out for you"?

Marco Longhi: The hon. Member is right, although I would not want to oversimplify the extent of the problem. The company has acknowledged that the response was not appropriate. It has accepted the critique and a number of the suggestions I made, and on the back of that, it has committed to making some improvements. I have yet to hear what those improvements will look like, but he is correct in what he says. Given the spectrum of customers that the company serves, we also need to think about tailored responses to different people, given the predicaments some of them may be in.

Several constituents have reached out to me with real anxieties and concerns, as have other Members. Picture this, if you will, Mr Deputy Speaker. You are an elderly resident with little or no access to IT or no IT literacy, and you have just received a six-page letter with instructions you are unable to deal with. It is a long and complicated letter—with very small font, I might add; something that even I would struggle with—with important information hidden several pages deep. You establish in the first page that your banking details and other personal details have been sold on a wholly unlawful area on the internet known as the dark web. You are told that criminals might take large sums of money from your accounts. Furthermore, upon reading the reams of prose, you find out you can only seek to protect yourself on the internet—something you might not even have access to. You may also be a vulnerable customer who perhaps receives care support in independent settings, but be wholly unprepared and unable to deal with something this complicated and even alien to the life you experience daily.

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned those who do not have access to internet or emails. I contacted South Staffs Water—I, too, have constituents affected by this cyber-attack—and it advised that these constituents would need to apply for paper copies of their records from three different credit reference agencies, and they would also need to verify their identity first. Does he agree that this will cause a considerable amount of work for those in these situations, particularly as they will presumably have to do this regularly to ensure they have up-to-date records?

Marco Longhi: My hon. Friend is right. All I can say is that the situation is clearly unacceptable, and the senior management team at the company now agree that their initial response was not adequate or appropriate. They physically have not had the time to address these concerns yet, but we should all be looking on behalf of our constituents to ensure that their response takes on board all these considerations.

Picturing yourself again as this vulnerable customer, Mr Deputy Speaker, you are then advised that to secure your data, you should register with another organisation called CIFAS—this was one of the things mentioned in the letter—at an additional personal cost, it was suggested by the company, of £25 a year. You are asked to then release yet more personal data on to the internet. That angered me somewhat, and it was one of the first things

[Marco Longhi]

I mentioned to the chief executive. Their immediate response was, “We have withdrawn that. We are writing again to customers, and we have removed that, as it has created confusion. We should not have done it”, and that is part of the package that the company will be coming back with in support of its customers.

When a data breach such as this has happened, one cannot simply let it go, because it can affect credit ratings, which can in turn affect an individual’s ability to apply for credit, whether a loan, credit card, mortgage or even a mobile phone contract. It could lead to a household finding itself unable to pay for household bills, groceries, electricity or heating. Should the worst happen, a data breach could lead to an individual or family finding themselves severely impoverished through no fault of their own—that point must be emphasised.

I know that I would panic and be extremely anxious, and I am sure that you would be as well, Mr Deputy Speaker, should you have found yourself in such a situation. As many of us in the House will know, good, easy to read and user-friendly communications are vital for keeping our constituents informed and with peace of mind. That is why, after I met South Staffs Water, it acknowledged shortcomings in its initial communications with its customers, and I am assured at this point that it is taking serious steps to mitigate the anxiety caused and ensuring that its customers are supported. I have also asked it to make special arrangements—I do not know yet what they will look like—to reach out to some of those more vulnerable customer groups that I mentioned.

Those of us with constituents who are customers of South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water know that what is needed is better access to over-the-phone support and in-person community support—events and surgeries—to give the best support to the hardest-to-reach members of our communities and to proactively reach those who may not know how to respond to a data breach letter. We must ensure that those who may be less comfortable accessing support online, and indeed those who cannot do so, are not left out in the cold.

I am pleased that, having met South Staffs Water, it has committed to upping its game and is taking better action to support our constituents. What are businesses doing to support our constituents by future-proofing themselves against cyber-attacks? What are the Government doing to assist businesses in that endeavour, and indeed to protect public services that could be victims of such attacks, ultimately to protect all of our constituents?

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Paul Scully): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) for securing the debate and bringing attention to an important, serious issue that has been worrying a number of his constituents as well as constituents of those hon. Members who made contributions: my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Kniveton) and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). Although my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) cannot speak as he is a Government Whip, I know that he has also been active in contacting his affected constituents.

While cyber-resilience in the water sector is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I am responding as the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has responsibility for data protection and cyber-resilience for the wider economy—I know that you were wondering, Mr Deputy Speaker, why I was here once again. The threat to the UK from cyber-attacks is on the increase as evidenced by the sharp rise in ransomware attacks that British companies have suffered in the last few years. Cyber-criminals are increasingly seeing ransomware as a profitable business. The Government are committed to addressing that issue, as evidenced by the national cyber strategy that was published in December 2021.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North highlighted, in August, South Staffordshire plc—the parent company of South Staffs Water and Cambridge Water—was hit by a cyber-attack that resulted in data extortion and ransom. The criminals also exfiltrated information from the company and attempted to extort it for their own financial gains. The National Cyber Security Centre, which is a part of GCHQ, alongside UK law enforcement and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, offered support to South Staffs Water and its incident response provider. In particular, the NCSC’s technical experts offered tactical and strategic guidance on how to effectively respond to and recover from the incident. DEFRA, which is responsible for the security and resilience of the water sector, also responded quickly and worked with South Staffs Water to understand the potential impact, provide business continuity advice and help it with notification requirements.

It is important to note that at no time was the water supply to residents affected. This was an attack on the organisation’s corporate IT system, which resulted in the theft of some customers’ personal data. I extend my sympathies to the customers who were affected and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North again for taking up this issue with the company on their behalf. As we heard, the company has contacted the affected customers and offered them advice and support, including a free 12-month credit monitoring and fraud alert service.

South Staffs Water made the Information Commissioner’s Office aware of the incident, and the ICO is making the necessary inquiries. Under the UK’s data protection legislation, organisations must take appropriate security measures to ensure the protection of the personal data they hold. That includes the personal and financial details of customers. If there is a breach of personal data that presents a risk to the affected individuals, organisations must notify the ICO within 72 hours of becoming aware of the breach. Breaches of the legislation are liable to enforcement action by the ICO, including fines of up to £17 million or 4% of the organisation’s global turnover for the most serious breaches.

Firms that deliver essential services like the supply of drinking water, transport or electricity are subject to regulations to ensure that their protections are appropriate to the risk. The Network and Information Systems Regulations 2018, or NIS regulations, which the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport brought into effect, are the relevant regulations in this case. The regulations require companies, including South Staffs Water, to take steps to ensure the security, resilience and continuity of their services.

The NIS competent authorities are responsible for ensuring that organisations adhere to the regulations. The competent authority for the water supply sector is the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and implementation is overseen by the Drinking Water Inspectorate. They responded to this incident, alongside the National Cyber Security Centre, to ensure that water remained safe and that the company was supported in its response. The NCSC worked with South Staffs Water by providing guidance on messaging, helping it to understand the potential impact and advising it on business continuity.

Only two weeks ago, the Government announced that following a public consultation, DCMS would strengthen the NIS regulations to boost security standards and increase the reporting of serious cyber-incidents. We will ensure that more services and organisations, including outsourced IT services, come within the scope of the NIS legislation. Those changes will reduce the risk of cyber-attacks causing damage and disruption. The changes to the law will be made as soon as parliamentary time allows.

However, legislation is not a silver bullet to address all cyber-threats. While it is important, it is only one of a broad range of activities, initiatives, programmes, and policies that are in place as part of the UK's broader national cyber strategy, which was published in December 2021. If we are to limit the likelihood of such attacks being successful in the future, we have to raise the collective security and resilience of the whole country, and make everyone better equipped to resist and respond to those who would do us harm. The security and safety of our country is a top priority of the Government. Our national cyber strategy, backed with investment of £2.6 billion, sets out how the Government are taking action to ensure our people, businesses and essential services are secure and resilient to cyber-attacks. The National Cyber Security Centre is the Government's technical authority on cyber-security. The NCSC is providing the expertise, advice, tools and support to ensure that government, industry and the public are secure online.

Those in law enforcement, including the National Crime Agency and our specialist cyber-trained officers in police forces across the country, are apprehending cyber-criminals and providing advice on how businesses can protect themselves. My Department is also working to improve levels of cyber-resilience right across the wider economy. That includes ensuring we have the skilled professionals we need, supported by a growing and

innovative cyber-security sector that provides the products and services to keep organisations secure. We are also working to ensure organisations are operated and governed in a way that tackles the cyber threat appropriately, for example, by training board members and including digital risks in company annual reports. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is also taking action to improve the security of the technology being used by businesses, organisations and consumers.

Given what we have heard today, I again commend my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North for the way he engaged with the company about the correspondence, which, as I said, has to balance being simple to understand and including the complexities of the case. He was right to address that and I am glad that the company responded to his intervention. He talked about CIFAS. The fact is that that £25 subscription is an additional option. Again, I am glad that, thanks to his encouragement, the company clarified that for people who would, understandably, already be worried about loss and risk. Worrying about having to pay £25 to get support would have been an extra concern, but it is important to emphasise that that is not the case; they get all the support from the water company, but the £25 is an additional option, should they wish to take it up.

Despite your encouragement, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will not go on long today. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to reassure Members that the Government continue to take significant action to ensure the security and resilience of our country's essential services and the wider digital economy. However, the cyber threat continues to evolve and remains very real, despite the good progress we have made in recent years. In the past 12 months, 39% of businesses and 30% of charities suffered a cyber-breach or attack. Many of them lost money and data, as well as suffering from disruption and having to invest staff time to fix the problems. Cyber-security threats posed by criminals and nation states continue to be acute, particularly from low-sophistication cyber-crime. Ransomware attacks are also on the rise, and their use as a service is becoming more and more prevalent. For that reason, organisations across the economy must ensure they continue to manage their risks appropriately and put in place the measures needed to protect their money, data and operations.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

ARCHITECTS

That the draft Architects Act 1997 (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 14 November, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 42.

Division No. 130]

AYES

Adams, rh Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan

Clarkson, Chris
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 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
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen

Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 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
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Largan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn

Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Jeremy
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 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
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe

Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 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
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir
 Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 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, Sir Charles
 Warman, Matt (*Proxy vote
 cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Sir
 John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir
 Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Bardell, Hannah
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
 cast by Martin Docherty-
 Hughes*)
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Chapman, Douglas
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
 by Martin Docherty-Hughes*)
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Fellows, Marion
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter

NOES

Hendry, Drew
 Lake, Ben
 Law, Chris
 Linden, David
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
 cast by Martin Docherty-
 Hughes*)
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Williams, Hywel
 Wishart, Pete

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 December 2022

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Asylum Seeker Employment and the Cost of Living

9.30 am

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum seeker employment and the cost of living.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. My constituent Mary had to flee her home country of Kenya because of fear of persecution and sought asylum in the UK in 2017. I met Mary in August of this year and learned about her story and the barriers that she has faced since coming to the UK, one of which is the barrier to being able to work. Back in August, she told me:

“I was made to understand that I did not have the right to work as a person seeking asylum. This was...devastating for me as I knew I had some transferrable skills that I could use here to build my life and contribute to society.

Not being able to work really affected my mental health. It felt...demeaning for me especially being a parent and not being able to fully provide for my child. Most days, I was confined in the house, dealing with devastation and a lot of stress. There were days my daughter had to miss school when it was non-uniform...days”.

Mahmoud came to the UK in 2020, fearing for his life. He was forced to leave behind his wife and young son. Mahmoud was a civil servant and campaigner in Sierra Leone. He loved his job, but more importantly, he loved the fact that he was advocating for others. His life was sent into a spiral when the authorities began persecuting him. He said:

“Going hungry brings me some comfort. The money that could pay for my food has paid for the food my family is eating. My little son”—

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. While inflation has pushed the cost of energy and food to a 40-year high, the asylum support allowance has risen by just 13p from last year. Does he share my concern that the Home Office has not adequately considered the harm done when refugees cannot afford the very basics, such as three meals a day?

Christian Wakeford: I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. I was just coming on to that point, but I completely and wholeheartedly agree.

As Mahmoud said, going hungry brings him some comfort. The money that could pay for his food has meant that his little son will not go to bed hungry. That is the only comfort that it brings him. He used to spend £10 on his weekly grocery shop, but now, increasing costs are making that impossible. These are not one-off instances; this is the life of an asylum seeker in a cost of living crisis.

Close to 18 months ago, I was in a debate on the Nationality and Borders Bill. In that debate, I said that asylum seekers travel through many safe countries, and

that they essentially have a shopping trolley as to what they want as economic migrants. I want to go on record here and say that it is important to admit when you are wrong. My meetings with Mary and others have shown me that I was wrong, and I am sorry for that. Every week, the Government use scapegoats, and as we continued to see even yesterday in the Prime Minister’s statement, asylum seekers have been one for this Government for far too long. I am sorry for playing my part in that narrative as well.

These people are not arbitrary numbers for newspaper editors to froth at the mouth about, or to stoke the fire of intolerance. They are human beings, and we all need to remember that. They have had their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children dashed, but they still have hope. They want a good education; they want to live life without fear of persecution; and more importantly, they need our help and assistance. The persecution may be for a religious or political belief, due to war or because of the sexuality of the person they love, but when I have met asylum seekers, one thing has always been constant: the need for dignity after all they have been through. I am sure that we can all agree that having a purpose through work brings dignity.

People seeking asylum in the UK are in effect prohibited from working, and are forced to rely on just £5.84 a day while they wait for a decision to be reached on their asylum claim. During the cost of living crisis, that small sum makes it impossible to cover what is needed. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said, an increase of just 13p in a year seems miserly in the crisis that we face as a nation.

You have fled persecution, and you fear for your life. You have taken on a potentially near-death experience, crossing dangerous waters in an overflowing dinghy with both your children. You get to your destination, but all avenues are blocked. That £5.84 does not even buy two cups of coffee. It is not enough to feed or clothe yourself or your children, to travel to appointments, or to buy toiletries and sanitary products; that is not feasible. That just is not fair.

Immigration rules dictate that people can apply to work only after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. There are many reasons why lifting the ban on asylum seekers working in the UK is the right thing to do. Forcing people fleeing persecution to spend months of their lives in poverty is inhumane. It has a detrimental impact on their physical and, more importantly, mental health. Enabling people to work provides them with the human dignity of being able to support themselves and their families while they build a route out of poverty. There are moral and ethical reasons why that would be the right thing to do. Lifting the ban would also provide considerable fiscal benefits to the country.

Without the opportunity to work, many people seeking asylum are forced into unsafe and exploitative practices, including forced labour. Research by the OECD found that a lack of permission to work can lead some people seeking asylum to work unlawfully, and that type of work can lead to situations of exploitation and modern slavery, as they do not have recourse to health and safety measures, or even regulated employment practices.

The Lift the Ban coalition estimates that reform of the policy could save the UK economy more than £333 million a year. If 50% of people who have waited

[*Christian Wakeford*]

more than six months for a decision on their initial asylum application were able to work full time on the national average wage, the Government would receive almost £249 million from the tax and national insurance contributions alone. If they no longer required subsistence support but retained support for accommodation, the Government would save an additional £84 million.

By the end of 2022, the Treasury will have wasted nearly £1 billion over 10 years as a result of banning people seeking asylum from working. Lifting the ban would also bring us into line with other countries around the world. The restrictive approach that the UK takes on the right to work makes it an international outlier. In comparable countries across Europe and in Australia, people are given an opportunity to support themselves earlier, with fewer restrictions. In France and Spain, there is a six-month wait, and in Germany a three-month wait.

Employment figures continue to show tightness in the labour market; the CBI has identified that three quarters of businesses are being hit by labour shortages. The British Chambers of Commerce suggests that reform of the shortage occupation list is required to allow sectors facing an urgent demand for skills to get what they need. It makes no sense for business, or for this country, to prohibit thousands of people who have the necessary skills from filling vacancies in industries that are desperately in need of workers.

Members should not listen only to me; the Lift the Ban coalition brings together almost 270 members, including the TUC, Unison and Oxfam, as well as those famous lefties at the CBI, Bright Blue and the Adam Smith Institute. The Government's own Migration Advisory Committee released its annual report on Monday. It found that banning asylum seekers from working results in their entering the informal economy on poorer wages and conditions, which leaves them open to exploitation. It states:

"We also recommended that the Government review their policy more generally on allowing asylum seekers to work."

It is not only businesses but the public who support that. YouGov polling carried out in March 2022 found that 81% of the population support granting the right to work after someone has waited six months. According to Refugee Action, 97,717 people seeking asylum have waited more than six months for an initial decision on their application—a sixfold increase from five years ago.

We have heard many times about the asylum system being broken. The figures alone show that to be the case. Just over three quarters—77%—of asylum seekers will eventually have their asylum claim accepted. The cost of living crisis has illuminated the ongoing dangers and frustrations of the restrictive rules. Soaring food and energy prices have pushed inflation to a 40-year high, yet the rate of asylum support allowance has risen by just 13p since 2021. Without the option of supporting themselves and their families through work, many people seeking asylum experience poverty, destitution and homelessness, and develop serious physical and mental health issues. The Conservative mantra has always been that the best route out of poverty is through work, so why are asylum seekers left in destitution and not offered that route?

Labour supports granting asylum seekers the right to work after they have waited for six months. The Minister for Immigration admitted recently that although he did not think the policy should change due to pull-factor concerns, there are good arguments on both sides of the debate. The Government's defence of the policy is that enabling asylum seekers to work would act as a pull factor, and that wider economic policy schemes could be seriously undermined if migrants were able to bypass work visa rules by lodging unfounded asylum claims in the UK, but that falls flat given that a leaked Home Office report showed that permission to work is not a pull factor. The report revealed that many people seeking asylum do not have a prior understanding of welfare policies or access to provisions before they come to a country, and they have little knowledge of economic conditions in destination countries.

Equally, the argument that economic migrants will make false claims in order to access the labour market is not a strong line of defence. A six-month waiting period would provide a strong safeguard against that. It is implausible that somebody would bring themselves to the attention of the authorities on the basis that there might be a chance that their asylum application will not be decided within six months. In reality, most people seeking asylum do not have a choice about the country to which they flee. Many of those who have come to the UK have done so because of cultural, family or community connections.

I pay particular thanks to Refugee Action for all the important work it does in supporting asylum seekers. It has been an invaluable source of information and, more importantly, education to me. I also thank World Jewish Relief; it set up its specialist training and employment programme in 2016, which helps refugees to gain language skills and qualifications, and to get training. It also provides one-to-one assistance in CV writing and interview skills.

We need an asylum system based on compassion. I hope the Minister has listened closely to the body of supportive evidence and takes heed of it. Human beings all need support at some point. Please do not leave these people behind.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

9.42 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (*Christian Wakeford*) on securing this debate, and on making such a powerful speech. It took a lot of honesty and courage, and I believe it truly honours his constituents.

When we see people through the lens of how they were created, we do not see the labels that people have adhered to them. We find our brothers and sisters, our colleagues and friends. For that reason, it is so important to seek the very best for people who are at their very worst. I have serious concern about people who are not in education, employment or training. We know the impact that has on our constituents, no matter where they come from or their circumstances. We know about the impact on their mental health, their self-esteem and their dignity. We know about the impact on wider

society, the local economy and the Treasury. The desire to work is instinctive in all of us. We want to contribute and make a difference to our society, and people who have come far want to make their contribution, too.

Margaret Ferrier: Not allowing asylum seekers to work means that the public perceive them as living off the state. Much of the public do not know about the work restrictions and the lack of access to welfare. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government's approach to refugees contributes to misconceptions, and may lead to racism?

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. There is a risk that that approach can be used to fuel a debate. That is why it is important to ensure that people who come to live in our communities are integrated into them, become part of our streets, families and society, and play a strong role by contributing and receiving, as we all do. That makes stronger societies. She makes a pertinent point.

People's desire to work should be honoured, but as we know, across society, some of those people will be picked off by traffickers. Many people are trafficked to our country, and their securing good employment is one way to mitigate that. We know about the rise of modern slavery and exploitation. A black market is operating, and it would be far better for people to have the opportunity to contribute through legal employment than to be taken to darker places. When people are in employment, additional safety and accountability is placed around them. We hearing too many stories of people disappearing. That is not safe for them, or for wider society.

Let me look at another aspect of the argument. I hear constantly from employers in my constituency and across North Yorkshire that there is a serious labour shortage. I am thinking about the NHS and social care, where services are unsafe because they cannot be properly staffed. We have an NHS crisis; it needs to secure more and more people in work. I am thinking about our wider public services and the contribution that so many people could make to the UK, just as they contributed in the countries from which they fled. I am thinking about the opportunities in agriculture; we need to increase our food security. I am also thinking about logistics, in which, again, there are serious labour shortages.

So many of the people coming to our country could be part of the future economy. We have a climate crisis and are talking, at this very cold time, about the need to retrofit homes, yet we do not have the skills or the workforce to do that. We could train a new generation of workers to be part of the army that will be needed to address those issues. Construction and engineering are other examples. There are so many such areas.

In my constituency, many hospitality settings have to close for part of the week because they simply do not have enough labour. That lack of labour is having a significant impact on the economy. The Government have been challenged by productivity, yet people who desperately want to work are being denied that opportunity. They could bring a greater return to the Treasury and help the economy across the board to settle, so that inflation could be controlled and the cost of living crisis, into which we have all been plunged, addressed.

Asylum seekers have to wait 12 months before they get the opportunity to work. That demonstrates the crisis that has emerged, owing to the Home Office not

having enough labour in place to process claims more quickly, and it costs people significantly. People's talents are being wasted. I would fully support an employment programme that ensured that people had the opportunity to work. Last week, I met the Minister for Immigration to discuss that very issue, and to talk about the opportunities now that York has many asylum seekers coming to stay in our city. I offered our city, which is England's only human rights city, as a city of sanctuary. There is an opportunity for people to come, and I suggested that in an orientation, they should receive the input and support that they need to address their trauma, and should receive any necessary language support.

We should also start to triage people, and to look at who would most benefit where—for example, for younger people, we should look at schools and colleges—and at where the skillsets are. For many people, it might be worth looking at the occupational shortage list; they could then move into skilled employment. Others should have the opportunity to undertake training, and work could then be identified for them. Alongside that, we should ensure that people have the accommodation that they need. If people are in employment, they can contribute to the cost of their accommodation and that of their family.

I also discussed a scheme that I would like the Government to adopt for people coming to the UK for asylum: homes for asylum seekers and refugees. That would give people the opportunity to integrate, and to live with families here. We have seen the success of the scheme for people coming from Ukraine, who have been able to integrate into communities. When 77% of asylum seekers have their applications granted, it obviously makes sense to get people ready for employment and for the opportunity to play a full part in our society as part of our communities. To deny those people that opportunity for 12 months is to deny them a year of their life, which is completely inappropriate. We know that work is therapeutic and healing, and it is one way of providing dignity for people. I have heard many stories of constituents who have come to me and begged for the opportunity to work, to provide and to be humanised through labour.

It is absolutely right that we now see the Government move; it is economically literate for them to do so, but it will also dignify people across society. It will build a stronger economy for the future, build better integration, take away the barriers that divide people and ultimately build a stronger society for all.

9.50 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) on securing the debate. Its timing is particularly good, given that we are about to go into the Christmas recess. Many of us will enjoy time with our families, and at the same time we are asking people not just to exist on £5.84 per day but live in cold and often damp housing. It is not a time of cheer for those people.

Earlier this year, I presented my Asylum Seekers (Permission to Work) Bill for First Reading. I discussed many of the issues that hon. Members have raised this morning. Ultimately, if we strip all this back and look at what the actual issue is, it is the Home Office; that is the bottom line. It is not making decisions and people are kept in limbo. Yes, we might hear about people kept

[Carol Monaghan]

in limbo for months, but for many of them—including a lot of my constituents—it is year after year of living hell. They cannot move on with their lives and they cannot do anything; they are literally just stuck there.

Christian Wakeford: If the hon. Member's inbox is anything like mine, she will have people who are waiting two or perhaps even three years. They come to my office literally every single day just to see if we have had any news whatsoever. Unfortunately, all that we can say is, "No, but we will chase it again." It is not being able to actually get on with life; they do not have a life, because they are not able to. They are stuck in limbo, as she said. She is absolutely right; this is fundamentally a failure of the Home Office, and it needs to be corrected now.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. One of my constituents has been waiting seven years for a decision. Are they an asylum seeker? Well, they are an asylum seeker—but are they a refugee or not? Surely we can come to a decision on that faster than seven years. We have a duty. If these people are not genuinely refugees, let us allow them to move on with their lives, because they cannot do that.

This is also economically stupid. We hear about the cost of housing these poor individuals. What we should be looking at instead is this: if they are working, what tax revenues can we gain? In fact, if only half of those currently awaiting a decision from the Home Office were able to work, it would generate nearly £200 million a year in tax revenues. We do not hear that; that is never put on the front of the *Daily Mail*. While there has recently been an increase in the shortage occupations where people can seek employment, there are still glaring gaps. Members have already talked about hospitality; I also have businesses in my constituency that are having to close because they cannot get staff. Meanwhile, literally upstairs from the café that is having to close, we have housed asylum seekers who are desperate to work. It makes no sense; when that café works, it closes. People—native Glaswegians, in my case—are also losing out, and money for the local economy is being lost. Simply by not allowing the neighbours upstairs to work, we are causing businesses to fail. It is economically stupid, but it is what we have come to expect.

Teachers are allowed to work if they teach maths, physics, computing or Gaelic, which is useful in Scotland, but there are huge shortages of teaching staff across the UK and we should be able to allow those people to come in and help. We have also seen shortages of HGV drivers, yet those people are not allowed to do such work.

In the rhetoric that we hear it is interesting that these individuals are coming here to steal all our jobs, at the same time as claiming all our benefits. That is the paradox that neither the *Daily Mail* nor this Tory Government seem to be able to solve. In fact, the reality is that these people do neither of those things. The majority of people are simply looking for somewhere safe to get on with their lives, where they can contribute.

Contributing is important: if we allow them to work, they contribute to the community and become part of our society. We all benefit as a result. I pay tribute to my constituent, Jean, who worked very hard with the asylum-seeker community about 20 years ago in Glasgow, when

the Home Office was trying to deport people. She mobilised the local community to stop that happening. The story was told as "Glasgow Girls", and one of those Glasgow girls, Roza Salih, is now an SNP councillor in Glasgow. Jean was the power behind the movement to stop the deportations happening. Kingsway Community Connections and people such as Jean are working hard to help people integrate and learn the language, and to show that they are welcome, which they are, but all the time we are battling against the poisonous rhetoric that causes so much difficulty.

We also hear about safe and legal routes. I would love the Minister to tell me what the safe and legal route is for my constituent's sister, who is women's rights worker in Afghanistan. Her brother was shot in front of her a couple of months back, by people who told her they are coming back for her. What safe and legal route is available to her? She is literally under threat of execution at the moment.

Working while waiting for a decision on an asylum claim allows for better integration, is economically sensible and allows us to learn from other cultures. It provides economic benefits to our communities and allows them to thrive. Finally, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury South once again on securing the debate and allowing us to put on record some of the issues.

9.58 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I offer huge congratulations to the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) on securing this important debate and on making a brave and moving speech. I thank him for what he said.

The right to work is a frustrating issue. I find myself unable to get into the Government's head on many parts of the discourse in this place about migration and how we treat refugees and asylum seekers, but the right to work is one area where the Government may be able to be pragmatic. I will make the case for that more fully if I have time at the end of my contribution, but to put it very bluntly and crudely, there are great left-wing and right-wing arguments for giving asylum seekers the right to work.

There are good bleeding-heart liberal reasons why we should care for people who are asylum seekers, as giving them dignity and the ability to integrate is a kind thing to do, but if the Conservatives, and the newspapers to which they tend to bow down, are really bothered about the cost of the asylum system, the answer is to allow people to pay their own way. There it is—I have solved the problem in one fell swoop: allow them to work, pay taxes and contribute to our society. That would be such an easy thing to do and I have a slight sense of hope from the Minister for Immigration, who was in Westminster Hall the other week responding to a debate on a related issue, that there may now be a little strain of pragmatism in the Home Office. I will continue to push for that, and I hope and pray that it might come to the fore.

Margaret Ferrier: Allowing refugees to work lets them integrate into their new communities faster. It could help tackle modern slavery. According to the campaign, Lift the Ban, it could hugely benefit the economy to the tune of £97.8 million per year in net

gains for the Government. Does the hon. Member agree that allowing asylum seekers to work is beneficial for both them and the UK?

Tim Farron: It really is, and I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. She is absolutely right, and I completely agree with her. It is worth bearing in mind the fact that some of the Government's tough posturing on asylum seekers contributes towards modern slavery. For instance, the nonsense about deporting people to Rwanda—what will that do? Will that stop people coming to the UK? Nope—it will stop people claiming asylum when they get to the UK, and then they will end up in the black economy, involved in modern slavery, forced labour and exploitation.

The objections to giving asylum seekers the right to work, or allowing the UK to make use of their talents—let us put it that way—are bogus. Fundamentally, they focus on the nonsense of the pull factor. Let us deal with that, first and foremost. The idea that the UK is being swamped by asylum seekers is nonsense. The massive majority—up to 90% of refugees—remain in a country neighbouring the place they have fled. Of those who find their way to Europe, four times more asylum seekers are in Germany than are in the UK, and there are three times more in France than the UK. If we were briefly to put the UK back in the EU for league-table purposes, we are 17th out of 28 when it comes to the refugees we take per capita. We are neither overwhelmed nor swamped.

The extent to which we are is because of a broken asylum system, where we fail to triage people's claims, and leave them rotting for months, even years, without an answer. That is absolutely outrageous. Yes, the cost of having people in hotels is huge, and it is entirely down to Government incompetence, not down to us being swamped by people seeking to invade and exploit us—and all that nonsense.

I have been to Calais, I have been to Paris to talk to displaced people from Calais, and out to some of the Greek islands where refugees first arrive in Europe. I talked to those who are seeking to come to the United Kingdom. First, they are a small minority. Secondly, when I dug down and asked why they wanted to come to the United Kingdom, their answer was family ties, and cultural reasons—particularly if people come from a country that was once part of the British Empire, and for whom this is the mother country. If that is the case, this is a place that people will seek to come to—but they are a relatively small minority.

With regards to all the hostile environment argument the Government comes up with to try to punish and dissuade people from coming here, there is no law that is dastardly enough even to remotely compete with the biggest “protection” this country has from asylum seekers—the small matter of being a flippin' island. It is hard to get here—really hard. There is nothing that we could do that would be able to match that bar to coming here, which is probably why we are 17th on the European league table, and have nowhere near the numbers of France and Germany.

It is worth saying that there is one pull factor. There is a pull factor about Britain—it is our centuries-old reputation. That is something that makes me proud. When one listens to people who are heading here, they are not saying, “I want to cream off the taxpayer.” They

are not saying, “I want benefits,” or “I can get free NHS treatment.” They are not even aware of those things. They are aware of Britain's reputation as a place of sanctuary. These are people who have been persecuted because of who they are, what their beliefs might be or what ethnicity they might be. They see Britain as a place where they can have a family in peace and quiet, and earn a living.

Carol Monaghan: It is also because Britain may well have had a colonial footprint in the country that they are coming from, so they have a feeling of affinity with Britain.

Tim Farron: That is absolutely right. They probably speak English, or have been taught it, so there is a sense of Britain being the mother country. The reputation of Britain as a place of religious and political liberty—a place of freedom—where people can live a quiet life is the pull factor. No amount of ridiculous legislation from this Government or any other will scrub out several centuries of having that reputation—a reputation we should be proud of.

I spent a little time in the constituency of my neighbour and friend the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), who is a Conservative MP—I will not say “but a decent human being”—and a decent human being. I went to one of the places where asylum seekers are being kept, and the people supporting them spoke highly of the hon. Member and his work supporting asylum seekers in their casework applications to have their cases heard. I came across people who had obviously gone through enormous trauma in the places they had fled, particularly those who fled through Libya, which is a place of terrible persecution and awful deprivation for those who have to pass through it to get to the Mediterranean. Many of them have post-traumatic stress disorder, and the mental health impact on them of having to wait for months on end is utterly intolerable. Many were not there because they were on antidepressants and simply could not get out of bed. My experience of meeting those people and seeing the talent they had made me think, “What a waste it is that that talent is not allowed to be deployed.”

Let us consider: why should the Government give asylum seekers the right to work? Why should the Government give the UK the right to benefit from asylum seekers' talent? It is simply because they will pay their way. If we are worried about the cost of asylum seekers to the taxpayer, we can stop worrying about it by giving them the opportunity to work, so they will be less of a burden and, by paying tax, will actually be contributors. We should think what it would mean for their mental health and dignity, which is important, and for their ability to develop their English and fit in more. As others have said, over three quarters of asylum seekers will be granted refugee status or granted asylum in this country.

Christian Wakeford: I rise to intervene because while we have been speaking, there has been an incident in the channel. Forty-seven people have been in the water and unfortunately several have died. That shows the dangerous lengths people go to to come here. It is not just for economic benefit and migration; people are taking a serious risk for cultural and familial reasons, and all the reasons we are talking about in this debate. We are a

[*Christian Wakeford*]

proud, tolerant country that should be accepting and trying to abide by that. Unfortunately, I feel that in the rhetoric we are hearing if someone said, “Build a wall”, I would not be surprised, so we need to overcome that and show compassion now more than ever.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. I know I have gone on for longer than I should, and I will wrap up in a minute. What he said was obviously heartbreaking, and it is a reminder that the reason why all the channel crossings happen is the lack of safe routes. If we allow people to apply when they are on dry land, they will not make ridiculous journeys like that. It is a minority of people who are fleeing who come to this country and, because we are protected by that body of water, people have to do dangerous things to get here. That is not a decision people take lightly. They take it because they are desperate and they see the United Kingdom as a place of safety for them. Giving asylum seekers the right to work will absolutely lessen the financial burden on the taxpayer. It will give the Government a defence for the many people encouraging them to be even more beastly because they are allowing them to share the cost of the system. It will help with integration, mental health and, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly pointed out, workforce issues. One of the major reasons why our economy is in recession is that there are parts of the economy where there is more demand than we can meet—that is an outrage.

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is really disheartening to hear about those deaths from the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford). While the moral and economic justifications are obvious, allowing asylum seekers to work would, conversely, deprive the Government of propaganda that says, “Asylum seekers are a drain on the country and a detriment to our society”. We all know how much the right-wing mainstream media love to fall back on finger-pointing and othering the poor, the vulnerable and especially refugees. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) will agree that allowing asylum seekers to work would give them the opportunity to provide a better standard of living for themselves and their families and improve their participation, engagement and contribution in UK society.

Tim Farron: I completely agree with everything the hon. Lady has said.

In conclusion, I want quickly to make a point about workforce in my community. There is a stat I often reel out—I did it yesterday in the main Chamber—that comes from a survey of Cumbria Tourism members. The lakes is the second biggest visitor destination in the country outside London. We have 20 million visitors a year and a relatively low population, so workforce is an issue. Some 63% of tourism businesses in the lakes report operating below capacity because they cannot find the staff. I am not saying that giving asylum seekers the right to work is the only answer, but it would contribute and help us economically. There are good self-interested reasons for the country to do this, but it is also the right thing to do morally.

This is about leadership. The rhetoric and discourse from the Government on asylum in particular—how we treat those who come to us for sanctuary—are a failure of moral leadership and show a lack of courage. They say there are two forms of leadership: one is where the leader sees the direction the crowd is travelling in and goes down to the front and says, “I agree”, which is not leadership, by the way; the other is where the leader has the courage to make the case. Leaders should lead and make the case. There is a strong, hard-nosed conservative argument for doing this, as well as a bleeding-heart liberal reason. Would the Minister agree to look into the mechanisms that would need to be employed to give asylum seekers the right to work or, to flip it the other way round, to allow the United Kingdom to make use of the talents of those who come to us for sanctuary?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): From Tim to Jim—I call Jim Shannon.

10.11 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate on a subject that is very close to my heart. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who captured the exact reasons why we are here. It is because we believe there is a good case to be made, and I am going to make my case for my constituency, as he did for his.

All of the hon. Gentleman’s speech captured my attention, but the one particular point that I took out of it was the fact that many asylum seekers may have a connection with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They are well aware of what the country that they may see as their mother nation has to offer them. The hon. Gentleman captured the emotion of the occasion very well, as well as the importance of the case we are trying to put forward. It is because of issues relating to human rights and freedom of religious belief that many asylum seekers have fled from where they came from, whether that is Afghanistan, Syria or Ukraine, as is topical at this moment in time and very fresh and real in our memories.

I want to put forward the case for Strangford. I am going to name some of the firms in my constituency that have offered jobs. Their offers are on the record and I have made those companies’ names available to Ministers. I do not understand why people who are here have not been offered those jobs when they are available, but I will speak more on that in a minute.

The rise in the cost of living is having a severe impact on many across the United Kingdom. People in full-time employment with possible savings are still struggling to make ends meet. I say this respectfully to Government: I believe that there must be some element of compassion for those who are awaiting asylum decisions and living on incredibly low amounts of money. I have always had the belief that we must help those who do not have the capacity to help themselves. We are fortunate and privileged to be Members of Parliament. Our job is to speak up for those who do not have anyone to speak for them. We may never meet them, but that does not mean we will speak up for them any less. Each and every Member who has spoken so far in this debate has reiterated that point. I know that the shadow Ministers who will follow will also confirm the stance that we all share on this matter.

There are currently 97,717 people in the UK seeking asylum, often waiting well over six months for a decision—a sixfold increase from five years ago. Numerous concerns have been raised about the amount of money allocated to those awaiting asylum decisions just to survive. I challenge anybody in this place to survive on that amount of money.

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to Lift the Ban, which is a really good project. It focuses attention on this issue, and I have some questions for the Minister. The Lift the Ban campaign has given Northern Ireland businesses and others across the United Kingdom a real insight into the benefits that would come with allowing asylum seekers to work. One asylum seeker living in a hotel in Belfast stated, “Now, the asylum seeker receives just £8 a week—that is not enough.” He said, “An asylum seeker living in shared accommodation receives £37 a week—that is also not enough and, even worse, not fair.” I do not believe that it is fair, either. I am no more compassionate than anybody else in this Chamber, but I understand fairly well what everyone is trying to say. Relying on that amount of money per week to cover essentials such as food, clothing and travel has never been easy for people seeking asylum, especially given the financial turmoil that we have all faced in the last couple of months and will face in the months to come.

I greatly respect the Minister and we have been friends for some time, but has she seen the Lift the Ban campaign? If not, I respectfully ask her to take note of it and to look at the options and solutions that it has put forward to try to address this issue. Will the Minister adopt and promote the proposals espoused by the campaign?

With consumer prices rising by 11% since last year, there have been increasing calls from the Lift the Ban campaign and others to encourage the Government to allow asylum seekers out of inactivity and let them partake in some employment. It is probably no secret that I am a bit of a workaholic; I like to be busy. I suspect that other MPs like to be busy, too. Can you imagine sitting in a hotel or shared accommodation for seven days a week and only being able to go out for a wee stroll? Your mind does not function—I say that very respectfully—your body does not function, and you become depressed. Indeed, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale referred to asylum seekers being prescribed medication for depression.

We should allow those who are skilled and, more importantly, willing to work to get into employment and find some part-time or full-time work that requires little official training. I do not say that in a demeaning way; I say it because it would mean that asylum seekers could step into a job tomorrow, which would allow them to earn a little extra cash and make their daily lives easier. I have companies in my constituency of Strangford that are looking for workers, and I have conveyed that to Ministers on numerous occasions. Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians in the asylum system have skills and there are job vacancies, so why not help them by giving them the opportunity to find employment? It would also give them some dignity and lift their confidence. Families would know that their breadwinner was out there earning for them, and it would keep families together—I am very conscious of that.

Carol Monaghan: As usual, the hon. Gentleman is giving a well-considered speech. Does he agree that it is the most natural thing in the world for human beings to have purpose and meaning in their day? Going out and earning a living gives them that purpose. Without that, asylum seekers are vulnerable to exploitation from those who would take advantage of the very vulnerable in our society.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right and I could not put it any better, because that is exactly how I feel. We should give them dignity and a purpose in life—I genuinely do not think that is too much to ask. That is why this debate is so important.

I will give another indication of the jobs that are available. The owner of a bar in Belfast revealed that they were crying out for staff. As we come up to Christmas, there are literally hundreds of jobs that could be taken advantage of in the hospitality industry in particular. Again, I just do not understand why those jobs are not being offered to people. If they cannot fill the jobs from the society we live in—whatever the reasons may be—there are plenty of people in hotels not too far away who would love that opportunity. There are people from Afghanistan sitting in a hotel in Bangor, which is a city in North Down. They have been there for over 15 months. My goodness. I am going to challenge everybody in this room: would anyone like to be sitting like that in a hotel? Bangor is nice, by the way, but that is not the point. It is not in my constituency, but I say that with honesty. Could anyone’s mind take that? Could anyone physically take that? I do not think so.

Carol Monaghan: On the hotel issue, this is portrayed as some sort of luxury. Can anyone imagine being in a hotel room? I stay in hotels here in London. It is bad enough doing two or three nights a week, but imagine that being your only place, with no cooking facilities, no place for the children to sleep, no separation of family members and no privacy. It would be hell.

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Lady. I am not sure it would be hell. As a Christian, I think hell is a place you never want to be and worse than anything in this world.

Carol Monaghan: It would not be pleasant.

Jim Shannon: I understand the hon. Lady’s point. I did not say that to be judgmental, by the way. I just wanted to make that point.

Although I appreciate and respect the Government decisions on not permitting asylum seekers to work, I believe that schemes could be put in place by our Government—my Government—to allow them to get back to society. They want to get back to society. They want to do something. They want to be purposeful with their lives here in our country. For example, they could take part in community service and assistance by means of cleaning streets or doing local gardening—for those who just want to be physically active. It does not mean the job is demeaning. It is important. It helps us out.

I want to mention two companies. Willowbrook Foods has a number of jobs and I met the chief executive officer, John McCann. He told me to tell Government that he has jobs available. He has been trying to fill

[Jim Shannon]

those jobs within our own constituency but has not been able to do so, so there are jobs and opportunities. The CEO of Mash Direct is Martin Hamilton. I heard the same thing from him. I think Willowbrook Foods employs about 260 to 270 people, and Mash Direct employs about 230 to 240. They have jobs available and they have specifically said that they want to help the Afghans, the Ukrainians and the Syrians get the jobs and make their lives better. I believe this allows for an improvement of local standards and improvement in the mental and physical health of asylum seekers. It would give them a way to give back to our community and a chance to make some money in order to get the essential items that they need and want.

Amid the cost of living crisis, the Government are taking steps to assist all aspects of our society. I ask that that includes those awaiting asylum decisions. To be asked to live on as little as £8 a week is shocking. Yes, accommodation and essential bills, such as for heating and electricity, are covered, but many of these families have young children. What about their schooling? What about the help for young children? They are just wee children, who look to their mum and dad for support, succour and help. But, at the end of the day, they also need to have active minds and bodies. Is that too much to ask? Some even have babies who require nappies, formula and baby food, which come at extortionate prices. In the last month I have become a grandfather again—it is the sixth time around. Rachael and Luke tell me that the price of baby stuff—they already have a child so they can compare it—is getting extortionate.

I strongly encourage and urge Government to consider the introduction of schemes, such as Lift the Ban and others, to ensure that asylum seekers have the possibility of earning some money for themselves while serving and working in our local communities, as well as dignity, understanding and opportunity. It is due time that Government understood that asylum seekers have abilities and skills and there are jobs available right now that they can do. To my mind, to give asylum seekers jobs is a win-win.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you so much for that. There has been a fantastic array of Back-Bench speeches. I now invite the Front Benchers to speak, starting with Alison Thewliss of the SNP.

10.24 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) for securing this debate and being honest and courageous enough to say that he has changed his mind. Many people get stuck in the position of thinking, “I’ve said something once so I have to stick to it forever,” so it can be difficult to do that. I thank him very much for doing that; it is incredibly powerful.

I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin), who fulfilled this portfolio role with great ability over the past couple of years. I am honoured to take it up following them; I have large shoes to fill.

I thank Refugee Action for its action on this issue and its campaigning over many years as part of the Lift the Ban coalition. More locally in Glasgow, I thank the Maryhill Integration Network and the Red Cross VOICES Network, which have done so much to bring this issue to light.

We all agree that, regardless of our constituency, political party and ideological position, there is a case to be made for allowing asylum seekers the right to work. The Migration Advisory Committee is giving the Government the same advice, so they really ought to be listening to it. I am desperately sad to hear the news that some people may have died in the wee small hours trying to cross the channel this morning in perishingly cold conditions. It highlights that we urgently need safe and legal routes to come to this country. People need to be able to apply for asylum from abroad. The only reason that people are crossing the channel in that way is that there is no safe way to do it, and I urge the Minister to give great consideration to that.

Article 23 of the universal declaration of human rights recognises that the right to work is a fundamental right, yet the UK Government’s restrictive approach to asylum seekers leaves people in limbo while the UK labour market suffers chronic shortages. All Members have spoken about the need for people to fill jobs in their constituencies and the frustration that many of us feel. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who had a private Member’s Bill on that very issue, said that people could be living above the shop that is closing and not be able to work in it. The situation is absolutely ludicrous.

Many of the constituents who come to my surgeries week in, week out have skills that they wish to use, but the longer they are away from the labour market, the more difficult it is for them to get back into it. They feel themselves daily losing their skills, languishing, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, in hotels and guest houses, unable to do what they wish to do.

There are organisations in Glasgow working on this problem. The Bridges Programmes helps people such as doctors get back into employment in the UK, wherever they have come from. Radiant and Brighter does a brilliant job of helping people to gain skills in business. Many people have had businesses in the places they are from and want to get started here, but it is difficult to navigate that path. I spoke to Pheona Matovu, who runs Radiant and Brighter. She came here unable to work and did not want to let her children know, so she kept herself busy. She started the organisation and trained other people to give the appearance, at least to her children, that she had a job with dignity and was not sitting waiting for something to happen, because she was not that type of person. Many asylum seekers are not that type of person. They want to get on in the world and contribute. For many of my constituents, that is incredibly important, and their frustration at the Home Office is palpable.

My constituent Sandra was able to study. She has been training as a nurse, and the call went out to all trainee nurses on her course that people were wanted to help with vaccination during the pandemic. They were to do that as volunteers—they were not fully trained as nurses, so they were not employed—but she could not even get an answer from the Home Office about whether

she could go and volunteer with everybody else on her course. Despite the shortage occupation list, and despite the shortage of healthcare workers, she was not able to get the assurance from the Home Office that she needed to do that. Nobody wants to fall foul of the rules, because of course that counts against their application.

Shortly after I became an MP, I spoke to a gentleman who had been volunteering with the Red Cross while waiting for his citizenship application. The Home Office took that to be almost akin to work, and that counted against him as a mark of bad character. Working for the Red Cross is a mark of bad character according to the Home Office, even though he was not being paid for it. We were able to get that case resolved, but it illustrates the ludicrous situation that many asylum seekers are in. They want to keep their skills up and they want to do more, but they know it might count against them because some civil servant in an anonymous bunker in the Home Office might decide it is a bad thing.

The next generation of people coming along is also affected. A family of seven came to my surgery some weeks ago. They have been in Scotland since 2014 and are now eligible to apply for leave to remain, because they have been here so long. They have kept their children in school and supported them. The parents have not been able to work throughout that time; we can imagine the financial pressures of supporting five children on so little. They travelled across the city so that the children could stay at the same school, even though their accommodation changed quite regularly.

Two of those children are now at university, doing incredibly important courses, in engineering and medicine. The children cannot work while they are studying, and the parents cannot work to support the children. It is incredibly difficult for that family to keep going. They should have a decision; they should not be waiting in Home Office limbo forever. Just think of the contribution that their children are going to make to this country. It is incredible. We should thank them, not make life more difficult for them.

In this cost of living crisis, the cost of food, of heating a home and of essential items such as nappies and infant formula, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, has soared, yet the amount that people have to survive on has gone up by 14p. Nobody can be expected to survive on that. We see the impact on the charitable and third sector in all our constituencies, because it picks up the pieces when the state has failed people.

Organisations such as Refuweege in Glasgow face increasing demands on their services. People cannot clothe themselves, feed themselves and heat themselves, and the Government are doing nothing to help. People are stuck in Home Office limbo for years, unable to work, unable to contribute, and having to depend on services. That is not good for anybody. As hon. Members right across the board have pointed out, that costs the economy, when asylum seekers could instead be working and contributing to the economy in so many valuable ways.

The hon. Member for Bury South mentioned remittances, which is an important point. A gentleman from Afghanistan came to my constituency surgery a few weeks ago. This man was in pieces. He has been through a very difficult time. He worked with US forces in Afghanistan, and he has been here for a few years; he did not come in the most recent iteration. His family managed to get out of

Afghanistan and are now in Pakistan, waiting for the family reunion visa. They do not know when they will get it.

That gentleman is having to send the very limited money he gets from the asylum system—all of it—to his family, to make sure that they do not starve in Pakistan while they are waiting for the UK Government to make a decision on their case, which means he is reliant on charities in Glasgow to try to get by. He is not even able to access the tiny amount of money that the Home Office gives him; he feels he has to send that to his family, because he does not want them to starve. He is going without.

I think the Government miss that sort of situation entirely. Perhaps the constituency surgeries of Government Members do not look like ours and they do not see the people that we see, but I assure them that people in Glasgow and across the UK are really struggling just now. The UK Government need to do a great deal more to address these issues.

I could talk on this subject until the cows come home, because I have so many cases that I could mention. It is desperately important that the Government recognise the peril that people are in and the reasons why people come here. As others have said, they come here because of family ties. They come here because of the English language. As Afghan interpreters told me, “We are here because you were there.” The Government should remember that. They should support people properly. They should make decisions sooner, rather than wasting fortunes on the failed Rwanda deportation programme. They should listen to the Members who are here today. We want our constituents to flourish, to do their very best and to contribute in the way they know they can.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call the Labour spokesperson, my good neighbour Stephen Kinnock.

10.34 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) for calling this important debate, and I commend him for his brave, powerful and honest speech. I thank all hon. Members who have made such excellent contributions—in particular my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who always speaks with such passion and commitment on these matters.

I echo the comments about the terrible incident in the channel today. It is just appalling to think of those poor people suffering. It shows that the issues that we are discussing today are matters of life and death in the most literal sense.

The debate about whether asylum seekers should have the right to work has come to the fore largely because of slow asylum claim processing by this Government. After 12 years, a series of Conservative Home Secretaries have openly admitted that their asylum system is “broken”—and they should know, because they broke it. The backlog of asylum seekers awaiting decisions stands at 143,000. An enormous 97,700 of those have been waiting more than six months. The root cause is that the Government have failed to process asylum claims with anything like the efficiency required. In 2012, Home Office decision makers were making an average of 14 asylum decisions a month; now, they are making just five.

[Stephen Kinnock]

Tory Ministers try to blame covid, but the truth is that this is a mess of their own making. They chose to downgrade asylum decision makers from higher executive officer grade to lower executive officer grade, leading to a less experienced workforce on lower wages and with lower morale, lower retention rates and a collapsing process. The inevitable consequences were slower decisions, more decisions overturned at appeal, an increasing backlog, and ballooning costs for the taxpayer.

As a result, the British taxpayer is now forking out almost £7 million every single day on emergency accommodation in hotels—with private contractors, by the way, making a killing. It is worth noting that the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 has made the whole situation worse by adding an extra layer of bureaucracy through its so-called inadmissibility provisions. Make no mistake: the system is a shambles.

That is the backdrop against which we discuss the right of asylum seekers to work while they await an asylum decision. Currently, asylum seekers who have been waiting more than a year are able to work in shortage occupations. The Labour party is clear that that period should be reduced to six months. It would not be appropriate for people to work straightaway on arrival, as those with clearly unfounded claims or who have come from safe countries should be swiftly returned. The asylum system is for those fleeing persecution and conflict; it is not an alternative to the normal immigration rules for those who are not. However, where people are in limbo for more than six months simply because of Home Office incompetence, there are real problems with expecting the British taxpayer to pay them about £40 in weekly earnings. That money and more could be being paid by employers, especially at a time of high job vacancy rates in Britain.

The current state of affairs is damaging to the taxpayer, damaging to the Exchequer, and damaging to the wellbeing of asylum seekers. The Government's own Migration Advisory Committee said that restrictions were pushing asylum seekers

“into exploitative situations by preventing them from obtaining safe and legal sources of income.”

The Lift the Ban coalition, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South, estimates that reform of the policy could save the UK economy more than £333 million a year. Moreover, research by the OECD found that being refused permission to work leads some asylum seekers to work unlawfully, which exposes them to exploitative working practices because of the absence of health and safety and other regulatory employment protections. That, of course, tends to lead to undercutting and a race to the bottom right across the labour market, so absolutely nobody benefits from the mess in which we currently find ourselves. Does the Minister recognise the absurdity of the situation?

Currently, the Government allow asylum seekers to work in jobs on the shortage occupation list if they have been waiting more than 12 months for their claim to be heard. As I mentioned, we support the view that asylum seekers should be able to work after six months, on the basis that the Government should not be taking longer than that to process a claim, except in the most exceptional circumstances. There is strong support for that view across the House, including from a number of Conservative Members.

In case the Minister has forgotten, may I remind her that the long-standing target of processing 98% of straightforward asylum claims within six months was scrapped by this Government more than four years ago, with no indication of when or whether it would be reinstated? Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us about whether that service standard will ever be reinstated. It is a shocking sign of Conservative Government failure that almost 100,000 asylum seekers have now been waiting more than six months.

It appears obvious that the right to work should exist alongside a functioning system. That is why our entire focus, when we are in government, will be on clearing the backlog and getting back to the six-month service standard. In other words, the debate about the right of asylum seekers to work is a symptom of the fact that the Government are not clearing the backlog or stopping the boats.

On the issue of small boats, we on the Labour Benches are clear that the dangerous channel crossings are a real problem and that preventing them is a priority for our party. In 2019, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), said that she would stop the small boat crossings in months. Three years later, the numbers have rocketed to around 45,000. Meanwhile, we recently had the chaos of 4,100 people living in Manston—more than double the legal limit—with the local Conservative MP blaming the Home Secretary for failing to provide the appropriate accommodation. Last month, another Conservative MP called on the Minister for Immigration to consider his position over the procurement of hotels around the country. We know that 222 vulnerable children have gone missing from asylum accommodation, and there have been other deeply disturbing safeguarding issues.

The public can see that the asylum system is neither firm nor fair, neither compassionate nor competent, and neither safe nor secure. The system needs fixing, but unfortunately the Conservatives are more concerned about chasing headlines than doing the nitty-gritty of good government. They put tough talk above hard graft. The country can see that government by gimmick is not working. An obvious example of that is the failing Rwanda offloading plan: with a mere threat of deportation, we are supposed to prevent crossings, but crossings have increased dramatically since that announcement.

The Labour party wants to stop refugees crossing the English channel and to crack down on the smuggling gangs that exploit refugees for profit, but the Rwanda plan is unworkable, unaffordable and unethical. Labour has shown leadership by setting out a five-point plan to deal with the mess. It is a serious approach based on sensible policy solutions; it is not based on what would best achieve a right-wing tabloid front page headline. First, we would crack down on the criminal gangs by repurposing the wasted Rwanda money for an elite unit in the National Crime Agency that would partner with France, Belgium and Europol to crack down on people smugglers.

Secondly, we would speed up asylum decisions by restoring order and smart management to the Home Office and by returning to 2016 levels of asylum processing. As part of our plan, we would fast-track applications of asylum seekers from safe countries in order to ensure swift returns. The previous Labour Government used

the safe countries list to fast-track returns, but when this Conservative Government lost control of the asylum system as a whole, the fast-tracking process fell off the cliff with it.

Recently, the Labour party has been pushing for that system to return in the context of the number of Albanian channel crossers rising to 12,000. The Government have announced their intentions, but the detail is still unclear. It feels like more rhetoric, but we hope we are proven wrong on that. Labour's common-sense fast-track system, combined with the much-needed injection of energy and competence that we would bring to government, means that we would deal with the issue in our first 100 days.

Thirdly, we would reform resettlement schemes better to target those most at risk of exploitation by trafficking and smuggler gangs, and liaise closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to get the Afghanistan scheme working properly. Fourthly, we would replace the Dublin agreement on returns. Fifthly, we would work internationally to address crises that lead people to flee their homes.

Claudia Webbe: Does the hon. Member not agree that the immigration system is based on the hostile environment and that we are going to have difficulties unless we do something about that? The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 effectively introduced internal borders. That means that every aspect of someone's life, including going to a bank and accessing any type of service, is being policed by immigration control internally, as opposed to at the border. That is the problem of the hostile environment, and it would be much easier simply to allow asylum seekers to work.

Stephen Kinnoch: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right that the hostile environment is profoundly counterproductive. Much of the thinking around the asylum system is based on a hostile environment for assessing applications, which has led to the system becoming completely blocked, and that has become a magnet in itself. The backlog is a magnet for many people, who pay people smugglers knowing that when they arrive in the UK it will take up to 450 days for their claim to be processed, so it is counterproductive in terms of the efficiency of the system. Of course, the hostile environment to which she refers is also the root cause of the appalling Windrush scandal, which has had such a damaging impact on communities across our country.

Having set out our approach to the right to work and how Labour will deliver on that in government, I look forward to the Minister's response to these vital questions. We need to get away from empty rhetoric and towards something that resembles the efficiency, speed, compassion and control that we need, so that we can have an asylum system that works for our country, we can start to get control of our borders again, and we can ensure that people who come here fleeing war and persecution are able to make a valued contribution to our society and, indeed, our economy.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call the Minister to respond. Perhaps she will leave a minute or so for Christian Wakeford to wind up at the end.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Before I move on to substantive matters, I want to say that we are all now aware of possibly tragic news—certainly a major incident—in the channel. The authorities have been responding to the incident and full details will be forthcoming in due course. I understand that the Home Secretary is coming to the House to make a statement, so we will have more information then. It is of course a tragic situation that is evidence of what is happening in relation to the present system, which is why the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister are very keen to resolve the issues that we have in relation to asylum applications and economic migrants.

I thank the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) for securing this debate and all who have contributed today; there have been heartfelt contributions. The UK has a proud history of welcoming and supporting those in need of our protection. We take our responsibilities very seriously and are committed to ensuring that we act in accordance with our international obligations.

Let me touch first on the eloquent points made by the hon. Member for Bury South. I am looking forward to even more eloquent apologies; there were a lot of policy issues on which he was flagrant and boisterous—I think that is the way of describing it—in the Chamber when he sat on the Conservative Benches, and there need to be various apologies to his constituents. It was interesting to read about his speech in *The Guardian* at 9.17 am, before he had been able to make his apologies, but I am grateful for his explanations today.

I turn to the cost of living. There has been a series of economic shocks. Cost of living issues, which people have raised today, are very much in the mind of the Government. The pandemic has contributed to them, and Russia's unacceptable invasion of Ukraine has led to global pressures on the rising cost of living. The Government understand that people are worried about the cost of living challenges ahead. That is why decisive action has been taken to support households across the UK. We continue to keep the situation under review and will focus support on the most vulnerable while ensuring that we act in a fiscally responsible way.

We are of course alive to the potential impact of rises in costs in the asylum system. It is important to remember that a full package of support is in place for asylum seekers while their claims are assessed. The Government have a legal obligation to provide support to those asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute, through accommodation and allowances to meet their essential living costs. The pressures exerted on the asylum accommodation system in recent weeks and months have been well documented. Nevertheless, despite those acute challenges, we have managed to continue to provide support where needed.

The level of allowance is reviewed annually to ensure that the amount provided meets the essential needs of asylum seekers. As of the end of September 2022, 100,547 individuals were in receipt of support—46% more than at the end of September 2021. Of those, 95% were in receipt of support in the form of accommodation and subsistence. The remaining 5% were in receipt of subsistence only. Since 6 September, over 100 new hotels,

[Miss Sarah Dines]

providing over 9,000 additional bed spaces, have been brought into use, and we continue to add to the pipeline of available accommodation.

It is no secret that the UK's asylum system has come under severe strain. One of the main factors has been the extraordinary and unacceptable number of people crossing the channel with, as we have seen again today, possibly tragic consequences. As I said, around 100,500 individuals are currently on asylum support. That is an unprecedented figure. The cost of accommodating asylum seekers in hotels is more than £5.6 million a day. All of that underlines why change is so badly needed. Getting a grip of the situation has been a priority for the Home Office.

It might be helpful if I set out some of the key rationale informing our asylum seeker right-to-work policy, which has been mentioned. It is important to distinguish between those who need protection and those seeking to come here to work, who can apply for a work visa under the immigration rules. As the hon. Member for Bury South is aware, our current policy allows asylum seekers to work in the UK if their claim has been outstanding for 12 months through no fault of their own. Those permitted to work are, as we know, restricted to jobs on the shortage occupation list, which is focused for a good reason. It is based on expert advice from the independent Migration Advisory Committee.

As part of reforms to our economic migration routes, we have set up cutting-edge skilled labour migration routes. To protect those routes and enforce our approach, we operate the compliant environment, which among other things serves to deter people who might otherwise undercut the rules from working illegally. Our asylum seeker right-to-work policy does not operate in isolation; it is a constituent part of a wider whole. We must ensure that it supports our objectives elsewhere in the immigration system and does not undercut it. That is why the policy is designed as it is. It is primarily intended to protect the resident labour market by prioritising access to employment for British citizens and others lawfully resident in the UK.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister is reeling off the Government's current policy, which clearly is failing catastrophically, and then highlighting shortages in the labour market. We know that there is so much need in the labour market because of the lack of supply of skills, so will she admit that what she is reading out is simply failing? It is time that the Government got a grip of this and had a real reform of their policy, to enable asylum seekers to work.

Miss Dines: It is certainly not phoney, but it is time that the Government got a grip. We cannot go back to the situation alluded to by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), when the Home Affairs Committee reported—I think in 2011—that over half a million legacy cases had been left by the Labour Government. We certainly should not get anywhere near that, so the Government are indeed getting a grip.

Stephen Kinnock: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Dines: If it is a point of clarification, I will gladly take it.

Stephen Kinnock: When Labour left Government in 2010, 6,000 asylum cases had been outstanding for more than six months. It is really important to correct the record on that.

Miss Dines: I was referring to the findings of the Home Affairs Committee, which heard the evidence at the time. However, I will make some progress.

Relaxing our policy could enable people to access the very same jobs for which we, with very good reason, require a visa application process. That would make a mockery of the whole system and would simply not be right. I should be clear that, where reasons for coming to the UK include family or economic considerations, applications should be made via the relevant route, not by undercutting the system, which is simply not fair to everybody else. Either the new points-based immigration system or our various family reunion routes should be used. We must guard against creating an environment that encourages individuals to come to the UK to claim asylum inappropriately in order to circumvent economic controls. Equally, the Government have a firm position that individuals should claim asylum in the first safe place they come to.

Tim Farron *rose*—

Claudia Webbe *rose*—

Miss Dines: Let me finish this point. I remember the hon. Member for Bury South talking about the shopping trolley. He explained that economic migrants were using their shopping trolley to go through various safe countries. We must remember, as the tragedy today shows us, that France, for example, is a safe country.

Tim Farron: The Minister is talking about people coming through the established routes, but there are hardly any. Unless someone is from Ukraine, or among the tiny number of people from Syria or the tinier number of people from Afghanistan, there is no way of getting to this country safely without doing what the Government now decide is—but what, under international law, most definitely is not—illegal. What will the Minister do to establish safe routes from the region? What about working in north Africa, or indeed with our partners elsewhere in Europe, so that we do not have tragedies such as the one that we learned of today?

Miss Dines: To answer that point, there are many safe routes—countries where, internationally, there are agreements for taking various people—to come to this country to claim sanctuary. I am proud of the Government's history of welcoming and supporting those in need. We need to focus protection on those who need it most, not on illegal migrants.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Miss Dines: I must make a bit of progress to allow for closing comments.

We cannot readily dismiss the risk that removing restrictions would actually increase asylum intake, reducing our capacity to take decisions and support refugees. Let me take this opportunity to make it clear that I acknowledge the hon. Members' concerns. In particular, I am aware of the debate about the best way to look at the right to work.

The comments made by the Opposition spokesperson about productivity were on point. The Prime Minister has committed to triple the productivity of case workers to abolish the backlog of asylum decisions by the end of next year. The Government are committed to ensuring that asylum claims are considered without unnecessary delay, to ensure that individuals who need protection are granted asylum as soon as possible. We are pursuing a programme of transformation and business improvement initiatives that will speed up the decision-making process.

I will briefly mention one or two comments made by hon. Members in interventions. The mental health of people is extremely important to the Government; indeed, as the Minister for Safeguarding I find that some important and cogent arguments have been made. There is, of course, voluntary work. It is important that people get out of the unfortunate situations they are living in and that they live, breathe fresh air and do voluntary work. They do not necessarily have to be paid financially. We must protect the integrity of the whole system.

On the points about Manston, as of yesterday, there were five people staying there. The figures are not quite the same as those given by the Opposition spokesperson.

Many points were made about the Lift the Ban campaign. The Government's view is that, as with its early reports, its most recent report was unduly and overly optimistic about the amount that might be saved by changes in the system. When cases such as the seven-year-old case mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) are raised, it is important to recognise that they are likely to have an extremely complicated legal history. After 12 months, people can work, so there is no reason not to be working for seven years and blaming the system for that.

I will conclude to give the hon. Member for Bury South a few moments to sum up, if he pleases. I am sorry that it is only a minute.

10.59 am

Christian Wakeford: I thank all Members for their poignant comments, including on economic illiteracy. In that respect, correcting this policy would boost productivity, growth, revenue and the economy.

We are a compassionate nation, and we need to show that, but language is also important. The Minister mentioned figures, not people, but what we have seen today is a tragedy of people, not figures. She also highlighted opportunities for volunteering. I would like to know how someone could accept voluntary work on £5.84 a day when they probably will not be able to travel the necessary distance.

I am disappointed with the Minister's response, and there are still many questions left to be answered on this policy, but I am sure we will keep asking them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered asylum seeker employment and the cost of living.

Integrity of the Voting Process

11 am

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I will call Paul Bristow to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up—that is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the integrity of the voting process.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I start by paying tribute to Lord Hayward, who has introduced the Ballot Secrecy Bill in the other place. It is a crucial piece of legislation, and my remarks will focus on the contents of the Bill and the intent behind it.

Few things are more important than exercising our democratic right by voting. The integrity of our elections can sometimes be threatened. Two main problems have been identified in the UK: voter fraud and forced family voting. There is an attempt to tackle voting fraud through the introduction of voter ID. That is controversial; some will think that it is the right thing to do, while others will not. Personally, I think it is absolutely right to put protections in place to tackle any type of voter fraud at polling stations.

The Ballot Secrecy Bill seeks to tackle the issue of family voting, which is when two or more people attempt to vote together in a polling booth, affecting, directing or overseeing the votes of another person in an attempt to influence their decision. The term “family voting” sounds like a friendly thing; it sounds uncontroversial, but that is not the case at all. Quite often, family voting involves malign influence or an attempt to influence someone who perhaps does not have English as a first language or who is inherently vulnerable. That cannot be right; it fundamentally goes against everything we believe in about the secrecy of the ballot.

Families often fight. To give the example of my own wife and me, I would not say we fought significantly, but we certainly had a few cross discussions about whether Britain should leave the European Union. I was very much of the opinion that Britain should leave; she took the alternative view—at least I am led to believe that she cast a vote for the alternative view. I am also led to believe that she now supports how I vote—certainly, she supports her local Member of Parliament when there is an election. But that is entirely up to her to determine; it is certainly not for me to do so.

Politics is sometimes a controversial thing, and families will fight and argue when it comes to the right way forward. That is their right. It is absolutely wrong for another person at or near a polling booth to attempt to influence someone voting. That is absolutely the wrong thing to do. The police need more powers to deal with that and tackle the issue of family voting. The chance of imprisonment or a fine will deter perpetrators from doing that. That is what the Bill is all about.

It is not just me talking about family voting. There are organisations that talk about it. Notably, the United Nations development programme describes family voting as

“the situation in which the heads of family (often extended family and often male heads of family) influence other family members in how they cast a vote... Family voting can be a serious violation,

[*Paul Bristow*]

especially when it is malicious, i.e., when it is carried out with the intent of influencing or removing the freedom of choice of a voter. In these cases, family voting violates the central principle of voter secrecy.”

It goes on to say:

“Family voting often stops women from casting a vote of their own choice. In many situations, while the woman physically casts her own vote, she is under a strong cultural expectation to obey her husband or father and vote for the candidate or party that she has been instructed to vote for. The influence may extend to accompanying the female family members to the voting centre in order to oversee the casting of the vote”.

That cannot happen in the United Kingdom in 2022, but it obviously is happening and I will go on to set out evidence that suggests that.

The Bill is intended to ensure that police, electoral staff and others have powers to address this issue. It is vital that voters can cast their vote in secret. Once at the polling station, nobody should be able to influence who a voter votes for or whether they vote at all, and nobody should know how a voter has cast their vote.

This is not a party political matter. As I understand it, the Ballot Secrecy Bill was supported by all parties represented in the House of Lords, and support was not divided according to political party. A new clause was tabled by Baroness Scott of Bybrook to cover behaviour intended to influence a vote either in or near a polling booth, which was supported by parties of all colours in the other place.

The secrecy of the ballot is, and must remain, a priority for presiding officers. It is their responsibility to maintain order at polling stations and to make sure everyone has the right to vote freely and without intimidation. I pay tribute to all those who work in that capacity, including presiding officers and all those who monitor elections, not just in Peterborough but across the country. They are professionals and often have to do their jobs in difficult circumstances.

Peterborough has had challenges with electoral malpractice in the past. A great deal of effort has been invested by Peterborough City Council and those responsible to clear those issues up. My experience in Peterborough, when we talk to people about family voting and the idea of casting votes in secrecy, shows that there is a grey area in the law. Activists do not know what they should be encouraging or what the law looks like, and nor do the police—who sometimes seem reluctant, or do not know how, to react to allegations of electoral malpractice—presiding officers, polling agents and other staff. This is a grey area, and perhaps the lack of clarity on what power the police have is one reason why family voting is so widespread. Hopefully, the Bill will address that.

We need to empower presiding officers to deal with suspected offences, and we need to involve the police where necessary. We need a system where voters are accompanied only by appointed companions, acting in accordance with rule 39 of the parliamentary election rules and the equivalent rules for other elections, or by children under the supervision of the voter, and not by someone who may intend to influence the voter’s voting intention or infringe their right to vote in secret.

There are times when it is right for a voter to be accompanied by another person. For example, people would not be punished if they were in a polling booth to

assist a grandparent, but only if they intend to influence a voter. There must be an intent to influence someone, eliminating the potential for prosecuting the intended victim. In certain circumstances—for example, when a voter is disabled or unable to read—an eligible companion or the presiding officer can assist them. That will give reassurance that such assistance is still possible where necessary. The Bill and my comments here today do not seek to stop such a practice. The Bill also means that children can still attend a polling station with their parents, and it does not prevent people from coming into a polling station if they have a young child with them.

Where is the evidence to suggest that such practices are a problem in the United Kingdom in 2022? I would like to draw attention to a report by the Democracy Volunteers, a non-governmental organisation that specialises in electoral reform, on the May 2022 elections, which outlines just how widespread family voting is. Some of the report’s findings were concerning, especially the claim that staff in polling stations were reluctant to intervene when they saw family voting. This is not a criticism of polling station staff, as this is a grey area, as I pointed out, but that is exactly why legislation is needed: to make sure there is clarity, and that everybody understands their responsibilities.

In the report, 1,723 polling stations were observed across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The observations lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. At 25% of those polling stations, family voting was witnessed. It is important to note that I am not talking about 25% of all ballots in those polling stations, but in 25% of the polling stations at least one example of family voting was witnessed by those observers. The problem is not exclusive to any one area, and affects all parts of the United Kingdom, as can be seen when we break the figures down further; it was observed in 21% of polling stations in England, 42% in Northern Ireland, 19% in Scotland and 34% in Wales.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Perhaps I could offer an explanation for the figure for Northern Ireland, which is double that for England. We have two systems of voting in Northern Ireland. For Westminster elections, it is a straight x vote—a voter nominates one person. For the council elections and Northern Ireland Assembly elections, the voting system is proportional representation. A voter marks the candidates 1,2,3,4,5, up to 9, or whatever it might be. That is confusing for many people. I understand from the spoilt votes that are cast in my constituency and others that there is some confusion among people; they mix up the two systems. There is also perhaps the pressure that they feel to get in, and as a result of the queue of people after them and so on. I think that is in part an explanation of why the Northern Ireland figure is so high.

Paul Bristow: Absolutely; the hon. Member makes a very powerful point. The argument he makes is for simpler voting systems. Often, PR systems, which we see in other parts of the United Kingdom, are complicated, not straightforward. There is not a binary choice in who to vote for. That might in some way explain the higher figure in Northern Ireland.

The report also states, worryingly, that in more than 70% of the cases of family voting that were observed, the voters were women. Those figures are astounding and shocking. On equality grounds alone, we need to

stamp this practice out. Women and polling station staff are being intimidated. It is an ugly practice, and we have to get a grip on it in the United Kingdom in 2022.

Democracy Volunteers also reported on the 2022 English mayoral elections, where family voting was witnessed in Croydon, at 35% of 63 ballot boxes; Hackney, at 26% of 50 ballot boxes; Lewisham, at 35% of 57 ballot boxes; Newham, at 36% of 50 ballot boxes; South Yorkshire, at 13% of 24 ballot boxes; Tower Hamlets, at 32% of 96 ballot boxes; and Watford, at 14% of 42 ballot boxes. This is a serious problem, and widespread activities of this nature across different parts of London, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland prove that.

I draw attention to the report by Democracy Volunteers on the 2019 parliamentary by-election in my constituency, Peterborough, in which I came a majestic third. The report states:

“Family voting was not simply localised to a couple of polling stations, it was identified across the constituency and ‘family voting’ should be challenged in whatever circumstances it occurs. Our observer team saw ‘family voting’ in 48% of the polling stations attended”.

That means that at almost half of all polling stations in Peterborough, family voting occurred in that 2019 by-election. That is appalling. The behaviour of those people, who clearly have no respect for the secrecy of the ballot, is wholly inappropriate, and is becoming a rising threat to British democracy.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, which I back wholeheartedly. In Keighley, voters are going to the ballot box intimidated, and encounter threatening behaviour on their way into the polling station. Complaints have been made to polling staff and the police. As for where the balance of power lies, the issue of whether people are empowered to take action is a grey area, as he outlined. Although he is clearly referring to families, does he agree that the issue extends to intimidating behaviour among friends and in wider community networks? We have to get on top of that, and I support him wholeheartedly.

Paul Bristow: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically powerful point. He has been a champion in this area; he, like me, campaigns for the integrity of elections and ballots. I completely agree that the intimidation of individuals, whether by someone in the family or in the wider community, while they are making a private judgment about who they feel will best represent them needs to stop. He has my full support on any measures—perhaps we can introduce them together—to strengthen the law in this area.

We need to create a level playing field. The Government have committed to that already through the Elections Act 2022, which I strongly applaud. Voter identification will prevent voter fraud and tackle intimidation, while increasing transparency and preventing interference in our elections. I completely and utterly support that. The Bill tabled by the noble Lord Hayward would continue that work. I hope that the Minister recognises the importance of that work, and of what I have said today. We have a responsibility to uphold our values and traditions. Secret voting was introduced by the Ballot Act 1872, and the fact that it is still a problem in 2022 is wholly wrong; 150 years later, that is unacceptable. I hope we will do something about it soon.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for instigating the debate, and for the strong argument that he has made for change in this area, particularly given the enduring concerns expressed by Democracy Volunteers and others over a long period throughout the country. He is absolutely right that the key principle for the Government in their approach to elections is to ensure the integrity of the ballot box and the system, and to ensure that it works for everyone. We are committed to doing that in any way we can. He highlighted a number of broader points, which I will come on to.

Before I speak about the Ballot Secrecy Bill, which is before the House of Commons at the moment, I too pay tribute to Lord Hayward for all his work in the other place in recent months. Good debates were had there—I read them in *Hansard*—and they demonstrate the acceptance across all political parties of the challenge, and a willingness to find solutions to the issues that have been highlighted. I therefore welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government today.

As I say, the Government believe that the integrity of our electoral system is fundamental to the health and strength of our democracy. The 2019 Conservative manifesto affirmed a commitment to protecting our electoral system, so that it continues to command the trust of voters and the public.

I will quickly and directly answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough rightly asked. He expressed concerns about family voting, which that Bill seeks to tackle. He has highlighted some examples of where there are problems, or perceived problems, around English as a second language, and where people are inherently vulnerable. He made a powerful point about those scenarios and others in which the problem may apply. The Government accept those concerns, and believe that it is of fundamental importance that people can vote in secrecy and without the threat of interference from others. We are committed to working with my hon. Friend and hon. Members on all sides of the House to safeguard democracy against those who would do it harm.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government supported the Ballot Secrecy Bill when it was in the other place, and I can absolutely confirm that we will continue to do so now that he has taken it up in this House. It is pleasing to note that the Bill is making progress. I put on record my thanks to Democracy Volunteers, whose work my hon. Friend outlined. It did a significant amount of work in the recent elections, and highlighted concerns that gave rise to the legislation and the proposals before us.

Under the Ballot Secrecy Bill, a person will commit an offence if they accompany a voter into a polling booth, or are near the polling booth when the voter is in it, with the specific intention of influencing that person to vote in a particular way, or to refrain from voting. The Bill is intended to strengthen the existing law on the secrecy of voting. Importantly, as my hon. Friend highlights, the measures are intended to give greater clarity on the law as it stands, and to ensure that presiding officers in

[Lee Rowley]

polling stations have the confidence to challenge inappropriate behaviour wherever it occurs. That was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore).

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough is right that this is about proportionality and ensuring that we do not preclude people from going into the polling station where it is reasonable for them to do so. It is also about making sure that those in charge of the station have a very clear understanding of when things are reasonable and when they are not, and are able to take action when unreasonable things occur. There should be clear penalties in the law when that is judged to have been the case. All told, when this Bill's passage is concluded, should it be the will of the House, voters should enter a polling station alone in almost all circumstances when casting their vote, and should not be accompanied by another person unless they are appointed companions or children under the supervision of the voter. We look forward to continuing to support the Bill as it progresses.

In the few minutes I have left, I want to talk about why we think voter integrity and ensuring the security of the ballot box is so important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough has outlined, we have brought forward a number of measures on the subject, particularly through the Elections Act 2022. This is my second debate this week in which I have responded for the Government on elections. The first one was slightly better attended, but that did not have anything to do with the subject under discussion. It was somewhat more histrionic. That was on Monday night, when we talked about voter ID. I much prefer these kinds of discussions, where Members have the opportunity to explain the issue, and then we talk about them in a temperate, calm and careful manner, with the gravity that the issue deserves, and without the histrionics demonstrated on Monday night.

It is vital that we get policy in this area right. If we do not, people will be prevented from taking part in an activity that is fundamental to the premise of a civilised society: choosing who rules them and who makes the laws on their behalf, and kicking people out of power if they are not making laws in the way that they would prefer.

We have to be cognisant as a country of the fact that our systems may not be perfect, and that fraud goes on. We have to look at opportunities to reduce that fraud over time. That is one reason why, in local elections from May next year, and then in subsequent elections, we are making it a requirement for people to show

photographic identification to vote. That is a controversial issue in some parts of this place, but when I speak to my constituents they tell me that it is a logical and reasonable thing to do. We have to show identification to pick up a package, buy alcohol or access certain parts of the high street and licenced premises, so it seems entirely reasonable and proportionate that photographic ID is needed for the very grave, important and serious act of determining who makes laws, who is the next Government and who is in charge of the country.

Secondly, we have brought forward changes to absentee voting and postal voting, including through a number of provisions to make postal and proxy voting more secure, and to determine any person or any group who might seek to undermine the integrity of the electoral system. As an example, the Elections Act 2022 addresses the harvesting of postal votes by introducing a ban on political campaigners handling postal voting documents that have been issued by somebody else. The Act includes a provision that means that nobody will have a permanent postal vote, and a person's entitlement to vote by post is reviewed at least once every three years.

There has also been more general strengthening of protections for voters. The Elections Act has updated the offence of undue influence to ensure that all electors and proxies can cast their vote free from intimidation, harm, and deception. That has made sure that the offence remains fit for purpose, given the technological changes in the last 20 years or so. It does that by providing broader legal protections for voters from different types of intimidatory behaviour, as well as through clearer legal drafting, which assists authorities when they are enforcing those protections. That should help the police to deal with intimidatory behaviour anywhere, including the behaviour in or around polling stations that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley highlighted.

In the short time that I have left, I thank again my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough for both securing this debate, and for being willing to support and ensure the progress of the Bill. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his question on Northern Ireland, and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley for his contribution, and for highlighting his support for the Bill. It is an important part of continuing to ensure the strength, health and integrity of our democracy. We are grateful to the Members of the other place who instigated it. We look forward to continuing to support it in the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

Visa Processing Times

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

4.15 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered visa processing times.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. This is a short debate on an important but, I believe, ignored issue. Routine processing times do not excite the public or, arguably, cause a ruckus in the media, but MPs and our caseworkers see day in, day out the stress and misery that they cause.

The Government like to talk about “illegal” and “legal” migration. The Minister will appreciate that that is not a division that I generally support, but for the purposes of today I want to talk about what his Department deems to be legal migration: the families and workers who want to live in this country but have been left in legal limbo because of the Home Office.

I have spoken to my colleagues, some of whom are here today, and I can tell the Minister that this is not a one-off issue that constituents of North East Fife just happen to experience; the problems I will outline are systemic ones faced by people across the entire UK. If he speaks to his own staff, he might find that they have similar experiences.

Let me start with the most obvious issue: the pure length of time it takes for visas to be processed. The most egregiously delayed case currently in my case load will have been waiting for an outcome for an entire year this coming Sunday—not a birthday that those involved want to recognise. I will not use their names, as the applicant is a minor, but a teenage girl, the stepdaughter of one of my constituents, is currently living in a state of limbo, with her previous visa expired and without an outcome on her family visa. Let me make this clear: it was the Home Office that advised that she should apply for a family visa in November 2021—and she did so in December last year, well in advance of her student visa running out—but now, a year later, the Home Office is unable to tell her whether she is going to get her visa.

I ask the Minister to imagine for a minute that he is a teenager—I do not know whether his teens were longer ago than mine—settling into a new country and a new school, and making new friends, with a half-sibling who has an automatic right to be in the UK, only to be left not knowing whether he will be told that he has to leave. That has the potential to be incredibly damaging to both the young person and their family. We are always told that the Home Office has to carry out checks—rightly so—but what on earth could a teenager have on their record that means their mother can get a visa but theirs gets held up for this long? It certainly does not make sense to me. Let me make it clear that this is not their fault; it is the Home Office’s fault.

The Home Office’s standard response is that their resources have been incredibly strained since the Homes for Ukraine scheme opened earlier this year. I do not think anybody will dispute the hard work done by the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration staff in processing those applications. Our staff worked with them day in, day out for months, and we saw at first hand the efforts that were made. But here is the key thing:

delays with standard visa processing predate the invasion of Ukraine. I supported a constituent in 2021 who, after having lived here legally for five years, wanted to apply for indefinite leave to remain, and it took her almost a year to get a response.

Both the cases I have mentioned have been classified by the Home Office as private life applications, although that has been disputed by my constituents. That means that the Home Office can hide behind the fact that it has not set itself a processing time goal. Other visas have expected processing times; private life visas, where someone applies for the right to live here to be with their immediate nuclear family, just like the Minister and I do, can exist in the system endlessly. The previous Immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), intervened in a serious case that I raised in early 2021. I was grateful for his intervention, but we MPs should not have to intervene at that level to make things happen.

There are three points that I hope the Minister will respond to. The first concerns how the Home Office designates a case as a private life case. The experiences of my constituents suggest that decisions are often made to designate applications as private life applications, whereas the applicants believe they should be processed under other routes. Often no information is given as to why that is the case. The system is opaque and, as a result, the Home Office can effectively designate cases as low priority, which I can only presume helps it to meet targets it might otherwise miss.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): A constituent recently contacted me to ask for assistance with his family’s visas. He had recently received indefinite leave to remain, having arrived from Iran. His wife and two young children were still in Iran. Sadly, his wife passed away, leaving his two very young children alone in Iran without a guardian. It took three months to get them visas so that they could join their father in the UK. In that case, the visas were granted under “urgent and compassionate” dispensation, but even then it took three months. Does my hon. Friend agree that three months falls far outside what should be considered an urgent timeframe?

Wendy Chamberlain: I absolutely agree. Clearly, there were specific circumstances in that case. I am looking for a response from the Minister about the more standard cases, but that case highlights how much of an issue we have in this area, and I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Chamberlain: Happily—I am delighted to see the hon. Member here.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this matter forward. I spoke to her in the Chamber before, knowing that the debate was coming. Working visas take over eight weeks to extend, so many workers who are asked to stay on and extend their contracts, perhaps for another three months, are unable to do so because of the waiting time. Should the Government not aim for a shorter process to allow those working and paying tax here to continue to do so while that is mutually beneficial for everyone?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. We know how tight the labour market is, and we know there is a need for a degree of immigration to help with some of the labour shortages we see. Later in my speech, I will talk about some particular issues that the University of St Andrews faces.

On my point about the Home Office designating cases as low priority, perhaps I am being sceptical, and perhaps there are perfectly good reasons for cases to be designated as private life visa applications, but it would be highly beneficial if the Minister could set those reasons out. That would help us to give proper feedback to our constituents. It would also be helpful if the Home Office set out the reasons clearly to applicants when their cases are being processed.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): On the point about transparency of criteria, my constituent, Catherine, who is a British citizen, applied for a spousal visa for her husband to come over. She applied back in July, when she was five months pregnant, because she wanted her husband, Donald, to be with her for the birth of their first child. In November, just days before the baby was due, the Home Office said that his case did not meet the criteria for expedition, because it was not “compelling compassionate” or a health circumstance. He missed the birth of his first child and was not there to support his wife, and he has missed the first four precious weeks of his baby’s life. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Home Office needs to review its service level agreement times, and review and be much more transparent about its criteria for what it considers worthy of expediting?

Wendy Chamberlain: I entirely agree. If that does not qualify as compassionate grounds to expedite a visa, I do not know what does. That brings to mind my urgent question in the last Session about visa processing times in relation to Ukraine. It seems that people are treated as clients or customers, and sometimes we forget that there are families and real people behind these cases.

The second point on which I would like a response from the Minister is whether any visa processes should take place without a target processing time. That gives the Home Office nothing to aim for, it gives us no way of holding the Home Office to account, and it gives applicants absolutely no certainty whatsoever. We know and understand that some cases will be complicated and might take longer than a standard processing time, but surely the Home Office should justify that, rather than leaving all applicants in a form of legal limbo.

My third point is about communication. I appreciate that providing updates takes up time and resource, but that has to be balanced against the immense stresses that people live under while they wait for months on end with no news. As human beings, we need to feel that we are grounded in our homes and communities—that is fundamental to feeling safe. Leaving people for months without any news as to whether they can stay in their community destroys that. MPs know from the constituents who contact us that people are often under so much stress that it is making them physically ill. When a rare letter does arrive, usually after the intervention of an MP—I am always of the view that so much of our casework is the result of processes not working properly in the first instance—the words we usually get are, “It is under consideration but we can provide no timeframe in which you can expect a response.” That is hardly a comfort.

The Homes for Ukraine drop-in centre in Portcullis House earlier this year provided a different form of interaction with the Home Office for our staff; we could be told, “Okay, I can see that the application was last worked on so many days ago.” Obviously, it is not practical to set up a drop-in centre like that in the long run. No one wants to see those queues across Portcullis House or the hours wasted in them—my caseworker would come in an hour early to sit in the queue, waiting for the centre to open—but those snippets of information gave people comfort and meant they did not feel so lost in the system. Especially as the Home Office moves further and further towards a digital system, surely there must be some way of replicating that and letting people have some insight into what is happening to their applications. In the meantime, I urge the Minister to look at what can be done to improve communication with applicants as they sit through these horrendous waiting times.

So far I have focused on delays with visas with no target processing times, but there are also significant delays with visas with target times; often, the delays go far past those targets. North East Fife is home to the University of St Andrews, which is *The Guardian’s* top-rated university in the UK. It is a hub of research and teaching and it attracts some of the brightest minds from around the world. The projects they work on are wide-ranging, but encompass medical research and energy. If we have learned anything from the last three years, it is that we need solutions in those areas and that we want to be at the cutting edge of progress. There is absolutely no doubt that there are increased challenges and barriers to ensuring that progress following our departure from the EU, so it is immensely disappointing to find that, when the Home Office sets itself an eight-week target for skilled workers’ visas, it ends up missing it by 10 weeks.

I am sure the Minister knows how employment contracts work and about the need to book airline tickets, find accommodation and so on. All those things need some element of certainty. If the delays continue, I worry that top academics will simply stop wanting to come here. We will fall behind and we will lose research funding and contracts. I am sure that is not a legacy the Minister wants to be involved with, so will he explain why these routine delays are happening? Is it that there are problems with the system that mean that eight weeks just is not possible—a degree of honesty would be fantastic—or is it that the system is just under-resourced, with bones cut so bare of fat by this Government that they are barely creaking on?

While I think about the University of St Andrews, I have a side point that I would like to get the Minister’s views on. This is not the responsibility of the Home Office, but it is definitely something that it has an interest in: the academic technology approval scheme. Where researchers have contracts to come to work at St Andrews in sensitive fields, such as energy, they are required to go through additional Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office checks. Visas are applied for at the same time and, if the ATAS certificate is delayed—as they generally are, to be quite honest—there is a risk that the visa approval has to be voided and the process must be started all over again.

Given that the rest of this debate is focused on delays and under-resourcing in UKVI, that seems a huge waste of time and resources. I am told by the university that delays are pretty much universal, but it gave me

some typical examples: instead of the mooted processing time of 20 days, we are looking at 65 days, 75 days, and 102 days and counting. Is the Minister having conversations with his colleagues in the FCDO about this? Is there anything that can be done to streamline the process, or at least to better align the visa and ATAS processes to avoid reapplications? That would be incredibly helpful for universities across the UK, not just my own in St Andrews.

Finally, let me turn to turn to some Homes for Ukraine visa cases that my office still has open. Earlier, I praised the hard work of the UKVI staff in dealing with the influx of applications, and I fully stand by that, but my office currently has 11 unresolved cases of people left in a warzone because of delays at our end. The first 10 of those visas were applied for by one sponsor in June; the processing time now stands at 25 weeks. We have tried to escalate the cases, but we keep being told that they are under consideration.

The 11th case is a separate application. The complication comes because the applicant initially applied to come to Scotland under its super-sponsor scheme. Unfortunately, she was told in September that, due to operational difficulties in the scheme, her application was on hold. She then applied again through the UK-wide route to stay with a family. It has now been almost 14 weeks since she sent in that application. Our office has been given conflicting information about the application. At one point, we were told that it was deferred, but with no explanation. That is incredibly worrying for someone who has been waiting six months to reach safety.

As I said earlier, this should not take a Minister's intervention, but I have a list of cases; if the Minister is willing to look at those that I have raised today so that we can at least find out what the delays are, I will be incredibly grateful. I have raised a few specific cases, but it is clear from my experience and the experiences of my colleagues that these are systemic issues. I would be hugely grateful if the Minister would look at the specific cases that we have raised today, but more than that, I hope that he can give me some reassurance that the Government are addressing the broader issues that I have raised, and that he will go back to the Home Office and effect some change.

4.30 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing the debate and to hon. Members from across the House who have joined us, no doubt sharing the hon. Lady's concerns.

My door is always open for individual cases. If the hon. Lady would like to give me the details of the cases she raised after the debate, I would be happy to look into them, but she is right that it should not take a request to a Minister to get the good service that the Home Office and our agencies should be delivering routinely. The concerns that she has raised are important to me and to the team behind the visas and immigration service.

In my short time in the Home Office, I have been impressed by the good work that the team has done in recent months to turn around some of the delays that we have experienced in recent years. The hon. Lady very

fairly mentioned that two huge events have affected the performance of UKVI. First, the pandemic affected productivity in all areas of the public sector and the private sector. It has taken us time, as it has other developed countries, to regain the level of customer service that we would like to offer. In most areas, the UK is actually in a better position than our direct competitors around the world, but of course we aspire to be in that position—or, indeed, to go further.

The second factor is Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. My predecessors made the right decision to transfer a great deal of the workers in the Home Office and UKVI to work on the Homes for Ukraine scheme so that we could get those visas issued as expeditiously as possible, but that did come at a cost to some of our other visa customer standards. It is now our hope that we can quickly recover that lost ground and bring each of the visa categories into line with the service standard as quickly as possible. The good news is that in most cases that has now happened. In the small number of cases in which it is not happening, it will happen very soon. I have been meeting regularly with Marc Owen, who leads the service, and have been impressed by the work that he has done to turn it around in recent months.

I will go through a couple of the principal areas that have been raised, just to give some comfort that we are very alive to these issues. Despite the need to take resource off the emergency situation in Ukraine and restore the service that the rest of the visas and immigration service needs to deliver, it remains important that we process applications under the Homes for Ukraine scheme quickly. If the hon. Member for North East Fife gives me details of the cases she mentioned, I will happily take them forwards, but we are generally processing applications in a matter of days. If some are taking longer, that is clearly concerning; it may be that there is something specific about those cases, but I will happily look into them.

Before my arrival in the Department, an entirely reasonable decision was taken to make work and study our national priority. We need to get the economy going again after the pandemic, and we needed to get students who had left because of covid back into the country, in order for universities to get going again. Resources were put in place to ensure that those visas were decided quickly. The number of cases was very high, as can be seen from the net migration statistics, which were published recently. The number of foreign students who have entered the UK in the past 12 months has been exceptionally high, and more than 590,000 study visas had been processed by the end of September 2022.

I am interested in the hon. Lady's example from St Andrews University. The national statistics show that we are meeting the study route customer service standard. The 15-day service is being met. In fact, it is averaging 11 days for a standard study visa. For leave to remain—the more complex and longer-term settlement cases—we have an eight-week standard, and that is at six weeks currently. In general terms, therefore, we are meeting the standard, but that is not to diminish the cases that she raised, which again I will happily take up.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing the debate. I have had a case in my constituency of a sixth-form student who was already studying at a sixth-form college,

[Dr Dan Poulter]

but who ran foul of the visa rules and had difficulty re-entering to continue their course. It is not necessarily about the easy cases here; it is about how we deal with what was called the long tail of casework. Some cases are still taking several months to clear up, which is interfering with student studies and sometimes with the supply of staff. I wonder what the Minister might be able to do to address that issue.

Robert Jenrick: I will happily look into that. As I say, the overall standard is being met and indeed exceeded—that was not always the case, but it is where we are now—but my hon. Friend is probably right that there is a longer tail of complex cases, which clearly take longer. It is important that the Department looks after those individuals to the same standard.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the Minister for giving way—he is being generous with his time. There is absolutely no doubt that the student situation has improved massively, and my casework team would acknowledge that, but the issue is the work visas of people coming for research or employment with the university. It will degrade the university's reputation if people coming to deliver courses to students cannot get here.

Robert Jenrick: Without repeating myself, I am happy to look into those cases. There is a conflict here between the standard practice and the cases the hon. Lady is raising. Again, that is not to diminish what she is saying, because there are without doubt cases where we are not performing as we would wish.

It is fair to say that the overall picture for work visas is mixed. For non-sponsored work visas, we are falling below the standard that we aspire to, which is 15 days; we are averaging 36 days, according to the latest statistics that I have seen. For the sponsored routes, which have been given priority by the Department for understandable reasons—this is where an employer is actively seeking for a person to come to the UK as swiftly as possible—the opposite is true. Our 15-day target is being exceeded; we are processing those claims in eight days on average. However, we would like to bring all those categories into line with our service standards as quickly as possible.

For visitors to the UK, we are also now in a much better position that we were recently, which helps with the return of international tourism to the UK. Generally, we are now at or exceeding the customer service standard that we aspire to, which is between 14 and 21 days to turn around an application.

The area where I think there is still room for improvement is family visas, which a number of hon. Members raised today. For the settlement visas, we are about in the position that we would like to be in, which is that we are turning cases around in 93 days. That is still a long time in the real world for someone who wants to get a loved one into the country for important reasons, so I appreciate that, although we might be achieving our customer service target, it is probably not the target that we as a country aspire to. We would like to improve on that.

Wendy Chamberlain: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will, but let me just finish the point. For spouses and partners looking for either leave to remain or indefinite leave to remain, the overall picture is much better. For leave to remain, we have a target of eight weeks. We are currently processing claims in three weeks. For indefinite leave to remain, we have a much longer target, of 26 weeks, but we are processing those claims within 10 weeks. Overall, the team has done a good job of turning around those times, but I appreciate that the hon. Member for North East Fife has some examples that tell a different story. Perhaps in the time remaining she would like to intervene one last time.

Wendy Chamberlain: I appreciate the Minister giving way for a final time. It is interesting that he admits that family visas are where the poorest performance is. That goes back to the very first point I made at the start of the debate: the Home Office does not have a target time for those visas. It is very good that the Minister is giving us data that shows that some tracking is happening, but perhaps if he agreed to set a target the performance would improve.

Robert Jenrick: We do have targets for those claims. I have been happy to read some of the targets today. For each visa category, we set our own internal customer service target, and as Ministers we push the team to deliver on it. Those targets can progressively be improved, now that we are out of the long shadow of covid and are able to move some of the resource that was on the Homes for Ukraine scheme back on to business-as-usual processes. I hope that, in the early months of next year, each visa cohort will be brought to, or will exceed, our customer service standard. Then I, as the responsible Minister, will be able to work with the team to set better targets that provide an even better quality of service to the hon. Lady and all our constituents across the country.

Munira Wilson: On the length of time the Minister cited for spousal visas, in our experience 26 weeks is much closer to the reality on the ground. Will he clarify for our constituents and caseworkers what the criteria for getting a case expedited are? The example I gave was not considered worth expediting.

Robert Jenrick: I do not have the exact criteria with me. I am happy to have a conversation with the hon. Lady to give her some further guidance, but it is fair to say that some of the cases that we receive cannot be expedited, even though they relate to what many of us would regard as important life events, such as an individual's decision to get married. It is the Home Office's advice that someone should get their visa before setting the date for their wedding. The issues that we take most seriously are obviously those of life and death, where individuals need to come into the country for a funeral or to see a relative or loved one just before they pass away. A high standard has to be applied, because we receive thousands of requests for expedited cases that relate to important life events and heartfelt issues. We have to set a high standard to ensure that we can truly prioritise important events.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for North East Fife for raising this matter. As I said, I will be more than happy to look into the specific cases that she, or indeed other Members, raised.

Question put and agreed to.

Cost of Food

4.44 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of food.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I would like to start this debate on the cost of food by speaking about the situation today in my constituency of Liverpool, West Derby. Food prices have increased by 16.4% in the year to October, and one in three people in my great city are in food poverty. One in six constituents in West Derby are missing meals or going without food, and two in three are cutting back on hot water, heating or electricity. The situation is getting worse by the hour.

I am here today to deliver a message to the Minister, the Government and this House: the rising cost of food, coupled with falling wages and a completely inadequate system of welfare support, is a catastrophe for my constituents and my community, and its long-term effects will be catastrophic for generations to come in Liverpool, West Derby.

Like many Members present, I have been contacted by constituents who have never been so scared about their future and their situation. We have workers in almost every industry taking strike action as a last resort, because work does not pay and does not meet rising costs, such as those for food. In West Derby, there are nurses, educators, firefighters, postal workers, rail staff and civil servants using food banks. What have we become?

This is one of the gravest and most frightening crises seen in our lifetimes, and my constituents tell me they feel abandoned and ignored by the Government, whose job it is to protect them—a Government who commissioned the national food strategy and ignored it when it reported back. For all the report's shortcomings, its author, Henry Dimbleby, attempted to answer some of the failings in Government policy and proposed changes that would have immediately lifted many people out of food poverty if they had been implemented.

Food insecurity levels have doubled since the start of 2022, affecting an estimated 10 million adults and 4 million children in September alone. If the Government cannot ensure that everyone has enough to eat and cannot guarantee their right to food, they are a Government who are fundamentally broken. The 16.4% rise in the price of food in the past year is the highest since 1977, and we have seen the sharpest fall in wages since that year. These catastrophic statistics have a devastating impact on our communities, which I am sure we will all speak about today.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. A recent survey by the trade association for school caterers found that food ingredient prices for schools have gone up by 20% in just two months. Schools are having to subsidise free school meals from their own budgets or to charge struggling families more, for those who are entitled to free school meals. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should not only extend free school meals to every child on universal credit, but fund schools properly to provide free school meals?

Ian Byrne: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I would go further and call for universal free school meals for every child, but I will speak about that later.

Calorie for calorie, healthier foods are now nearly three times more expensive than less healthy foods. Terrifyingly, the cost of baby formula has soared over the last year, with the cheapest brands increasing by 22%. We have seen pictures of baby milk locked away and put on the highest shelves in supermarkets—images that surely epitomise this entirely broken system.

Inflation hits the poorest hardest. The poorest fifth of the population would need to spend 43% of their disposable income on food to afford the Government's recommended healthy diet in "The Eatwell Guide". How is that achievable with so many pressures and so little income?

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a number of excellent points. Tomorrow, Good Food Scotland will open the Linthouse Larder. Does he agree that what we want to hear from the Government is how they are going to assist organisations that provide affordable food at affordable prices for so many of his constituents and my constituents, so that they can survive from week to week?

Ian Byrne: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I fully agree with everything he said.

I want to highlight the appalling impact that the cost of food is having on children in particular. Professor Ian Sinha, a paediatrician at the fantastic Alder Hey Children's Hospital in my constituency, told me:

"We see the almost Dickensian effects of poor nutrition in children in Liverpool and other working class cities. We see rickets, poor growth, and deficiencies in minerals and vitamins that reflect that their nutrition revolves around getting enough calories to survive...not around developing optimal health...We have seen malnourished children so anaemic as a result of poor nutrition, and so acutely sick, that we thought they had leukaemia. We see children sharing food portions, in schools and in houses, and so no wonder they are falling asleep and struggling to concentrate in class. Paediatrics is about ensuring children live their best life—as per the UN Convention on the rights of the child—and their lack of food is shackling them and their opportunities."

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the outstanding work he is doing on the Right to Food campaign. Does he agree that the Welsh Government are leading the way on food, particularly for children? We have already introduced free school meals in primary schools, and hopefully that will be extended to secondary schools at some point, despite the fact that Wales does not get a fair, needs-based funding formula. Wales really does care and is compassionate about the needs of people and future generations. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK Government need to take the lead from Wales?

Ian Byrne: I fully agree, and I commend Mark Drakeford and the Government in Wales for absolutely leading the way on this issue and showing that a different way is possible.

Professor Sinha goes on to say:

"When I tell families in my asthma clinic that nutrition is crucial, they tell me that by the time they can get to the foodbank any fresh fruit and vegetables have gone. When we explain the importance of how food is prepared, they tell us that the only mechanism of heating food is a kettle. They are limited to ultra-processed, calorie dense foods that are cheap and easy to store.

[*Ian Byrne*]

When we see analyses such as those in the British Medical Journal last month, showing associations between ultra-processed food and the risk of death, we know that the children coming to our clinics are often on this path, but they can't afford to get out of it."

It is a disgrace that my constituents face this appalling and grave situation, and yet at the same time we read reports that global food companies have paid out £15 billion in profits to their shareholders. Supermarkets are not doing too badly either: they have also paid out vast dividends during covid and the cost of living crisis.

At a recent Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee session, we heard evidence from the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, who told us:

"Corporations have a significant amount of power in markets and there is not much being done to hold corporations accountable. Food prices are at the mercy of speculation... Governments have tools in place to stabilise prices."

At the same time, research from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union highlighted that the workers who produce the food and enable those profits are some of the hardest hit by the rising cost of food.

Hunger and out-of-control food inflation are not inevitable. They are a political choice made by this Government and compounded by cutting away vital protections from rising fuel costs, dismantling the social safety net, cutting universal credit, imposing benefit sanctions, eroding workers' rights and presiding over a decade of austerity that has cut to the bone our vital services, which are needed now more than ever. The time for sticking plasters to address the rising cost of food—such as the reliance on thousands of food bank and food pantry volunteers and donors—is over. We need systemic change so that all our people have the opportunity of health, happiness and dignity.

That is why we need to legislate for the right to food. We need enforceable food rights to ensure that the Government of the day are accountable for addressing the cost of food and making sure nobody goes hungry, and that they are prevented from making decisions that lead to people being unable to afford to put a meal on the table. A right to food should be not a safety net but a rope ladder, with ever-higher standards of provision.

I propose the following as an extremely modest and deliverable beginning. There should be a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure the food security of our nations, which should be taken into account when setting competition, planning, transport, local government and all other policies. We should be eradicating food deserts, not enabling them. Ministers should be under a duty when setting the minimum wage and any relevant social security benefits, including pensions, to state how much of the prescribed sum has been calculated for food, because right now it is nowhere near enough.

Finally, we must legislate for universal free school meals—a nutritious free school breakfast and lunch for every child in state education. We heard powerful evidence at the EFRA Committee recently about the benefits that that would bring for children's learning, happiness and health and about how that investment would allow our children to enjoy futures that are far brighter than what they are looking forward to now. Crucially, from the Government's perspective, it would pay for itself in the long run. The benefits far outweigh the costs.

I urge the Minister to come forward with action now and not to repeat the indifference they have shown when I have raised this issue repeatedly in the House. Constituents are starving, and we need political leadership that guarantees and realises everyone's right to healthy food. If reliance on charity alone was a sufficient guarantee for basic human needs in the UK, previous generations would not have legislated for universal state schooling or a national health service. This horrific situation demonstrates that we need the same vision and ambition when it comes to food security—and it cannot wait a moment longer.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Colleagues will recognise that we have around half an hour until the winding-up speeches at 5.23 pm. Eleven people are trying to catch my eye, and that works out at around two and a half minutes apiece. I shall not set a formal time limit, but if Members could be courteous to each other by keeping to two and a half minutes or less, that would be most appreciated.

4.55 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing the debate.

One in six Jarrow constituents have gone without food in recent months, and two in five have cut back on food spending. Food prices increased by 16.4% in the 12 months to October 2022, and the cost of wholesale food is having a huge impact on charities and food banks. At my surgery last week at Hebburn Helps, it reported that wholesale food prices are severely impacting its ability to help those in need. Food insecurity rates have doubled since the start of 2022, with an estimated 10 million adults and 4 million children impacted. Reductions in food quality and quantity are having serious health consequences for children, the elderly and the vulnerable.

We are hearing reports that food prices are so high and wages so low that firefighters, nurses, teachers and many others are now reliant on food banks. Yesterday in Parliament, the National Education Union told us that support staff are using food banks set up in their schools. Teaching assistants are still trying to feed students from their own pocket, while they themselves are being forced to use food banks to put food on the table in their cold homes. One million children living in poverty do not even get a free school meal. No child should go hungry; no child should be left behind. The nationwide figure that 28% of children live in poverty is appalling. In my constituency of Jarrow, that rises to 39%. That is a horrifying statistic, but we must not forget that behind all these stats is the face of a hungry child and a family who are struggling. When we visualise an average primary school class of 36 children, we should recognise that 14 of them will be living in poverty, too hungry to concentrate at school.

Poverty is clearly a political choice—one that this Government keep on making. This Government should be ashamed that poverty pay and the cost of living crisis have led to millions living in in-work poverty. Throughout the pandemic, supermarket profits soared and they continue to do so. Tesco's pre-tax profits jumped from

£1.1 billion to £2.2 billion in the 12 months to 26 February this year, and the company recently announced a 20% increase in its interim dividend to its shareholders. There are increases in company profits and shareholder pay, yet people are being asked to pay more. We need an urgent change of direction in this country. We need a right to food. In the sixth richest country in the world, it is not too much to ask that our kids do not go hungry.

4.58 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for bringing forward this debate and I pay tribute to the tremendous work he has been doing to tackle hunger. Alongside fans of his beloved Liverpool, as well as Everton fans, his Right to Food campaign has helped tackle the food insecurity faced by 11 million people across the United Kingdom.

The Scottish Government allocated almost £3 billion this financial year to help households facing the Tory-induced cost of living crisis, including £1 billion to providing services and financial support not available anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That included increasing the Scottish child payment by 150% in fewer than eight months, to £25 per child per week for those aged between 6 and 15. However, most of the key policies and fiscal levers are held here by this UK Government, given that over 85% of welfare policy is reserved. We continue to press the UK Government, who have all the levers at their disposal, to tackle this emergency on the scale required, including enabling access to borrowing, providing an uprate in benefits and offering extra support to households.

Unlike the Tories, the Scottish Government rightly see food as a basic human right. Everyone should be able to afford the food they need to sustain a healthy life. The Tories have not only taken a wrecking ball to our economy but are decimating the chances for working people, who are often working multiple jobs, to put food on the table for themselves and their families.

The charity Action for Children has unearthed heartbreaking stories of the current cost of living crisis, including the fact that 25% of young people are donating their own pocket money to help their parents through the festive period. Other parents are having to rely on their children's leftovers, and many families are simply going without. How shameful is that? In my own constituency, I hear personal stories of vulnerable people not leaving their beds because of the price of energy and the current Arctic snap. A constituent contacted me yesterday in a cry for help after spending the last four days in temperatures of minus 8° without any money to heat her home or heat up the homemade soup she had received from a neighbour.

This is a crisis—a food crisis—and one that has been exacerbated under the Tories. Food bank usage has soared over the last 12 years, and yet they turn up gleefully, scissors in hand, to cut the ribbons and open new food banks—or should I say pantries, as the Leader of the House has been referring to them lately? This is terrible stuff. The Trussell Trust revealed that 1.3 million emergency food parcels were provided to people by food banks between April and September this year, and almost half a million of those went to children. Is this truly the society we now consider acceptable?

5.1 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): It is important in these debates that we try to get to the roots of what the cause of this food crisis is. We will be told that it is largely to do with the crisis in Ukraine. I believe that it is actually to do with supermarkets profiteering and world global speculation on the food markets.

With regards to supermarkets profiteering, as my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) said, Tesco has doubled its profits, while those of Associated British Foods have increased by 48% and those of Lidl by 319%. Now is the time for an excess profits tax to ensure that we prevent food speculation at the national level.

In addition, there is speculation at the global level. As I have said time and again on the Floor of the House, we saw this during the banking crash, when billions were moved from the sub-prime housing market into the food commodity market, creating a famine. As a result, we introduced regulation, MiFID II, which put position limits on how much of an individual food commodity could be held by speculators. However, the Government have now introduced the Financial Services and Markets Bill, and in Edinburgh last week the Chancellor announced further deregulation of the market system, meaning that that regulation will be lifted. Instead of regulation by Government or the Financial Conduct Authority, food commodity limits will be handed over to the traders themselves—the very people who are making profits out of this speculation.

Let us put in context the argument that somehow Ukraine has caused this crisis. Ukraine produces 3% of the world's wheat and 2.6% of the world's corn—the basic food stuffs. This is about speculation and profiteering. It is not just me saying this about deregulation. The Governor of the Bank of England today stated his anxieties about the Government going too far on deregulation overall, and not learning the lessons of the banking crash. People will starve as a result of profiteering and speculation. That is why we need an excess profits tax and regulation of the food commodity market along with our partners globally.

Finally, I know people do not want to talk about Brexit, but if we look at the London School of Economics analysis, we see that £6 billion has been put on our food bills over the last two years—that is 3% a year. We have got to sort out a new deal on Brexit.

5.4 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for his fantastic contribution and his hard work on this issue. I agree with everything he said.

Earlier this year, Salford's Labour council declared Salford a Right to Food city. When my council made that commitment, along with ramping up support through its Spirit of Salford network, we were facing acute levels of food insecurity across the city. Sadly, since then the number of people in need has risen exponentially. Indeed, tomorrow I hope to visit an event called Five Days of Christmas, where a group called For the Love of Food, led by the brilliant Councillor Sammie Bellamy, will be distributing hot meals to anyone over 65 who might

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

need one. Sammie and her team have been helping those who are struggling to afford hot cooked meals for months now, and they are joined by a stream of other charities across the city providing urgent food support. They include the Salford Families in need Meals Project, Salford Foodbank, Swinton food bank, Mustard Tree, More4Less, Salford Community Grocery, the Food Collective, Audacious A-Teams, Family FoodFayre, Lucie's Pantry, Salford Loaves and Fishes, Salford Food Parcels, FoodCycle, Oasis Hub and so many more. The list is becoming endless.

The work these brilliant organisations do is nothing short of heroic, but we must question why, in one of the richest economies in the world, the people of my city are having to rely on charity to feed their families. The answer is that more than a decade on from the financial crisis, UK workers are still earning on average £75 a month less in real terms than they were in 2008, and it is getting worse. Nurses' pay, for example, has fallen by 20% in real terms, and workers in the UK are facing the worst real wage squeeze of all G7 nations. At the same time, the cost of food has soared by at least 11.6% over the last year, which is the sharpest increase on record, not to mention energy costs, which have skyrocketed.

We are at a point when even those in work, even those thought to be in good work, cannot afford the basics they need to survive. All this is why so many workers are now choosing to take strike action. They are choosing to go without pay this Christmas in order to ring the alarm. They simply cannot survive any more.

I agree with the comments by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on the imposition of price caps on essential goods and items in supermarkets to assist with addressing this crisis. I also agree with his suggestion of an excess profits tax for supermarkets. We need to listen to trade unions, which are calling for the national minimum wage to be increased to at least £15 an hour, with an end to exploitative youth rates, and we should be looking at scrapping the widespread use of zero-hours contracts.

The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union has made a very important suggestion. It is calling on the Government to convene a national food emergency summit as soon as possible to bring together all regional and national leaders to put forward a plan to ensure the people of this nation have their basic needs met. I call on the Minister to address that point when he sums up.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on the global situation. There are calls for the Government to regulate and recognise the casino economy and commodity prices. I want to reiterate my right hon. Friend's comments, because what he raises is so important to addressing this crisis.

5.7 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): We should call this what it is. This is about hunger, poverty and desperation. It is about kids going to bed hungry, waking up and not getting enough food to be able to study at school. This is Britain, one of the richest countries on the entire planet. In this debate, there is not a single Tory MP present who does not have to be here—[*Interruption.*] Forgive me, there is one.

This is a political choice we have here. It is a political choice to keep wages down. It is a political choice not to match inflation. And it is a political choice to attack the people who are ringing the alarm bells. Tomorrow we will have the first nationwide nurses' strike. In Plymouth we are seeing nurses using food banks. We are seeing teachers using food banks. We are seeing armed forces personnel using food banks and emergency food vouchers. These are people in good jobs—jobs they have had to study and learn skills for, and jobs that should provide a decent wage so that they can put food on their table for them and their kids. Yet they cannot. This is a reboot of Dickensian Britain. It is sickening. It is utterly sickening.

I launched a campaign with our utterly brilliant food bank in Plymouth a month ago to buy electric blankets. An electric blanket or throw costs 20p a day and people can put their families underneath them to keep them warm, rather than spend £6 a day to heat their home using central heating. We have raised £3,500 to buy electric blankets. The people coming in to collect their food parcels need food that they do not have to heat, because they cannot afford the utilities. It is sickening that this is happening in one of the richest countries.

Brilliant charities such as Provide Devon, a relatively new charity, have seen their fresh food costs go up by a third. They have seen demand go up by a third. They have served an amazing number of people, especially children, but they are seeing their food and their monetary donations fall at the same time, because people are struggling to make ends meet.

I think that when we look at the price of food, it is right for us to also look at the speculators and the supermarkets. I want to give a shout out to our farmers, because it is not the primary producers in this country who are profiteering from high food prices. Many of them are locked into contracts whereby they cannot get a decent price for the food that they grow. It is time that this changed.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

James Gray (in the Chair): We have 30 minutes left and six Back-Bench speakers. They will take two minutes each, preferably.

5.10 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Let me first thank you, Mr Gray, and thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for this very important debate.

I will pick up where my friend the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) left off and say that no policy of trying to tackle food poverty in this country will get anywhere if it does not look at how we produce our food and the amount that we produce, so let us talk about our farmers and the difference that they can make. We have a 14% rise in food prices—it amounts to much more for the poorest people. I agree with everything that hon. Members have said in the last few minutes about the heartbreaking reality of children not having enough food to be able to study and to maintain their health. It is utterly outrageous that in the fifth richest country in the world, we are in this situation.

However, the United Kingdom produces only 60% of the food that it eats. It is a decision of the Government to allow that to be the case, or rather it is the absence of decisions that would have solved that problem. The Government are moving towards the new farm payments scheme. Many or all of us probably support the principles underlying that scheme, which is about public money for public goods. But this month, farmers will see a 20% cut in their basic payment, and that is without most of them having access to anything new to replace it. We see new incentives in order to give landlords financial support for turving out their tenants and so reducing the amount of food that we produce. This Government now have a farming policy that actively encourages the reduction of food production in this country. That does two things: it pushes up the price of food, and it pushes Britain on to the international commodity markets to buy food elsewhere, pushing up the price of food for the poorest people in the world. That this Government have a farming policy that actively encourages us to produce less food in this country and to push up the price of food for the poorest people in the world is morally reprehensible. I can tell the House, representing, as I do, Cumbria, the lakes and the dales, that Britain's farmers are determined to feed Britain's people and to tackle the food poverty that exists in every community. On their behalf, I beg the Government to change tack and allow them to do so.

5.12 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on his work on the right to food. He certainly stands in the traditions of the greatest MPs from the great city of Liverpool, second only to Leeds of course—[*Interruption*].

Controversy apart, in this, the fifth richest country on earth, not a single person—adult or child—should need to be fed by a charity. I congratulate all those wonderful people who donate to charities, whether it be money or food, and who work in food banks. In this, one of the richest countries on earth, that simply should not be necessary. It is a political choice, as my hon. Friend and others have said, and the campaign for the right to food is so important. We need immediate action. I think that, in this historic cost of living crisis, we need price caps on food and other essential items. The state should intervene for the benefit of everyone in our society, particularly the most vulnerable. I believe that we need a tax on supermarket super-profits, to create a fund to tackle hunger. And we should certainly back the campaign by the National Education Union and others for free school meals and support for families over the school holidays.

What should a right to food mean? Every single person in this country should have a right to a decent home, a right to good-quality and healthy food, and a right to free healthcare and education. The right to food should include free school meals for every single child in compulsory education. Let us have a universalist approach and end the stigma of means-testing. There should be a framework of legal duties on national and local government to provide community kitchens. As we have heard, the Secretary of State should be required to consider the cost of food when calculating the minimum wage and benefits.

This is an emergency—a food emergency, a nutrition emergency and a health emergency. Food insecurity levels have doubled since the start of 2022, affecting an estimated 10 million adults and 4 million children in September 2022. Everyone should have the right to food. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby, for securing the debate, and every Member of Parliament, across the parties, who has committed to supporting the right to food.

5.15 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing this debate. As other Members have said, we have to look at price controls. The price of vegetable oil has risen by 65%, pasta by 60% and tea by 46%.

As other Members have done, including the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), I want to pay tribute to organisations in my constituency, such as the Scottish Pantry Network and the Children's Holiday Food Programme, funded by Glasgow City Council. This is a cross-party issue, too—the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) is chair of the Country Food Trust, and his organisation donated 400 food pouches to a number of my local charities only last month. There are many other good organisations out there, including Shettleston Community Growing Project and Cranhill Development Trust, of which I am a director, which are doing some really good work in teaching people not just how to grow food, but how to cook it as well.

In the course of the debate on the cost of food, we have to have a conversation not just about the food available, but about the quality of that food. Quite often, food banks have a plethora of tinned foods, but fruit and veg are not as freely available. The idea that in these islands there are fields where, as a result of a lack of labour, fruit and veg are rotting, should shame a vast number of us, and I attribute much of that to Brexit.

Feeding people should not be something that charities have to do. The comedian Henning Wehn is quoted as saying, "We don't do charity in Germany. We pay taxes. Charity is a failure of Governments." That is the fundamental problem. As a result of Government policies, such as the sanctions policy, the five-week wait for universal credit and many other Government-driven issues, we are in a situation where charities in my constituency are having to step in and feed people. That is not a sustainable situation.

We talk about food sustainability. The ultimate issue about sustainability is how the Government behave and their lack of support for the poorest in our society. That is a message that the Minister needs to take back to his colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions.

5.17 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): This Christmas, millions of children will go hungry in the sixth richest nation in the world, completely unnecessarily. It is said that this is about Ukraine, but in 2010, 26,000 people were using food banks, and by last year, that figure was 2.6 million—a hundredfold increase. Now, one in four people are in food poverty, having faced a decade of frozen wages; they are now feeling the cold wind of 17% food inflation.

[Geraint Davies]

The response of the Government and the Chancellor is, “Oh, it’ll be all right. We will increase universal credit by 10% and pensions next April.” Food inflation is at 17% now, and it is freezing cold out there. We have just granted 490,000 warrants for energy companies forcibly to convert people’s electricity to prepayment meters, so they will not be able to cook and will be freezing cold. The starvation that we are going to see this winter is much worse than we saw in the aftermath of world war two, when we had rations. It is shameful. It is disgraceful. It is unnecessary, and it must be changed.

Not only should we provide benefits and support for those in greatest need, but there are other obvious things that we can do. As I mentioned, in Wales, there are free universal school meals, both at breakfast and now rolling out for lunch. We could do that immediately.

We need to think about the quality of food. The cheapest calories are the worst calories for diabetes and obesity, and that stores up a time bomb for the future, not just in life chances but in life expectancy. That is unnecessary and stupid, and it is not what we should be doing in a healthy, prosperous, growing economy for all.

In the NHS, 7 million people are already on the waiting list and the nurses are on strike because they cannot afford to feed their own children. We should ensure that the pressures on the NHS are alleviated by feeding all people—children, obviously, and all families and people—so that they are prosperous for the future. Clearly, we need a situation where we stop profiteering; we are seeing the doubling of margins by retailers. We must stop the speculation, ensure a supply of healthy food and ensure fairness and a right to food for the future of Britain.

5.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for setting the scene. He is always here to speak on issues that every one of us supports, and I commend him for bringing this forward.

Between the rise in the cost of living, increasing inflation, rates for basic household goods and the impact of the Northern Ireland protocol on goods coming into Northern Ireland, my own constituents are facing higher prices daily. Why is that? It is because—as the Minister will know, and as I will reiterate for the record—Northern Ireland faces increasing haulage fees. There has been an increase of some 30% in haulage fees this year, in the past six to nine months. It is important that people are aware of this, when other parties state that the Northern Ireland protocol is good for our local economy; here is a figure that proves it is not—not when local businesses are faced with having to put up their prices for the consumer because they cannot afford to make ends meet.

As of 9 December 2022, the inflation rate for food in Northern Ireland was about 10.6%. For a large or small family with kids or elderly pensioners, that is extortionate. My office has seen an incredible rise in the number of people asking for help from food banks. Up until about two months ago, we made between 25 and 30 referrals; we are now making 50, 60 and 65-plus. The people who are coming in are not just the food-poor; they are middle-class people who are now finding it difficult to deal with this as well.

As Members will know, I was in the picket line on Monday past with NHS workers, and the nurses and care staff over there were telling me that they are visiting food banks. That is a fact; that is where we are. I also worry about the lone pensioner who, when it comes to getting their energy payment, has the added stress and pressure of shopping; they worry about whether it is a sustainable price and whether it will last.

I appreciate that times are hard, but we often cannot help the circumstances that occur internationally that cause them. I believe we have a responsibility to ensure that our constituents are supported wherever we can do that little bit extra to help, and that goes for our farmers as well.

James Gray (in the Chair): One minute—Claudia Webbe.

5.22 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): Thank you, Mr Gray. Food poverty is a political choice. It is slow violence; we are talking about social murder. The sheer numbers of people who are suffering hardship in this country is staggering. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that over 20 million people in the UK have been forced to cut back their spending on food and essentials because of the spiralling cost of living. Despite the energy crisis, the No. 1 reason that they reported for having to cut their spending was the rocketing price of food itself. One in six households in the UK are food-insecure. In Leicester East, where more than four in 10 children live in poverty and food bank use has soared by more than 300% in recent years, people are facing the worst of this crisis. Food-bank use is again at record levels, and the numbers are rocketing up. These are horrifying figures; a country with so many people in these situations cannot claim to be truly civilised.

I will end on this, because I want to tell this story. It seems that the most popular—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. We will not bother with the story—thank you. I call Patricia Gibson.

5.23 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Gray. The premise of this debate, and all debates about food, is that everyone should have access to the food that they need. That ought not to be a controversial thing to say. The ONS today reported that food prices continue to rise, with annual food inflation hitting 16.5%—the highest rate for 45 years—and staple items such as tea, pasta and bread rising sharply. Alongside that, the UK is set to suffer the sharpest decline in economic growth of any European nation, with a drop in growth of 1.4% in 2023. That compares unfavourably with a small independent country similar to Scotland such as Ireland, which will see its economy grow by about 3%.

The Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee told MPs that Brexit added 6% to UK food prices—or £210, as the London School of Economics study indicated, which has caused real harm—and a real-terms cut of 2.6% to wages across the UK. I know that that is uncomfortable for the Brexit enthusiasts in the Labour party, but there it is. Add to that the inflationary pressure created by the exchange rate going down due to Brexit, mix it through with the consequential increase

in interest rates—despite a recession, as explained by the former Bank of England Governor Mark Carney—and add it all together with the complication of the disastrous mini-Budget, which we are now supposed to pretend did not even happen, and which blew a £30 billion hole in the UK's finances, and here we are.

My constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran and households across the UK are struggling to pay for essentials. Wages are eroded in the face of soaring inflation, with even buying food a challenge, not to mention heating the home. Where does this leave us? Food banks in Scotland experienced their busiest six months on record from April to September, providing 116,000 emergency food parcels during that period, with 40,000 parcels for children—a 29% increase on the previous year. That is the most parcels ever distributed for children in Scotland by food banks in the Trussell Trust network.

Alongside that, we have the issue of food security itself. We know that Ukraine has had an impact on food production, as have the soaring costs of fertiliser and energy. However, we need to take action now to better understand the full impact of challenges and disruption to our food supply chain and how industry and Government could work together to manage and mitigate the resulting impacts on the cost of food products.

The Scottish Government have established the food security and supply taskforce jointly with industry experts—the first of its kind in the UK. I hope that the UK Government will follow the Scottish Government's example and the Good Food Scotland strategy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) has told us, the Scottish Government are doing all they can with the very limited powers they have. They have allocated almost £3 billion this financial year to help households face the cost of living increases, including £1 billion to provide services and financial support not found anywhere else in the UK. That support includes the Scottish child payment, which has increased by 150% in less than eight months to £25 per eligible child per week for those aged between six and 15 years old, as well as free school meals for all primary 1 to 5 children, which will be rolled out for all primary pupils soon.

Let us not kid ourselves. The real way to tackle inequality is to have control over the full range of tax and welfare powers. Anything the Scottish Government try to do to tackle inequality is done with one hand tied behind their back, with 85% of welfare powers reserved to Westminster. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) pointed out how wealthy the UK is, but it is also the most unequal country in Europe. The UK Government must wake up and come to terms with the shocking reality that work is no longer a route out of poverty. Indeed, the Institute for Public Policy Research found that the chances of being pulled into poverty have doubled for households where two people work. That is a disgrace.

Doing nothing is not an option. For those who are really struggling, what is already being done is simply not enough; really, what we need to hear is what more will be done. I sincerely hope that the Minister will respond to the debate in that spirit. I hope that he responds from the starting point that everyone should have access to the food they need and that whatever he plans to say about what is already being done to support people needs to be built on, because it is not enough.

5.29 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing this timely debate. He is a hugely passionate and determined campaigner on this issue who speaks up for people across the country who are left hungry as prices soar. It is striking that, with one honourable exception—the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter)—the Government Benches are empty, while the Opposition Benches are overflowing with Members who have spoken passionately in this debate. I have been impressed by the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies). I am not going to repeat the points they made because time is short.

I will go straight to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, who observed the effect of food prices on primary producers. We have seen with rising egg prices that the issue has been well rehearsed but not resolved. Consumers pay more but producers do not cover their costs, so they stop producing, leading retailers to turn to lower standard imports. The excellent and widely reported research by Sustain last week shows just how fine the margins are for many producers, and how, when they are locked into fixed-term contracts, they are blown away by sudden and dramatic rises in costs.

For probably the third or fourth time in these debates, I ask the Minister for an update on the dairy code, the pork code and the fate of the Grocery Code Adjudicator. I do not expect any answers. I could not help smiling at the comments by Minette Batters of the National Farmers Union at the weekend, when she told *The Times* that the Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), was “asleep at the wheel”. I thought that was a bit unfair; the Secretary of State does not even think she should be at the wheel. As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West will recall, she made clear it to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee last week that she does not think it is the role of the Government to hand out free food or make price interventions.

That prompts this question: if it is not for the Government to intervene when people go hungry, then whose role is it? Ministers may be surprised to find that many people in this country do think that the Government have a role—just not this Government. My big question for the Minister is: what does he think his role is as the Food Minister? What is he for? It is almost exactly a year on from the Government sneaking out the food security review under the Agriculture Act 2020. Can he tell us what the situation is today? Farmers tell me that we are less food secure than we were a year ago. Growers are not planting, the sow herd is smaller and poultry farmers are not restocking. Are the Government concerned? Do they have a view? Can he even tell us whether we are more or less secure than we were a year ago?

[Daniel Zeichner]

I am grateful to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for pointing out in its briefing for this debate that the Government said the biggest medium to long-term risk to the UK's domestic production

“comes from climate change and other environmental pressures like soil degradation, water quality and biodiversity.”

What have the Government done to address that challenge, other than miss their own so-called legally binding date to publish the targets promised under the Environment Act 2021?

Has there been any progress on the Government's half-hearted food strategy from a few months ago? Although we all accept that there are big cost pressures, a more active Government would be using their convening power to make a difference. Will the Minister tell us how often he meets the major players in the industry? What are they telling him? What is he telling them? Is it down to just the big retailers to decide the nation's food policy, or does anyone else get a say? Perhaps he can tell us how often the Food and Drink Sector Council meets and what it has achieved to tackle this crisis. Its website says that it last met in February, although I understand there was a more recent meeting. What did the Minister get from it? Can he tell us?

What assessment have the Minister and his colleagues made of the impact of the rising cost of food? What discussions has he had with Department for Education colleagues on the impact on children of real cuts in the nutritional value of school meals? Caterers try to provide meals, and yet they are handed just a few pence to make up the loss when costs soar.

What are the health consequences of the changing buying patterns, as people move to cheaper options? What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care; or has he succumbed to his Secretary of State's clear intention to dump any plans to tackle the obesity crisis that Henry Dimbleby highlighted? There are plans to ban adverts for foods that are high in saturated fat, salt and sugar before 9 o'clock. Why, when type 2 diabetes is rising faster in children and young adults in Britain than anywhere else in the world, has implementation been delayed until 2025?

I doubt we will get any answers today. I wish the Minister and his colleagues a merry Christmas and a happy new year, but my sense is that on the cost of food—a very real issue facing every family in the country this Christmas—this Government have nothing to say, and frankly they show little interest. As always, their message is, “Leave it to the market; it is nothing to do with us. You're on your own.” For too many this Christmas, that is exactly how it will feel.

5.33 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate and I congratulate all Members who have spoken passionately on the topic.

The rise in food prices is a result of global shocks, including a spike in oil and gas prices and the conflict in Ukraine. I certainly recognise the impact that rising

food costs is having on households across the country. My Department is engaging closely with industry to understand potential pressures on our food supply chain, which has shown resilience in coping with unprecedented challenges.

As the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said, we have had a number of debates in this Chamber. He has speculated about us running out of turkeys for Christmas, predicting Armageddon. I reassure him again today that no such Armageddon has taken place, and turkeys will be available for Christmas. Despite his gloom and doom, the measures that the Government have put in place are delivering against the challenges that he described some time ago.

We continue to monitor food prices using the ONS inflation figures. Recent pressures have been sustained, and food price inflation continued to rise to 16.5% in November, up from 16.4% in October.

David Linden: The Minister talks about monitoring food prices. How often does he monitor the increase in food banks?

Mark Spencer: We continue to monitor food prices across the country. The hon. Gentleman also said that Brexit was a huge challenge for food prices. Actually, food price inflation is greater in the eurozone and the EU than in the UK, so I do not think that that is the challenge. Consumer food prices depend on a range of factors, including agri-food import prices, domestic agricultural prices, domestic labour and manufacturing costs and the sterling exchange rates. Some of the factors are influenced by our trading arrangements with other countries, which a number of Members referred to. Change in food prices is dependent on changes in one or more of those factors.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad that the Minister is monitoring food prices, but does he monitor the cost of infant formula? The all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding and inequalities has been doing so, and many groups are concerned that the cost of formula is now outpacing the amount of money that people are getting through the UK's Healthy Start programme. People just cannot afford it, and are watering it down.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The Government monitor all food prices. We are of course aware of the price of the grocery basket, so we are aware of the spikes in food prices across a range of products.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is taking action to maintain an efficient food supply chain by mitigating any potential burdens or friction that could otherwise drive up consumer food prices. In the UK, we are fortunate to have a large and resilient food supply chain. Our high degree of food security is built on supply from diverse sources, strong domestic production and imports through stable trade routes.

Tim Farron: Has the Minister assessed the impact on food prices and business profitability for farmers of the 20% reduction in the basic farm payment this month?

Mark Spencer: The reduction in the basic payment scheme is well advertised. Farmers are aware of it. We engage on a daily basis with farms up and down the country, as we are about to roll out the new environmental land management schemes. In fact, I have been engaging with farmers today on some of the new schemes that are coming, to give confidence in the marketplace that those farmers will continue to produce food, as well as improve our environmental footprint and biodiversity. There is good news there, which will give our farmers the confidence to continue to produce great food.

Dr Poulter: The Minister will recognise that we cannot protect the consumer from price rises without protecting the food producer. What specific support are the Government providing to help UK farmers with the unprecedented rises in input costs that food producers are facing, and to deal with some of the supermarkets' cartel behaviour in fixing prices, which is having an effect on producers and consumers?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The honest truth is that a lot of support is going to primary producers to help them through the challenges they face. The energy scheme is helping producers, but a lot of the debate this afternoon has been diametrically opposed, with calls for lower food prices for our consumers and, at the same time, a rise in payments to our farmers who produce the food. We cannot have both. If farmers are paid extra at the farm gate—*[Interruption.]* Look at some of the margins in retail, production and manufacturing. For lots of those businesses, margins are being squeezed quite dramatically and there is a challenge. I would like to see more of the profit trickle down to primary producers. *[Interruption.]* We are absolutely in a place where we are engaging with primary producers to try to help them with that.

Daniel Zeichner: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mark Spencer: I will take one more intervention and then I will have to conclude.

Daniel Zeichner: Will the Minister at least tell us what interventions he has made with retailers to make this happen, rather than just let it trickle down?

Mark Spencer: I have had lots of meetings with retailers and with many sectors. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the egg sector; we specifically had an egg roundtable last week, where we pulled together retailers, packers and primary producers to try to get some co-operation within the industry. The meeting was productive and conducted in a spirit of co-operation. There is clear willingness on the part of all parties to make sure the sector works, and we have recently seen

improvements in both the supply of eggs and the sharing of costs across the supply chain. That is good example of where we as a Department recognised the challenge, pulled people together, got them around a table and made sure that we had a positive impact on the sector.

The Government are in regular contact with food and farming industries to ensure that they are well prepared for a range of scenarios. We continue to take all the necessary steps to ensure that people across the country have the food they need. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby for securing the debate and bringing people together.

Luke Pollard: Before the Minister concludes, will he address the issue of hunger, particularly child hunger, which has been raised by so many Members? I appreciate his focus on farming—as a farming nerd, I like that—but there are kids who are going to bed hungry tonight. Will the Minister address that before he sits down?

Mark Spencer: There is a huge package of intervention from the Government to help families up and down the country who are struggling with the cost of living. The Government recognise those challenges. That is why the current Prime Minister, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, invested £37 billion in supporting households who are facing such challenges, to ensure they can pay their domestic bills and have a level of support. We are also investing in our local authorities to help them to help those families. That is what the Government are trying to achieve, but there are huge global pressures at play that make that very difficult and challenging.

Claudia Webbe: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mark Spencer: I cannot take another intervention as I have to give the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby the opportunity to conclude the debate. I thank hon. Members for their time today and for the spirit in which the debate has been conducted.

5.42 pm

Ian Byrne: I thank hon. Members for their powerful contributions; it has been a brilliant debate. I acknowledge the Minister's interesting reply, but we need deeds, not trickle-down words. Listening to the leadership coming from the Minister and from the Government, Beveridge would be spinning in his grave. We definitely need something, and I am just not seeing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost of food.

5.43 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 14 December 2022

TREASURY

UK Green Taxonomy

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, Baroness Penn, has today made the following written ministerial statement.

The development of a UK green taxonomy is a complex, technical exercise which is linked to multiple sectors of the economy and various legislative and regulatory frameworks. This complexity is also becoming apparent in the European Union (EU), where challenges have arisen during the implementation of the EU's taxonomy.

The Government are clear that the value of a taxonomy rests on its credibility as a practical and useful tool for investors, companies, consumers and regulators in supporting access to sustainable finance. These are long-term matters and it is important to proceed carefully. Having received advice from the Green Technical Advisory Group, and following stakeholder engagement, the Government believe that there is benefit in reviewing its approach to taxonomy development to maximise the effectiveness of our sustainable finance agenda.

Therefore, the Government will not make secondary legislation under the taxonomy regulations this year. The Financial Services and Markets Bill is currently before Parliament. Subject to parliamentary approval, the Bill will repeal retained EU law relating to financial services—including the taxonomy regulations. Using the powers in the Bill, HM Treasury intends to first commence the repeal of the statutory requirement to make technical screening criteria regulations by 1 January 2023, so that the obligation no longer applies. Then it will consider how to use the powers in the Bill to restate and modify retained EU law, and decide whether to change the UK's approach. This is consistent with the Government's general approach to retained EU law for financial services.

The Government will provide a further update as part of its publication of the green finance strategy in early 2023.

[HCWS444]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Chinese Consulate General Staff: Manchester

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): In October, I summoned China's acting ambassador to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to demand an explanation for an incident that had occurred outside the Chinese consulate general in Manchester. Soon afterwards, His Majesty's ambassador in Beijing also sought an explanation from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Images carried on social media showed what appeared to be completely unacceptable behaviour by a number of individuals near the entrance to the consular premises. The right of free expression—including the right to protest and to speak one's mind—is absolutely essential to our democratic life.

Given the seriousness of this matter, it was correct and appropriate for Greater Manchester police to take the decision to begin an investigation. Earlier this month, the police informed the FCDO that they wished to interview the Chinese consul general and five of his staff. They asked the FCDO to request the Chinese Government to waive the immunity of those individuals to enable the interviews to take place.

The FCDO made this request and gave the Chinese Government one week to comply. In response, the Chinese embassy, acting on instructions from Beijing, notified His Majesty's Government that the functions of the consul general in Manchester have come to an end and he has returned to China. The embassy has further notified us that the other staff involved in the incident who the police wish to interview have either left the United Kingdom or will shortly do so.

Throughout this episode, I have sought to emphasise that we in the UK abide by the rule of law, follow due process and respect the operational independence of our police. It was right to allow their investigation to proceed so that we could respond on the basis of evidence and facts, rather than images on social media. I am grateful for the professionalism shown by the Greater Manchester police, particularly given the complexities involved due to the immunities held by the staff.

We have been clear with China from the outset that we were prepared to take firm action should the police determine that there was a case to charge officials for their involvement in the incident. We expect a certain standard of behaviour from all foreign diplomats and consular staff in the UK regardless of their privileges and immunities.

The Vienna convention on consular relations allows states to withdraw members of a consular post at any point, as has happened here. However, I am disappointed that these individuals will not be interviewed or face justice. Nonetheless, it is right that those responsible for the disgraceful scenes in Manchester are no longer—or will shortly cease to be—consular staff accredited to the UK.

[HCWS445]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Correction to Written Answer: HL2636

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Markham, has made the following written statement:

I would like to amend a written answer that I gave to the House on the 7 November 2022.

An incorrect figure was provided in my reply to HL2636, which was asked by The Lord Bishop of Gloucester. The question was: "To ask His Majesty's Government how many recipients of Healthy Start vouchers are not in receipt of prepaid cards despite remaining eligible for the scheme."

The reply stated that "The NHS Business Services Authority estimates that as of 18 October 2022, there were 2,954 households previously were in receipt of paper vouchers which have not successfully applied to the NHS Healthy Start prepaid card scheme."

However, it has since been brought to my attention that the figures supplied by the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) had a typographical error. The answer should have stated that “the NHS Business Services Authority estimates that, as of 18 October 2022, there were 42,954 households which previously were in receipt of paper vouchers which have not successfully applied to the NHS Healthy Start prepaid card scheme.” I apologise that the incorrect figures were inadvertently supplied.

Further to the revised answer, I am also able to share a more recent estimate. As of 27 November 2022, the NHSBSA estimates that there are now 35,284 households which previously were in receipt of paper vouchers which have not successfully applied to the NHS Healthy Start prepaid card scheme. I would like to clarify that some of these households will not have reapplied to the prepaid card scheme because they no longer meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme. This could be because their child has reached the age of four or because their household income has changed.

I would also like to provide some context about the scheme's digitisation, and the transition from paper vouchers to prepaid cards. The latest available data shows that uptake of the scheme by the eligible population increased overall, from 55% in March 2021, to 72% in March 2022. Since the paper voucher scheme closed at the end of March 2022, the number of households on the Healthy Start scheme has continued to increase, from 273,280 on the 31 March, to 323,136 on the 27 November.

I would also like to share details of the activity that the NHSBSA has undertaken to support households which were in receipt of paper vouchers to apply for the digitised prepaid card scheme. Since September 2021, the NHSBSA sent multiple communications to all paper voucher beneficiaries to encourage them to apply for the prepaid card scheme. This includes a total of four invitation letters to their home or email address, two leaflets in voucher packs and text messages to those who had mobile numbers on their accounts. There was also targeted social media activity to encourage people to apply to the prepaid card scheme. Stakeholders and local organisations also supported the transition by raising awareness with beneficiaries. Additionally, the NHSBSA actively promotes the scheme through their digital channels and have created free tools to help stakeholders promote the scheme at a local level.

I have also asked the NHSBSA to update me on their future plans to promote uptake of the Healthy Start scheme among all eligible groups.

[HCWS446]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Provisional Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2023-24

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today published the Provisional Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2023-24. The report sets out the Home Secretary's determination for 2023-24 of the aggregate amount of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Today the Government are setting out the provisional police funding settlement in Parliament for the 2023-24 financial year. Overall funding for policing will rise by up to £287 million compared to the 2022-23 funding settlement, bringing the total up to £17.2 billion for the policing system. Within this, funding to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) will increase by up to an additional £523 million, assuming full take-up of precept flexibility. This would represent an increase to PCC funding in cash terms of 3.6% on top of the 2022-23 police funding settlement.

The Chancellor confirmed at the autumn statement that departmental budgets set out at spending review 2021 will be maintained to 2024-25. This confirms that, despite the pressures faced by all public services, we are still increasing funding into 2023-24 by providing forces with an increase to Government grants of £174 million, £74 million more than announced at spending review 2021 (SR21), reflecting the commitments made earlier this year to support the 2022-23 pay award. By delivering on this promise, we are making sure that the police receive the funding they need to achieve and maintain their overall officer headcount, comprised of their agreed police uplift baseline plus their allocation of the 20,000 additional officers.

To ensure that policing is able to balance budgets and deliver on key priorities, we have gone even further by providing an additional £5 on top of the £10 precept limit agreed at SR21, which could raise up to an additional £349 million when compared to 2022-23. This means that PCCs will be receiving up to £15.1 billion of funding in 2023-24, an increase of over half a billion pounds.

This Government have provided significant investment into policing over the previous four years, and so now it is only right that we hold forces to account on delivery. We therefore expect policing to approach the 2023-24 financial year with a focus on this Government's key priorities:

Ensuring overall police officer numbers are maintained at the agreed police uplift baseline plus force level allocations of the 20,000 additional officers.

Deploying these additional officers to reduce crime and honour this Government's commitment to keep the public safe.

Delivering improvements in productivity and driving forward efficiencies, maximising the value of the Government's investment.

Police Uplift Programme

Since 2019, this Government have invested over £3 billion, including additional funding each year and that rolled into Government grants, to enable the recruitment of 20,000 additional officers, a Government priority and manifesto commitment. Forces have worked hard and are delivering at pace, having recruited 15,343 additional officers in England and Wales as of the end of September 2022.

It is critical, however, that beyond March 2023 officer numbers are maintained to ensure the benefits of the additional 20,000 officers can be realised. Forces will need to retain both new and more experienced officers as we move into a new phase of the maintenance of officer numbers in 2023-24. We will look to forces to invest in their officers, striving to be efficient and conscientious with their own budgets. Many officers recruited since 2019 will be reaching the end of their probationary period, and we expect forces to deploy new and experienced officers effectively to ensure local communities benefit from the investment now and in years to come.

Reflecting the importance of reaching this milestone and maintaining the additional officers, in 2023-24 £275 million will be ringfenced and allocated in line with funding formula shares. As in previous years, PCCs will be able to access this by demonstrating that they have maintained their overall officer headcount, comprised of their agreed police uplift baseline plus their allocation of the 20,000 additional officers.

Precept

Spending review 2021 confirmed that PCCs in England will be empowered to raise additional funding through increased precept flexibility of up to £10 per year to 2024-25. However, recognising the financial pressures police forces are facing, we propose to enable PCCs in England in 2023-24 to increase their precept by up to £15 for a typical band D property, subject to a period of consultation and approval from the House of Commons through the local government finance settlement. This would equate to an additional £349 million should all PCCs maximise this flexibility¹.

Using this precept flexibility is a decision that must be taken by each locally elected PCC. Local taxation should not be in place of sound financial management, and therefore I expect PCCs to exhaust all other options to reprioritise their budgets, seek efficiencies and maximise productivity of their existing resources before looking to local taxpayers for additional funding.

Efficiency and productivity

Police, like all public services, must ensure that they make best use of public money. This means reducing inefficiencies and maximising productivity. As part of the spending review 2021, we expect to see at least £100 million of cashable efficiency savings delivered from force budgets by 2024-25, achieved through areas such as:

Working with BlueLight Commercial to maximise financial and commercial benefits related to procurement, through use of the organisation's commercial expertise, leveraging the purchasing power available across the sector, and developing the capacity to implement a full commercial life-cycle approach to procurement.

Corporate functions, where the Home Office and BlueLight Commercial are conducting ongoing work with the sector to understand the opportunities around the management of corporate functions for example implementation of shared service models.

BlueLight Commercial is itself a sector-owned company, set up to provide commercial expertise and assistance to policing and assist forces in identifying and making efficiency savings. In 2021-22 the company assisted policing in making efficiency savings of almost £40 million (including cashable savings of £25 million and non-cashable savings of £15 million). The organisation has been funded by the Home Office for the last three years and we will continue to support the company in 2023-24 whilst they work towards establishing and implementing a sustainable funding model.

For the continuing significant investment into policing that the Government have made in recent years it is crucial that we are delivering the best possible value for the public. This includes ensuring that the police are meeting the needs of their community and the public are receiving the highest possible quality of service. We have therefore commissioned the National Police Chiefs' Council to conduct a review of operational productivity in policing. We expect the review, led by Sir Stephen House, to deliver clear, practical, and deliverable recommendations to improve the productivity of policing, with the review team having already considered how the police respond to individuals experiencing acute mental health distress.

National priorities

This settlement provides £1.1 billion for national policing priorities (as set out at tables 1 and 4) to support PCCs and forces, and to support the strategic vision

outlined in the beating crime plan to cut crime, increase confidence in the criminal justice system, and put victims first.

For 2023-24, we will maintain settlement funding for programmes that prevent crime and help keep communities safe, including:

This settlement provides funding to combat serious violence, including violence reduction units and the grip "hotspot policing" programme. Funding arrangements for specific crime reduction programmes will be confirmed in due course.

Delivering on the commitments made in the 10-year drug strategy by prioritising funding to clamp down on drugs and county lines activity which has already achieved over 2,900 county line closures since 2019.

Continuing to invest in tackling exploitation and abuse, including child sexual exploitation and modern slavery.

Prioritising regional organised crime units, ensuring they are equipped with the specialist capabilities and dedicated resource needed to support law enforcement in confronting serious and organised crime.

Funding arrangements for specific crime reduction programmes will be confirmed in due course.

Going further, this settlement provides funding to improve the criminal justice system, victim care, and investigation outcomes including:

Prioritising funding for commitments made through the rape review, ensuring the right support is in place to support police forces in implementing the national operating model for rape investigations and improving their digital capability, crucial for improving timeliness and reducing victim attrition.

Investing in a new victim satisfaction survey to drive improvements in the support police forces provide to victims, and gain new insights into why victims withhold or withdraw support for investigations.

Continuing to invest in the development of forensics tools and services for police forces, and the forensic capability network as a central resource supporting the national network of over 4,000 forensic specialists in police forces.

It is crucial that police forces and law enforcement partners have effective technology systems to support frontline officers. Therefore, we are:

Providing funding for major programmes of work which are already under way to replace and improve systems, such as the national law enforcement data programme and emergency services mobile communications programme.

Continuing to invest in critical national police and law enforcement IT capabilities to transform the way that the police engage with the public and unlock more efficient working practices.

Counter-terrorism policing

The Government will continue to provide vital support for counter-terrorism (CT) policing, ensuring they have the resources they need to meet and deal with the threats we face. CT police funding will continue to total over £1 billion in 2023-24. This investment will support ongoing CT policing investigations to keep the country safe and includes funding for both armed policing and the CT operations centre. PCCs will be notified separately of force-level funding allocations for CT policing, which will not be made public for security reasons.

This settlement will support the police to do their vital job to cut crime and keep people safe. I would like to express my gratitude and pay tribute to our dedicated police officers and staff for their exceptional commitment and bravery. I have set out in a separate document, available online, the tables illustrating how we propose to allocate the police funding settlement between the

different funding streams and between police and crime commissioners for 2023-24. These documents are intended to be read together.

¹ Calculated using the latest forecasts. Council tax in Wales is devolved and PCCs in Wales are not bound by the council tax referendum principles.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-12-14/HCWS443/>.

[HCWS443]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Update

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Today I announce measures to update the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This scheme has been a significant success. Although the initial roll-out of visas was slower than the Government would have liked, over 100,000 Ukrainian guests are now safe in the United Kingdom, and 37,500 more have valid visas and may choose to travel to the United Kingdom if circumstances change. The sheer number of applicants and of British families willing to open their homes to those seeking shelter is truly extraordinary.

The Government are committed to protecting this route to safety into its second year, but we need to do so in a way that is sustainable considering the wider pressures on public finances and the UK's overseas development assistance budgets. We are therefore setting out today a series of updates. These measures taken together are designed to recognise the contribution made by sponsors while also ensuring the sustainability of the programme over the longer term and to provide certainty to all those who are supporting our guests here in the UK.

“Thank you” payments

Hosting is a very significant commitment. The Government are enormously grateful to all those who have volunteered to share their home with Ukrainian people fleeing war. Without the generosity of all our British sponsors, we simply would not have been able to give shelter to so many of those in need. In recognition of this, I am announcing today that the £350 “thank you” payments, will be extended from 12 months to a maximum duration of two years. The UK Government will also increase the minimum “thank you” payments for hosts from £350 per month to £500 per month, once a guest has been here in the UK for 12 months.

This additional financial support is aimed at helping existing hosts to continue with their sponsorship, as well as new hosts who come forward to offer a home to a Ukrainian individual or family.

Some local authorities are already uprating “thank you” payments using their own resource, and this is a measure we fully support. Our new package shows our strong desire to recognise the contribution made by sponsors, to help them with the rising cost of living and incentivise further sponsorships and rematching.

Funding for local authorities

Since the Homes for Ukraine scheme launched in March 2022, the UK Government have provided £1.1 billion to councils through a tariff for each arrival in their area.

This funding is available for councils to support Ukrainian guests and their sponsors. Given a fraction of Ukrainian arrivals return to Ukraine, after arriving in the UK, and the need to manage public finances at a time of significant economic challenge for the UK and the global economy, the Government will reduce the tariff for each local authority. Councils will continue to receive the existing year 1 tariff to support those Ukrainians who have already arrived, as previously set out.

From 1 January 2023, councils will receive funding of £5,900 for each new arrival to support guests and their sponsors, in addition to the “thank you” paid to sponsors. Local authorities will continue to receive separate funding in 2022-23 for the Ukraine education tariff under the rates and terms previously set out—a per child tariff of £3,000 for early years, £6,580 for primary and £8,755 for secondary and payments calculated on a pro-rata basis—and the Ukrainians families will also continue to receive Government support on skills training, jobcentre access and welfare payments. The Department fully recognises the many pressures on local authority budgets and at the autumn statement the Government announced a further £6.5 billion to be made available for local government to deliver core services over the next two years.

The Department will also provide £150 million of new UK-wide funding in the 2023-24 financial year to local authorities and devolved Governments to help support Ukrainian guests move into their own homes and reduce the risk of homelessness. Local authorities are best placed to understand the support needed for local communities, and as is typically the case for various local authority funding, they will also be able to use this funding to support other people at risk of homelessness. This funding will be allocated between the different parts of the UK in relation to their proportion of Ukrainian guests. I will be writing to local authorities and my counterparts in the devolved Administrations with more details on this shortly.

Local authority housing fund

Today, I am also launching a £500 million local authority housing fund, which will provide capital funding directly to English councils in areas that are facing the most significant housing pressures as a result of recent Ukrainian arrivals. These local authorities are facing housing challenges on the back of their generosity, which unless alleviated will further impact existing housing pressures. This fund will allow them to address the immediate pressures as well as build a sustainable stock of affordable housing for the future. This fund will also be used to provide homes for up to 500 Afghan families currently living in bridging hotels at a significant cost to taxpayers. Whilst helping to fulfil the UK's humanitarian duties to assist those fleeing war, the fund will create a lasting legacy for UK nationals by providing a new supply of accommodation for councils with which to address local housing and homelessness pressures.

The UK Government continues to work with the Ukrainian Government, the devolved Governments, local authorities and charities and voluntary groups to deliver the Homes for Ukraine scheme and support sponsors and their guests.

[HCWS447]

Petitions

Wednesday 14 December 2022

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Dental care in Halifax

The petition of Residents of the constituency of Halifax,

Declares that petitioners are concerned about the lack of access to NHS dental care registration and appointments in Halifax; further that residents have been unable to receive both urgent and routine treatments at NHS dentists; and further that there are concerns that residents in Halifax are being advised by NHS England to enquire about appointments further afield which is impractical for many people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to improve NHS dental care provision in Halifax so that residents can access care easily and locally.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Holly Lynch, *Official Report*, 1 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 838.]

[P002777]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):

The Government are aware of the challenges that areas such as Halifax are facing in accessing NHS dentistry. Dentistry is an important part of the NHS and we are committed to improving access and other issues currently faced by patients and the workforce. This is why we announced a package of dental system improvements on 19 July, detailed in our plan for patients. These important first steps to reform NHS dentistry, will improve access for patients and make NHS work more attractive to dentists, particularly in areas where there are access challenges. These changes include improvements to the 2006 contract to ensure dentists are remunerated more fairly for complex treatment, and patient access is improved, especially for those with higher oral health need. As part of this package, we will also enable dental practices to deliver 110% of their contract levels to help recovery from the pandemic and increase activity.

We have taken action to implement these changes, including through regulations that came into effect on 25 November. NHS England (NHSE) will shortly publish additional guidance for dental professionals as part of this package.

In Halifax, additional funding for local initiatives will improve patient access by increasing dental practice capacity. These initiatives will deliver additional care from November 2022 to March 2023 targeted at those patients in greatest need. In addition to this, an additional £50 million in funding was made available for additional activity and patient appointments at the beginning of this year.

We recognise that, despite these changes, there is still more to be done. This is why the Government continue to work with NHS England and the dental sector on further changes which will be announced in 2023. We will continue to work with stakeholders to understand the issues and concerns and this includes considering the most effective reforms for improving access.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Access to pensions for women born in the 1950s

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s, on or after 6 April 1951, have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the state pension age; notes that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman reported in 2021 that the Department of Work and Pensions had let down women born in the 1950s; and further notes that the PHSO is clear that DWP's failure to let women know about the changes to the state pension were maladministration; and that it has encouraged the DWP to be "proactive" in considering compensation now.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the state pension age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patrick Grady, *Official Report*, 17 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 495.]

[P002774]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Laura Trott):

The Government decided over 25 years ago to make the state pension age the same for men and women. Changes to state pension age were made over a series of Acts by successive Governments from 1995 onwards, following public consultations and extensive debates in both Houses of Parliament.

The Pensions Act 2011 accelerated the timetable for equalisation and brought forward the increase in state pension age for both men and women to age 66, these changes to be transitioned in over a 10-year period. During the passage of the Pensions Act 2011, Parliament legislated for a concession worth £1.1 billion, in 2011-12 prices. This concession reduced the proposed increase in state pension age for over 450,000 men and women and means that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months, relative to the original 1995 Act timetable. This was a clear change to help ensure the financial safety of those affected..

In the judicial review on changes to state pension age, both the High Court and Court of Appeal have found no fault in the actions of the Department, and decided it acted entirely lawfully. The courts found that the Government were justified in striking the balance where they did, between keeping state pension provision on a sustainable footing and recognising the hardship that could result for those affected by the changes. Several age and sex discrimination arguments were raised, and the courts found in favour of the Government on all of them. The Court of Appeal held there was no sufficient

causal link between the withdrawal of the state pension for 1950s-born women and the disadvantage caused to that group.

The Court of Appeal concluded that the Government were justified in its actions on state pension age changes, and it held that there was no duty to notify those affected by them. Furthermore, the courts concluded that there has been adequate and reasonable notification given by the Department over a number of years.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is independent and is carrying out an investigation on the notifications DWP gave about changes to state pension age. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's stage 1 report confirms that their investigation is not a review of the entire state pension age increase from 1995-2011. The ombudsman stage 1 report of 20 July 2021 made findings in relation to a specific window of time under the last Labour Government.

This is a multi-staged process and the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has not given his final findings on the overall investigation. Stages 2 and 3 have not yet been completed. It would not be appropriate to comment on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's stage 1 report published on 20 July 2021. The ombudsman's investigation is ongoing and section 7(2) of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 states that ombudsman investigations "shall be conducted in private".

Reforms to the state pension have put measures in place to improve state pension outcomes for most women. Over 3 million women stand to receive an average of £550 more per year by 2030. Women live longer than men on average, and therefore receive pension payments for longer. Also, women retiring today can still expect to receive the state pension for over 21 years on average; two years longer than men.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 14 December 2022

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety Bill

The following is an extract from the debate on the Online Safety Bill on Report on 5 December 2022:

Dame Maria Miller: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for his commitment to look at this matter before the Bill reaches the House of Lords. Can he just clarify to me that it is his intention to implement the Law Commission's recommendations that are within the scope of the Bill prior to the Bill reaching the House of Lords? If that is the case, I am happy to withdraw my amendments.

Paul Scully: I cannot confirm today at what stage we will legislate. We will continue to work with my right hon. Friend and the Treasury to ensure that we get this exactly right. We will, of course, give due consideration to the Law Commission's recommendations.

Dame Maria Miller: Unless I am mistaken, no other stages of the Bill will come before the House where this can be discussed. Either it will be done or it will not. I had hoped that the Minister would answer in the affirmative.

Paul Scully: I understand. **We are ahead of the Lords on publication, so yes is the answer.**

[Official Report, 5 December 2022, Vol. 724, c. 120.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully):

An error has been identified in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) during the debate on the Online Safety Bill on Report.

The correct response should have been:

Paul Scully: I understand. **We are planning to table these amendments during the Bill's passage through the Lords.**

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Wednesday 14 December 2022

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