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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 19 January 2023

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Bus Services: Newcastle

1. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the quality, availability and accessibility of bus services in Newcastle since 2019. [903132]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): In response to the Government's national bus strategy, all local transport authorities in England outside London, including Transport North East, produced bus service improvement plans. Following a detailed assessment process, we have awarded TNE an indicative allocation of £163.5 million to support the delivery of its BSIP, which covers seven local authorities, including Newcastle City Council.

In December, ahead of the launch of the Government's £2 bus fare on 1 January, I visited the north-east, including Blaydon and Newcastle, and the Go North East depot. I was pleased to hear about the work that operators and local transport authorities are doing to continue to provide bus services for local people in challenging circumstances.

Chi Onwurah: An elderly man waits two hours in the rain not knowing whether a bus will turn up. A lone woman is left stranded at 11 pm. A business cannot open because half of its workforce are delayed on different bus services. The bus companies say that the services are improving, but my constituents tell a very different story. We need accessible, affordable, regular, sustainable bus services; information about where the buses are; and accountability when they are not where they should be. How long do we have to wait?

Mr Holden: I totally agree with the hon. Lady that we need affordable bus services, which is why we have introduced the £2 cap. She will be aware that today £19.5 million of levelling-up fund investment has been announced for her area, including for 52 new electric buses, supported by 26 rapid chargers in the depots, to help provide that more regular and reliable service in the future. I will continue to work with operators to ensure that we have the drivers we need across the country, including in her constituency and mine.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): In March 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, the previous Secretary of State promised buses so frequent that people would not need a timetable and said that the Government would

“not only stop the decline”—

in bus services, but—

“reverse it”. —[*Official Report*, 15 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 50.]

Since then, have bus services increased or decreased?

Mr Holden: The pandemic had a major impact on many bus services across the country. As the hon. Lady will well know, that included a huge fall in the number of concessionary fare users and, as people were having to work from home or were not able to go into the office, in the number of paid fare users. We have put in more than £2 billion in support for the bus network since the start of the pandemic in order to support services.

Louise Haigh: I repeat that that promise was made in the middle of the pandemic. Only once before on record, also under a Conservative Government, have bus numbers fallen by as much as they did last year. So instead of continuing to defend this broken bus system, will the Minister extend franchising powers nationwide, remove the hurdles that operators use to block reform and finally put power and control over routes and fares into the hands of the communities who depend on them?

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady will be aware that the BSIPs and the devolution deals allow franchising powers to go forward, and Labour Mayors, if they want them, can apply for them. If she wants all of this across the country, she should speak to some of her Labour colleagues in order to do that. Some are doing franchising, but a lot are taking the other alternatives and working in close partnerships. As for the new buses across the country, perhaps she could welcome the extra money going into the north-east today—the 52 extra electric buses in the north-east depot. Perhaps she could welcome the news of that extra funding today.

Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure

2. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What assessment he has made of the accessibility of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903133]

5. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the accessibility of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. [903136]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): As you will know, Mr Speaker, the Government take the issue of accessibility extremely seriously. With the assistance of wider research, we have identified specific accessibility barriers faced by drivers of electric vehicles in using public charge points. Those can include the height of charge points, charging cables that are very heavy, the connectors, and street design. To address those issues, the Government, with Motability, co-sponsored publicly available standard 1899 in October 2022, which provides, for the first time, specifications on designing and installing accessible public charge points.

Stephen Metcalfe: People who have off-street parking can easily meet the majority of their EV charging needs at home, but people who do not are rightly concerned about access to charging. How will the Government address that issue to ensure that people in Basildon and Thurrock have equitable access?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will be aware that Essex County Council has been able to use ORCS—the on-street residential charge point scheme—and that there has been support in his area for workplace charging and the home charge scheme. We want to go much further, however, and the new local EV infrastructure fund will support local authorities to do just that. A £10 million LEVI—local electric vehicle infrastructure—pilot is in operation, which will deliver more than 1,000 charge points. We will use that as a springboard for further expansion of the fund.

Andrew Selous: Councillor Steve Dixon, the portfolio holder at Central Bedfordshire Council, is a big enthusiast of electric vehicles, as I am. Earlier this week, he told me that there are some issues with connectivity to the grid, particularly for the 50 kW superfast 20-minute chargers, which are especially important for tradespeople and delivery drivers who need a quick charge-up during the day. What conversations is the Minister having with National Grid to ensure that it does not hold us back in this vital area?

Jesse Norman: We take this issue extremely seriously. As my hon. Friend is aware, responsibility lies with the electricity network operators. Ofgem has allowed baseline funding of more than £22 billion, including the more than £3 billion proposed for network upgrades. We need to ensure that that money is put in place and that any blockages are addressed by the distribution network operators. We are also working closely with fleets and industry bodies to ensure that we can anticipate problems before they arise.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I do not know whether the Minister has been on a long journey in an electric car, but you can often travel for dozens of miles—perhaps more than 100—without finding a rapid charger. When you do get to one, you discover that “rapid charger” is a misnomer, because National Grid cannot deliver the necessary power. Even if you get to one that is working, it is often full because of the number of electric cars now on the road, so you end up waiting in a queue for half an hour or more. When will the Government develop a proper national network so that what should be a pleasant day out for motorists does not mean hours of planning in advance and then hours of frustration and delay on the journey?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there were very specific problems over Christmas.

Mr Betts: Not just at Christmas.

Jesse Norman: We recognise that. Those problems had to do with adverse weather conditions, as well as with particular concerns of the season, but there is a wider problem and the hon. Gentleman is right to mention it. That is why in due course we will promote regulations that will require 99% reliability and other standards, as well as transparency across charge points, in order to address some of the points that he raises.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, there are 4,000 electric vehicles and 337 charge points. Central Government have assisted and funded charge points in the past. People are unable and unwilling to buy an electric car if there are not enough charge points, so what discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Infrastructure in the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the number of charge points is increased across the whole of Northern Ireland?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the question. I myself have not recently spoken to the infrastructure board in Northern Ireland, but I shall make a point of doing so in the near future.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): This week, I and colleagues hosted leading figures from across the car industry. They are desperate for the UK to lead the world in electric vehicles, but they are banging their head against the wall at the state of the charging infrastructure. In 2019, there were 33 electric vehicles per rapid charger; today there are almost 90 vehicles per charger. Given how critical the charging network is to confidence in the EV market, why on earth are there yet more delays to the botched roll-out of the rapid charging fund? Will the Minister consider using binding targets to speed up the roll-out?

Jesse Norman: The figures that the hon. Lady has given are a result of the extremely rapid increase in the number of battery electric vehicles, which is welcome and is supported by Government policy. We have supported the provision of more than 400,000 chargers for homes and businesses in the last few years, and, as I have said, we take the issue very seriously. We have the LEVI fund and the rapid charging fund, which I am seeking to accelerate. However, I appreciate the hon. Lady's point. It is right for us to continue to proceed in tandem with the growth in the sector, all the more so because this year our new zero-emission vehicle mandate will continue to propel the number rapidly upwards, which I think will benefit the public greatly.

Protesters: Motorway Disruption

3. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce disruption on motorways caused by protesters. [903134]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Irresponsible action last year by a number of protesters put the lives of police, motorists and National Highways staff at risk and caused travel disruption for thousands. That is completely unacceptable, which is why my Department worked with National Highways to secure injunctions allowing a prompt and effective response. The police and National Highways continue to look at lessons that can be learned to deter similar protests. As my hon. Friend will know, on Monday the Prime Minister announced an amendment to the Public Order Bill giving the police more flexibility and clarity in respect of when to intervene to stop the disruptive minority who use tactics such as blocking roads and slow marching to inflict misery on the public.

Marco Longhi: When hypocritical wealthy lefties cut off motorways, they are not just damaging people's jobs and damaging the economy; they are potentially killing people by not allowing ambulances and other blue-light services to pass. Does the Minister agree that we may be able to help them save the environment by locking them up, perhaps with the gas and electricity switched off?

Mr Harper: I thank my hon. Friend for putting his question in his own direct, inimitable way. He will, I hope, be pleased to know that we are working closely with council and Home Office officials to ensure that we can follow all legal avenues to pursue those who are arrested for protest activity. The injunctions mean that we can take swifter action. The courts obviously have to hand down the penalties; 13 Insulate Britain protesters received immediate custodial sentences ranging from 24 days to six months, and evidence from the gantry protests is being reviewed to support committal proceedings against more than 50 additional protesters.

Traffic Flow: Congleton

4. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve traffic flow in Congleton constituency. [903135]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): Managing the traffic on local roads is the responsibility of the local traffic authorities—in this case, Cheshire East Council. They are subject to a network management duty which requires them to manage their roads to deliver expeditious movement for all traffic, including pedestrians. A wide range of tools is already available to help them to manage congestion and traffic flow.

Fiona Bruce: I was prompted to raise this question by Cheshire East Council. Can the Minister explain, for the benefit of Holmes Chapel residents, why the Middlewich Road-Chester Road junction may require alteration in connection with plans for High Speed 2, bearing in mind that the planned HS2 route is some distance away?

Mr Holden: I know how strongly my hon. Friend campaigns on behalf of her constituents. The A54 Middlewich Road services an emergency diversion route for the M6. HS2 Ltd and National Highways identified the need for works on the route to mitigate traffic impacts forecast at the Chester Road junction during the construction of HS2, and measures have therefore been developed to improve the junction. A supplementary environmental statement for additional provision 1 to the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill describes the reasoning behind the inclusion of this junction improvement, and HS2 is in the process of sharing the technical work that supports it with the local highways authority in Chester East. If my hon. Friend is concerned about any further issues, I invite her to meet me so that we can discuss them.

Rail Fare Evasion

6. **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce rail fare evasion. [903137]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): From 23 January, the Government are increasing National Rail penalty fares for the first time since 2005. The penalty will change to £100, plus the price of the single fare to the intended destination, to act as a greater deterrent and to reduce fare evasion on the network.

Amanda Milling: There have been persistent problems on the Chase line with passengers dodging fares, so I welcome the increase in the penalty for those caught travelling without a valid ticket, but if the system is to be effective it is essential for there to be enough revenue protection officers to catch offenders. What are the Government doing to ensure that there are enough inspectors on lines such as the Chase line to check passengers' tickets?

Huw Merriman: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising the important issue of ensuring that resource is available to check tickets on lines such as the Chase line. Ticketless travel is currently costing the network, and, indeed, the taxpayer nationally, an estimated £240 million per year. Back in December 2016, my right hon. Friend joined the then London Midland revenue protection team. She later told this House:

“The £20 penalty is insufficient to deter fare dodging.”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2017; Vol. 447, c. 619.]

She went on to ask for a review of penalty fares so that they would become an effective deterrent. She has won that campaign, and I thank her for it.

There are nine new revenue protection security managers within the West Midlands Railway business. They are in training, ready to be deployed on the Chase line and throughout the midlands.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In Scotland, peak time rail fares on specific routes are being disbanded in 2023 to ease commuting costs and encourage use of services. Have Ministers discussed rolling out a similar scheme with operators in England, as increased affordability could reduce fare evasion?

Huw Merriman: I have a real passion for reducing fare evasion. It is important that we learn from all parts of the United Kingdom how we can do this. At a time when we are experiencing issues with financing, it is vital that we do everything we can to ensure that passengers pay their way, so I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to share those ideas. If they are good ideas, I would like to see them rolled out.

Railway Modernisation

8. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of modernising the railways. [903140]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I agree with my hon. Friend that the railway is in urgent need of modernisation of both its working practices and the way in which it is structured. The lasting consequences of covid-19, industrial action and the financial challenges facing the railway have made the case for reform stronger, and I will shortly set out the next steps for that reform process.

James Sunderland: The South Western Railway line between Bracknell and London Waterloo is a really important link between Berkshire and London. Even though passenger numbers are now increasing back to pre-pandemic levels, South Western Railway's own figures for November and December last year are that more than 90% of trains ran up to 15 minutes late. It is not acceptable. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State please outline to the House what he is doing alongside South Western Railway to improve the service?

Mr Harper: The level of services remains constantly under review. As passenger numbers increase, both the Department and the operator can look at that to see whether more needs to be done. On performance, the operator is contracted to deliver our operational performance benchmarks, and it is penalised financially if it delivers below those benchmarks. The Department has a right to request a mitigation plan if it fails to meet those benchmarks consistently. Now that my hon. Friend has raised that with us, we will keep an even closer eye on the performance of that railway.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I understand the Secretary of State will be in my constituency later today to announce the successful £50 million bid, which I backed alongside Cardiff Council, for improvements to the links between Cardiff Central and Cardiff Bay—a crucial missing link in our rail infrastructure. It is obviously very welcome, notwithstanding the wider criticisms of the levelling-up scheme. One of the positive things about the bid is that it involves close working between the UK Government, the Welsh Government, the council and Transport for Wales. Will he assure me that he will work co-operatively with them to get that scheme up and running as quickly as possible, for the benefit of our local community?

Mr Harper: I am grateful for the positive tone in which the hon. Gentleman has welcomed that announcement. Wales will receive the highest amount of funding per capita from the levelling-up fund under the announcement that has been made today. I am indeed visiting that scheme later today and I will meet officials from the council. I will of course continue to work closely with them to turn the money into effective transport connectivity as soon as we can.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): On average, how much do train drivers get paid and how many contracted hours are they required to do each week?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I think that about £60,000 is the average salary and the contracted hours are about 35 per week.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): TransPennine Express has been habitually using P-codes, which are for pre-cancelled trains. This means that trains are cancelled at 10 o'clock the previous night. In conjunction with on-day cancellations, this means that up to a quarter of all services, including for my constituents travelling from Greenfield, are cancelled; and on some days it is nearly half. Will the document that the Secretary of State just mentioned address these long-term issues, which we have had not just for the past year but for many years?

Mr Harper: There are two issues. The most important is the level of performance. The hon. Lady will know that one of the big issues is the overdependence, particularly on that service, on rest day working. One of the reasons why we want to modernise working practices—

Debbie Abrahams: That is nothing to do with it.

Mr Harper: It is very much to do with it. The fact that the rest day working agreement is not being delivered means there is a real problem, which fundamentally argues the case for reform to working practices.

On the hon. Lady's narrower question about transparency in P-coding, the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), will be meeting the Office of Rail and Road to discuss exactly that issue, to ensure that passengers have a transparent understanding of rail performance.

Rail Service Improvements

9. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve rail services. [903141]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The current sustained poor performance on the railways is unacceptable, and the industry needs to make significant improvements to deliver the punctual, reliable services that passengers and taxpayers deserve. We are addressing immediate issues in the sector by engaging and facilitating discussions between employers and trade unions to bring about a resolution to the industrial dispute. As the Secretary of State said, the Government will shortly set out the next steps for reform of the rail industry.

Elliot Colburn: I welcome the Minister's comments, but rail services in Carshalton and Wallington are still not back to pre-pandemic levels, and there are regular delays, industrial action and timetable changes by Southern and Thameslink. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to unblock the Croydon bottleneck, which is the real cause of congestion in south London, and to improve rail services for Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches commuters?

Huw Merriman: As a user of Southern for many years before I switched to Southeastern, I understand my hon. Friend's points. I thank him for standing up for his constituents who use the services. The Department remains committed to working with Govia Thameslink Railway and Network Rail to address performance issues. Peak service provision for Carshalton and Wallington users is at pre-pandemic levels, although passenger numbers remain lower. I take his overall point about the entire service. I also share his desire to see improvements delivered for rail services in the south-east. For this reason, we have recently implemented upgrades to the track and signalling north of Gatwick airport, which will deliver journey time savings and improved reliability across the Brighton main line.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Back in November 2021, the integrated rail plan confirmed that there would be a study on running high-speed trains between East Midlands Parkway and Leeds via Sheffield. Fourteen months on, not only has the work not been done, but

the terms of reference have not even been agreed. Ukraine and Romania have just reopened a train line in six months during a war. I ask the Minister to look carefully at what more can be done to expedite this work so we can get this vital rail corridor working in the way we all want.

Huw Merriman: I am aware that the study needs to get out so we can look at how to get High Speed 2 trains up to Leeds, and so we can look at the other impacts on Leeds. There have been discussions in the Department this week about how to move that forward. I expect the report to be out very shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): My hon. Friend the rail Minister will be aware that services on the Marston Vale line serving my constituency are currently suspended because Vivarail, which maintains the rolling stock, has gone into administration. The replacement bus service is far from ideal, which is causing significant difficulties for my constituents, especially young people going to school and college. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he is doing everything he can to ensure the earliest possible reinstatement of that rail service?

Huw Merriman: The Chair of the Select Committee has raised this point on a number of occasions, and he is right to do so. It is incredibly sad to see Vivarail, which is pursuing good, innovative technology, have to go into administration. I am keen to work with him to ensure that West Midlands Railway puts on a service as soon as possible. Together we will look into whether contractors can contract into West Midlands Railway and whether those contractors have the essential skills that are needed. I will work with him in partnership to ensure that his constituents have that service back up and running.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Under Southeastern's new timetable, my Blackheath constituents have had significant changes made to their journey, which were imposed on them without consultation. There are also far too many disruptions to trains at Catford Bridge. Last month, the Rail Minister promised to visit more train stations to see how the timetable was impacting customers. Will he honour that commitment to visit Blackheath station, speak to the service users and agree to review the train disruptions at Catford Bridge?

Huw Merriman: Yes, I visit many of those stations because my train comes along many of the Southeastern routes once I leave Etchingham and head towards London Bridge. I am aware of changes that have taken place, which mean that some passengers must change at London Bridge if they wish to go on to Waterloo East and Charing Cross. London Bridge is an accessible station that has been built with that type of movement in mind. Furthermore, the timetable change happened on 11 December. Since then, a series of events related to weather and industrial action have made it rather difficult to assess whether the changes are working. *[Interruption.]* They impact my line, so while there is some chuntering going on, I share the concerns and am keen to make the changes work.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When will services be restored on the mainline between Waterloo and Southampton?

Huw Merriman: I am happy to write to my right hon. Friend on that matter. I am not sure whether he is referring to landslips and recent weather-related events, but Network Rail is working incredibly hard to deliver. Perhaps I can update the entire House by putting in the Library a letter with the most recent update.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Minister will be very much aware of the chaos that customers experience on the Avanti West Coast line. What assurances can he give me that Avanti will not be given yet another extension on the extension that should never have been given in the first place as this chaos continues?

Huw Merriman: The most important thing for me is to make sure that the service is turned around. If the team at Avanti can turn that service around, then that will be a matter that we will look at when it comes to renewal of the contract. If matters within its control cannot be turned around, then of course that will lead to a different decision. Again, the timetable change of 11 December is difficult to assess, but it has involved 40% more services than in the summer, and all of that has taken place without rest-day working, because more drivers have been recruited and trained. I hope the hon. Member will join me in encouraging everyone at Avanti to deliver on that extended service. If it succeeds then we all succeed, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Just to say that the Minister ought to try travelling on the line, because it is an absolute disgrace.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Key to improving services is actually providing services, as the rail Minister will be aware, and schemes such as Restoring Your Railway reversing the Beeching cuts. Will my hon. Friend continue to work with me and West Midlands Mayor Andy Street to deliver a station for Aldridge? The track is there. Mr Speaker, we must be one of the few constituencies across the country that currently has no train station at all.

Mr Speaker: It must be.

Huw Merriman: My right hon. Friend makes a great campaign point, which I hear. Mayor Andy Street met the Secretary of State for Transport this week. We are passionate to ensure that we can deliver the services that she needs in her constituency and that are needed across the midlands as a whole.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): My constituents learned today that they will not be receiving a Cullompton relief road as a result of the second round of levelling-up funding. They still have great hopes for easing congestion through the reopening of the Cullompton railway station, which is already in receipt of Restoring Your Railway funding. Will the Minister come to Cullompton to see the merits of the proposal?

Huw Merriman: I am keen to visit as many projects and potential projects as I can to help see the potential and how we can realise it. When I am in that part of the

country, I would be very happy to visit. On the levelling-up fund bid, as somebody who was disappointed first time around but has managed to get better news the second time, I would encourage the hon. Member to continue to apply. If one works hard with people of all political colours in the local community, one will be amazed by what can happen.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Neither passengers nor hard-working staff are happy with the lamentable state of our railways on this Government's watch. They have bumped up ticket prices twice as fast as wages have grown, yet passengers are experiencing delays and cancellations to most services at Britain's busiest stations, with experts declaring that our rail system is broken. So what is their plan to fix the mess they have made? If the *Financial Times* is correct, their big solution is to impose even more devastating funding cuts of more than 10% on train operators. Forget managed decline: in 2023 it looks more like freefall decline. Rather than this veil of secrecy over steep service cuts, can the Minister confirm how much of a cut he is imposing?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that passenger numbers are at about 80% of where they were pre-pandemic. The timetable is at about 90%, so it continues to run ahead of passenger numbers. Taxpayers more broadly have put in £31 billion over the last two years to support the railway, and there will be a further £11 billion required for the year to come. We have a balance between those who use the railways, continuing to ensure that they can do so, and those who fund the railways and the difficulties they have in meeting their tax bills. I look forward to his optimism and enthusiasm in working with me to ensure that railway services improve, as I am determined they will.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Cross-border rail services run by Avanti and TransPennine Express have been shambolic. Last week alone, TransPennine Express could not point to a single day when it ran the emergency timetable it had promised. On two days, Avanti had only one and two trains on time the entire day running out of Glasgow Central. In contrast, publicly-owned LNER was running a much better service. Is there not a lesson here that the private sector model has failed both workers and passengers and it is time to follow Scotland's lead and bring rail operators under public control?

Huw Merriman: Perhaps another way of looking at it is that on the east coast there is competition with open access, whereas on the west coast there is not. The hon. Gentleman might feel that we are not doing enough on private enterprise and competition. I am rather keen that we look at open access and see whether we can do on the west what has been done on the east. However, he is right that performance has not been good enough. I take your point on Avanti, Mr Speaker; your interventions inspire me to ensure that my weekly meetings on turning around Avanti performance continue—but if that performance is being turned around, I must say a big thank you to the staff who work on the Avanti services

day in, day out, because we need to motivate them that this can work. TPE is a little further behind and I think we will be discussing it further. I am keen to work with the hon. Gentleman to get better services on TPE.

Gavin Newlands: ScotRail, which is publicly owned and controlled, pays the highest track access charges of any single rail operator, despite repeated requests to complete rail devolution and transfer control of Network Rail to Holyrood. Meanwhile, the Transport Committee heard last week from Mick Lynch, who said:

“When there is a Network Rail strike, they shut Scotland and large parts of Wales. They choose to run the parts that connect to England.”

Does the Minister agree that Scottish rail passengers get a second-class service in this UK system? Is it not time that he turned over responsibilities to a Government who have recently settled two rail disputes?

Huw Merriman: When there is industrial action on the scale that we have seen impacting Network Rail, we implement the key route strategy, which sees about 20% of the network remain open. That can be patchy, because we tend to focus on the areas that are strategically important for freight. That is our driving mechanism for determining when lines open. I would like to see more open, and of course there may be legislation around the corner that will allow that to occur—the hon. Gentleman will no doubt be happy with that outcome.

Transport Infrastructure: Adequacy and Sustainability

10. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the (a) adequacy and (b) long-term sustainability of transport infrastructure. [903143]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): In November 2020 the Government published the national infrastructure strategy that set out our long-term plans for addressing Britain's infrastructure needs and challenges. Those plans include continued developments of our road and rail networks across the UK, including in Scotland. The levelling-up fund will play a key role in helping to reduce geographical disparities. To that end, the second round of the fund, announced today, will see £177 million awarded to Scotland, including three transport schemes.

Patricia Gibson: The specific point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) a moment ago was not addressed. For years, Scotland has paid the highest track access charges of any single train operator: £354 million per year—over £200 million more than northern rail, with broadly similar services by distance travelled. Scotland is making huge strides in decarbonisation and sustainability, as well as bringing ScotRail back under public control, but this is a huge cost and reduces capacity to increase infrastructure investment. Why are Scottish taxpayers quite literally being taken for a ride by the Department for Transport compared with their counterparts across the border?

Mr Harper: I am disappointed; I missed the hon. Lady's thanks for the £177 million awarded to Scotland from the levelling-up fund today. It would have been nice if she had managed to recognise the fact that that

money is being distributed fairly across the whole United Kingdom. Some of the issues about connectivity between England and Scotland and across the United Kingdom were addressed at length in previous questions. We are working very hard to make sure there is a successful rail network, to reduce the impacts of industrial action. On the question that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North raised about what happens on strike days, it is very important that we have minimum service levels, and I hope the hon. Lady will support that legislation.

TransPennine Express: Operational Performance

11. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with TransPennine Express on its recent operational performance. [903144]

13. **Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with TransPennine Express on its recent operational performance. [903147]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The Department, which manages the TPE contract in partnership with Transport for the North through the Rail North Partnership, is in regular dialogue with the operator, as we seek to stabilise the current service provision and provide passengers with a reliable timetable. Due to high levels of absence, industrial action and much higher than predicted driver departures, TPE will continue to face challenges, even as it restores some services.

Dame Diana Johnson: How is it that in Ukraine—war-torn Ukraine—they manage to cancel fewer trains and have a more reliable service than TransPennine Express? Is it not now time to cancel the TransPennine Express contract?

Huw Merriman: The contract for TransPennine Express comes up for renewal in May. Anybody who takes that contract on will be faced with the exact same issues we have. Sickness rates are currently at 14%. We have no rest-day working agreement in place, despite it previously being the highest rate offered across the network. A number of drivers have left, some during covid, and while 113 drivers have been recruited, it takes on average 18 months to train a driver through that network. All those issues remain to be fixed, regardless of who the operator will be. I can assure the right hon. Lady that if the operation does not improve, other decisions will be taken in addition to the points I have just raised.

Navendu Mishra: Mr Speaker, as a north-west MP, you will be aware of the disgraceful service level offered by Avanti. My constituents have to deal with TransPennine Express on the one hand and also Avanti, so it is a double whammy for the people of Stockport. It has recently been revealed that between 18 September and 12 November 2022, TransPennine Express pre-cancelled between 250 and 450 trains per week through the use of P-coded notices, meaning that thousands of people were left stranded. P-coded notices were first introduced for cancellations caused by exceptional circumstances but now appear to be used routinely by private rail operators. Does the Minister agree that this is an abuse of the P-coded notice system, and has he been speaking to TransPennine Express about that abuse?

Huw Merriman: As the Secretary of State said earlier, I will be speaking to the Office of Rail and Road about P-coding, because I feel it needs a good look. P-coding makes a lot of sense, to ensure that passengers are told on the day they travel whether the train will be operating. If rosters have not been put together because of staff shortages, that makes absolute sense, but the current levels on TPE give me concern, so I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will look at that. P-coding has been used a lot across the network due to the weather-related issues, where we have known that we cannot operate services the following day and want to let passengers know in advance. Finally, I assure him that performance-related fees, which take up the largest part of train operator payments, do of course take into account P-coding, as we would with other cancellations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Minister must surely agree that this is simply not good enough. In November, he assured us that the new timetable would be deliverable. This week, the results are in and the service has never been worse. This morning alone, at least 123 services have been cancelled or disrupted on TransPennine Express. He cannot pretend that the management are blameless in this farce. The north cannot afford to continue like this any longer, so will he strip TransPennine Express of its contract and bring it under the operator of last resort?

Huw Merriman: The operator of last resort does a great job, but I also hear criticisms from Members across the House with regard to Northern Rail, which also has higher than average cancellations, and Northern Rail is operated by the operator of last resort. I am also keen to ensure that the operator of last resort has a manageable portfolio. Nothing I have said in the House today or in the Select Committee yesterday absolves the management of any blame. I have said that this situation requires action from all in responsible positions, and if it cannot be turned around, decisions will be made.

Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency: Performance

12. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. [903146]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): The DVSA is recovering after the pandemic. The theory test service is performing well. There are 620,000 practical test appointments in the booking system. Since April 2021, the DVSA has created an extra 695,000 car practical driving test appointments and the average waiting time to take a car test is at 15.1 weeks, with more than 80,000 slots currently available. The average waiting time for an HGV or other vocational driving test is currently just over two weeks. The heavy vehicle testing service is operating normally and enforcement operations continued throughout the pandemic.

Mr Carmichael: If the Minister were to go online to book a test in my constituency today, he would find that in Shetland, the earliest date is 18 weeks away and in Orkney, there are no test dates available. That is quite apart from the continued lack of availability of off-road

motorcycle testing. The history of the DVSA in Orkney and in Shetland in particular in recent years has been frankly pitiful. When it comes to the next performance appraisal interview with the chief executive of the DVSA, could the Minister prevail upon her to find a day or two to come north and see for herself the effect that her stewardship has had on our communities?

Mr Holden: My understanding is that in Shetland, the average waiting time is 18 weeks, but in Orkney the waiting time is significantly less. I do not understand the discrepancy between us, so I shall write to the right hon. Member about that. I was surprised that he did not also welcome the £26.7 million that has just been announced today for transport funding for the Shetland Islands Council for the Fair Isle infrastructure project, showing how much this Government are investing in his constituency.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Notwithstanding the answer that my hon. Friend just gave, multiple constituents have written to me this week about the inability to get a driving test. One said that despite logging on daily, they cannot get a test at all in nearby test centres at Bletchley, Leighton Buzzard, Aylesbury, Banbury or Northampton. For rural communities like those I represent, the car is essential for people, young or old, to get anywhere, so when my hon. Friend talks to the DVSA, will he prioritise test centres for rural communities to get back on track?

Mr Holden: I also represent a rural constituency, although in a different part of the country. What I would say to my hon. Friend is that we have made big progress in recent years, with more than 300,000 new slots available due to the extra 300 driving examiners we have hired since the pandemic. Waiting lists are coming down for driving tests, and rapidly, and we hope to achieve pre-pandemic levels within the next few months.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Nationwide, almost one in 10 bus driver positions is vacant, hitting vital services across the country hard, but Ministers are asleep at the wheel, with no action plan to tackle it. Currently, the DVSA requires a provisional bus licence to start training, but with huge paperwork delays, 20% of applicants give up before their training begins. Will the Minister listen to calls to speed up this glacial process to allow applicants to begin their theory tests while they wait for their provisional licences?

Mr Holden: The Opposition spokesperson raises an important point that I have been raising myself. I have spoken to both the unions and the management during recent visits to Stevenage and Gateshead bus depots. There is an under three-week wait for practical driving tests for bus drivers. We are looking to do everything we can to speed that up. On a recent visit to the Gateshead depot I was told that at the start of the pandemic they had more than 150 vacancies. They are now down to under 20. We are seeing massive progress across the country. I want us to do everything we can to go further, which is why we have increased the number of driving tests, and during the pandemic we prioritised both HGV drivers and passenger transport drivers. I will continue to do everything I can in that space.

Topical Questions

T1. [903157] **Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Following today's £2.1-billion levelling-up fund announcement, I would like to briefly update the House about its transport aspect. Through your decision making, Mr Speaker, you have allowed Members the opportunity to range more widely. I am sure that Ministers at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are grateful to you for the opportunity they will have to be at the Dispatch Box later today.

Nearly £650 million will be spent across 26 projects to help to create a transport system that is modern, efficient, and accessible to everyone across four nations. As we touched on in earlier questions, that includes more than 15 new electric buses in the north-east and the new metro line in the heart of Cardiff which, as Members know from our earlier exchanges, I will visit later today. Today's announcement is a vote of confidence in the entire United Kingdom. As the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) said, I hope that it is rightly welcomed by both sides of the House.

Mrs Elphicke: When there are delays at the port of Dover, whether due to weather, strikes or the French, the impact on local jobs, businesses and residents is absolutely enormous. I welcome the £45-million levelling-up fund investment in our local campaign to keep Dover clear. I thank my right hon. Friend for that. Will he join me in thanking the Conservative leaders of Kent County Council and Dover District Council, and the excellent leadership at the port of Dover?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions. Other colleagues want to get in. Tell me who you do not want to get in, because that is who you are depriving.

Mr Harper: I will give a pithy answer. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her campaigning work. Dover is a strategic port for the United Kingdom. This project will ensure that we can meet our requirements and keep that flow of trade and traffic going. I am pleased that we have been able to get that money to help the port of Dover.

T2. [903158] **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** The Law Society of Scotland, the RMT and others have all expressed concerns about the Seafarers' Wages Bill only covering services that dock in our port 120 times a year. That threshold is so high that several services will not be covered. Why will the Minister not listen to their concerns and reduce that threshold, thereby protecting more seafarers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): My understanding is that around 98% of services will be covered by the Bill, including the short straits services around which there have been concerns about P&O.

T3. [903160] **Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con):** Despite more than £2 billion of support for buses from the Government during the pandemic, my right hon. Friend will be aware that the well-used and popular

route 41 has suffered a massive reduction of service across my constituency. The local authority was made aware of plans to reduce the service in May 2022. However, my constituents still do not have a replacement service and are unable to access healthcare, jobs and education. Will my right hon. Friend meet me urgently to work out what more we can do to encourage local authorities to keep those vital bus services going?

Mr Holden: I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend. He will be aware that under our bus service improvement plans we are ensuring that local authorities and transport providers work more closely together. We provided more than £2 billion during the pandemic, as he says. I would be delighted to meet him and his constituents on this matter.

T4. [903161] **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): Cuts to local bus services have left some of the most deprived communities in my constituency, including the Beechwood and Noctorum estates, effectively cut off from the wider Wirral at evenings and weekends. Many constituents now find it almost impossible to reach Arrowe Park Hospital by public transport. Will the Minister commit to increasing funding for local transport authorities so they can guarantee that no one is left behind by cuts to local services? Will he commit to a review of the Bus Service Act 2017, to allow the creation of municipal bus services that serve the needs of local communities?

Mr Holden: My understanding is that talks are already under way about a franchising service in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We have already provided an extra £60 million over these three months for the £2 maximum fare cap, which will particularly help low-paid working people who regularly use buses to get to work.

T5. [903162] **Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): The commitment in the Williams-Shapps plan to reform the structure of rail fares has particular resonance for commuters in Swindon, who have historically endured disproportionately high rail fares for journeys to London compared with those in Didcot, Bath and Bristol. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that, in any forthcoming legislation, those plans will be brought to fruition? Is the Treasury supportive of them?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his question, particularly his reference to our important plan for rail and the necessary reform. As I said, I will set out those plans in more detail shortly, but he should be reassured that we want to simplify the current complicated ticketing strategy while protecting more affordable tickets. I hope he will be pleased about that.

T6. [903163] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The impact assessment for the anti-strikes Bill stated that on a strike day last year, 20% of rail services were still operational. Clearly, the Tories think that 20% is too low, but to a layman, that is a minimum service. What minimum service will they impose on workers under threat of sack?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): We have already written to our stakeholders and we will be launching a consultation. The results of

that consultation, in terms of how the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill would work across the network and whether we would look at a proportion of the timetable or parts of the network, will be determined only when it has been completed. That is the right way to take the process forward.

Mr Speaker: On his birthday, I call Anthony Browne.

T8. [903165] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I could not imagine being anywhere more joyful than in the Chamber. The Liberal Democrat and Labour authorities in Cambridgeshire are introducing the country's most draconian congestion charge, but they claim that they are being forced to do that by the Department for Transport, which supposedly rejected Cambridgeshire's bid for bus funding because they were not committed to road charging. Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm that that is untrue and that the Department did not require Cambridgeshire to commit to congestion charging to secure bus funding?

Mr Harper: I am happy to confirm that bus funding has never been linked to road charging. A disagreeable pattern seems to be emerging where Labour politicians, backed by the Liberal Democrats, are not being entirely straightforward with the people they represent about road pricing schemes. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is holding them to account, even on his birthday.

T7. [903164] **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The north has one third of the levelling-up funding, yet train and bus services are a fraction of what they were. Every train service between Barnsley and Manchester is cancelled or delayed today and it takes two buses to get from neighbouring Rotherham to Elsecar. Can the Minister explain to my constituents, who simply cannot rely on public transport, how he can possibly think that the Government are levelling up?

Huw Merriman: Today's announcement demonstrates that the Government are levelling up. If one looks at it from a per-population perspective, one will see that the areas are not London or the south-east, but further north and in Wales. We are proud to level up all areas. Many of the amounts that are going to areas involve transport, and we in the Department for Transport are all proud to play our part to ensure that those projects are delivered and work for communities across the United Kingdom.

T9. [903166] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): In thanking the roads Minister for visiting Kettering in December to promote the £2 bus fare scheme, I ask him when National Highways will complete its planning development work on the proposed junction 10A on the A14 at Kettering so that it can be submitted for potential inclusion in road investment strategy 3?

Mr Holden: I was delighted to visit Kettering—in fact, it was the same day that I visited Gateshead—and to see such great coverage in the *Northamptonshire Telegraph*, which is Northamptonshire's paper of record. My hon. Friend is an ever-passionate advocate for his constituency and for the proposals to improve the A14. I can confirm that National Highways is considering

proposals for junction 10A of the A14 as part of the RIS3 pipeline. Those proposals will be considered alongside a further 30 schemes in the pipeline this year as candidates for potential inclusion in the scheme.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): This week, there were media reports that an 87-year-old south London resident has been unable to attend her hospital appointments since Southeastern made changes and cuts to its timetable. My social media is inundated with complaints of overcrowding, cancellations and continual delays on Southeastern services. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the new timetable on reliability?

Huw Merriman: I welcome, and I congratulate the hon. Member on, the £19 million that has been provided by the levelling-up fund to Lewisham. I am looking forward to visiting her to talk to her and her community groups about the issues she raises. Southeastern has had considerable issues with weather-related matters, industrial action and Network Rail asset improvements. *[Interruption.]* I know that, unlike the Members talking to me, because I am on a Southeastern line.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): Tomorrow, I will be meeting Nottingham City Transport to discuss the new £2 single bus fare. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that—coupled with the recent £11.4 million grant to Nottingham to support bus services, including the Lime Line services and 53 and 39 buses that run through my constituency—there is no better time for Gedling residents to take the bus for work and leisure?

Mr Holden: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The £2 bus fare cap is not only innovative in helping people save money on their regular transport costs, but helping to take 2 million car journeys off our roads. There are 4,600 routes across England in the scheme, including the 44 bus from Nottingham and the 53 and 39 buses. I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend very soon.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): The Conservatives' promise of great bus services for everyone everywhere is clearly another empty promise. The Minister was right that the only way to solve this is through the devolution of powers and funds to places such as Chester. Will he therefore urge the Secretary of State to take seriously the devolution bid put forward by Cheshire and Warrington, so that we can get buses going where Cestrians need them?

Mr Holden: We always look forward to working with local authorities on whatever plans they bring forward, but I remind the hon. Lady that this Government put in over £2 billion of support during the pandemic. We are trying to drive the crucial ridership that will ensure services are sustainable in the long term via the £2 bus fare scheme, which I am sure she will be promoting in her constituency. It has been really good news to see Cheshire West and Chester Council getting an extra £13.3 million today from the levelling-up fund.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am working with the Stonehouse company BorgWarner in Stroud to raise the profile of hydrogen combustion engines and

the need to ensure that they are considered compliant with the upcoming zero-emission vehicle mandate and vehicle requirements from 2035. Will my right hon. Friend agree to visit this important local provider of hundreds of skilled jobs and apprenticeships to learn more about its world-leading work?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank my hon. Friend very much for her question. She is absolutely right that hydrogen is a key component of the full decarbonisation of transport—not just heavier transport, but aviation and maritime. I would be delighted to come and visit her.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The levelling-up fund bid for Pencoed level crossing was rejected this morning on the grounds that the spend could not be done in this year. Rail Minister after Rail Minister have promised me and my borough council that this was the key way to get that level crossing closed and unleash the potential of increased services. Will the Rail Minister meet me so that we can resolve this and get the much-needed funding for my constituency?

Huw Merriman: I would be absolutely delighted to meet the hon. Member. I am sorry for the disappointment he receives on behalf of his community, and I will do everything I can to work with him to make sure that the level crossing is safer.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Building on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) about the £2 bus fare, I am delighted to see it. However, for my Cornforth constituents, the bus no longer exists to Spennymoor, where the supermarket is, so they actually have to take two buses, changing at Ferryhill. What can be done to help such constituents, and will the Minister meet me to discuss this in more detail?

Mr Holden: I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. He will be aware that the enhanced partnership put forward by the Labour North East Joint Transport Committee is currently looking at the BSIP as well. I hope to work with him not only on that, but on the broader regional transport issues of which I know he has been a major champion since he was elected in 2019.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Reddish South and Denton stations are served by just one train a week. This line is the subject of a restoring your railway business case, but it is all coming down to the crossover with the west coast main line at Heaton Norris junction, just north of Stockport. Can I have a meeting with the Rail Minister so we can highlight the case of this line for growth in south-east Manchester and get train services to Denton and Reddish South?

Huw Merriman: The answer to that is yes, and may I thank all Members I have met who have come up with great ideas of simple timetable changes that can benefit communities and rail patronage? The hon. Gentleman's idea may be one good example and I will be happy to meet him.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my hon. Friend will know, National Highways has now submitted a development consent order on the construction of the lower Thames crossing. Who will be assessing the accuracy across Government of the benefit-cost ratio, and who will make the final decision on whether the £10 billion-plus-plus-plus budget still represents value for money?

Mr Holden: My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment further while the DCO process is ongoing. The LTC is a major transport infrastructure project and I am happy to meet with him and other hon. Members interested in this, as is the Secretary of State; it is a major piece of infrastructure investment and we need to get it right.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When will the Secretary of State sort out the Rhondda tunnel, in particular the money for it? When is he going to come to the Rhondda—it is not very far from the Forest of Dean—so that I can dangle him down my hole?

Mr Harper: This is my first opportunity to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his recently announced honour in the new year's honours list for his long service in this House. He has raised this specific question on the tunnel with me before; either I or the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), will meet him to look at what we can do to bring that forward.

Speaker's Statement

10.36 am

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question, I wish to make a point about communications with Members. We all understand that decisions will sometimes be unwelcome, but it is completely unacceptable for Members to hear of those decisions via the media or third parties. Members represent constituents who care deeply about these issues; the Department must do much better to communicate with Members. It cannot communicate with one side and not the other, which I am very concerned about. Yesterday morning, some Members were brought in to be told about decisions, while other were not. Like other Members, I am still awaiting a phone call or some communication. I think we all find this totally unacceptable; it is inappropriate and the behaviour must not be repeated.

The other question is: why on earth did the Government not come forward with a statement to the House, instead of slotting it in the Library on a Thursday?

Levelling-up Fund Round 2

10.37 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to make a statement on round 2 of the levelling-up fund.

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lucy Frazer): First, Mr Speaker, I apologise; we can always improve on our communications. I believe letters were sent both to MPs and to councils last night and the Secretary of State did make a written statement, but I accept that we can improve on this going forward.

Levelling up is one of the driving missions of this Government as we look to build a stronger, fairer economy. As the Prime Minister set out a fortnight ago in his five people's priorities, levelling up is how we will grow our economy, spread opportunity across the country and build stronger communities with safer streets for people to live on.

The levelling-up fund is essential to how we will develop that opportunity, which is why we have today set our next wave of investment for projects up and down the UK. The second wave will see up to £2.1 billion-worth of funding, awarded to 111 bids that we know will stimulate growth and benefit communities.

The levelling-up fund is about directing funding where it is needed most. Local leaders and Members across this House have seen the impact of the first round of funding, with 105 bids receiving £1.7 billion to drive regeneration and growth in areas that have been overlooked and underappreciated for far too long. That is why we received a tremendous response to the second round, with more than 500 bids received totalling £8 billion, which is a significant increase on the 300-odd bids received last year.

Across the two rounds of the fund, we have allocated nearly £4 billion to more than 200 bids from communities across the UK. I am pleased that we have been able to work closely with parliamentarians, local authorities and the devolved Administrations in all parts of the United Kingdom.

The levelling-up fund has a clear and transparent process for determining how bids are selected. Each bid is assessed by officials against the published assessment criteria, with the highest scoring bids shortlisted. To ensure that there is a fair spread of bids across the UK, funding decisions are then based on the assessment score and by applying wider considerations such as geographic spread and past investments. A place's relative need is also baked into the process. In this round, 66% of investment went to category 1 places. As we did for round 1 of the fund, an explanatory note setting out the details of our assessment and our decision-making process will be published on gov.uk. Ministers did not add or remove bids from the funded list, as set out in the note.

There will be a further round of the levelling-up fund, along with other investments. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House as we protect community assets, grow our local economies and restore pride of place where people live and work.

Alex Norris: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The Government are running scared of Parliament and their own Back Benchers—judging by the faces behind the Minister, I can understand why. However, there are serious questions to be answered. Levelling-up is a failure: the Government are going backwards on their flagship missions—they cannot even appoint levelling up directors—and today we see that reach its maximum. There is a rock-bottom allocation for Yorkshire and the Humber, nothing for the cities of Birmingham, Nottingham and Stoke, and nothing for Stonehouse in Plymouth, which is a community in the bottom 0.2% for economic activity, but there is money for the Prime Minister's constituency and money for areas in the top quartile economically. What on earth were the objective criteria used to make those decisions? How on earth are only half the successful bidders from the poorest 100 communities?

Over the last decade or so, the cut to local government—in cash terms rather than real terms—is £15 billion. Today's announcement gives back £2.1 billion. The Government have nicked a tenner from our wallets and expect us to be grateful for getting less than two quid back. We are pleased for the communities that have been successful because they have been starved of cash for years, but in reality even those communities will still get back less than the Government have taken from their budgets. The Minister must be honest that, in levelling up, even the winners are losers.

Is not the reality that this “Hunger Games” approach to regional growth creates a huge amount of waste in time and energy? Why will the Government not instead adopt our commitment to end these beauty parades in favour of proper, sustained investment that is targeted at need?

We are to believe that levelling up is to be rebranded as stepping up or gauging up. Let me save the Minister the trouble. It is not levelling up, it is not stepping up and it is not gauging up. It is time's up.

Lucy Frazer: I would like to correct what the hon. Gentleman suggested about which areas got funding across the country. He mentioned Yorkshire and the Humber, and I would like to clarify that, across rounds 1 and 2 per capita, every region got more than London and the south-east. Of course, the figures can be cut in different ways, but this is funding of £4 billion across the two funds for areas across the country. Combined with what we are doing with our Metro Mayors, it is the biggest transfer of power away from Westminster since world war two. Sixty-five per cent of the north is now represented by a Metro Mayor and, together with significant amounts of funding through other pots of money, we are ensuring that areas such as the north grow and communities get the delivery that they need.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Prime Minister's constituency. I am proud that we are regenerating a town where there is an infantry base. I am comfortable that we are supporting our country and the people who serve in it. He forgot to mention that the Leader of the Opposition had a successful bid in his constituency and that the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), got £20 million. He also forgot to mention that Nottingham North got £18 million in round 1 and therefore is benefiting from the Government's levelling-up programme.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Department did advise the Labour leader of Worthing Borough Council that we had been unsuccessful in our “connected cultural mile” bid. We should not make this issue partisan. Most people understand that all the bids were worth while.

Will the Minister arrange for departmental officials to talk with those who put in the bids about how some of these important projects could be funded in other ways, rather than waiting for the third round?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes a number of important points. Local councils were informed last night that we can improve on that. There were successful and unsuccessful areas, and that is because this levelling-up round was so successful. Some £8 billion-worth of bids were made, so of course there will be unhappy people this morning. However, £2 billion-worth have been successful.

On my hon. Friend's second point, we will be providing feedback because there will be a third round and we want people to understand why they were not successful in this one.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Scotland's share of the funding is £177 million out of £2 billion—some 8.5%. That proves that the distribution of the funding is not needs-based at all and therefore, by definition, not levelling up. Around £1.1 billion of the £1.6 billion total levelling-up funding in England has been awarded to areas where there is a Tory MP or a majority of Tory MPs. The Chancellor's constituency, one of the most affluent in the UK, has been successful; my own constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran, one of the most economically challenged constituencies in the UK, has not been successful in this round.

Let us not forget that the last successful bids, which took place last October, were based on costings at that time. However, labour and material costs have soared. Unless the funds are renewed, the bids cannot be delivered as envisaged and therefore they cannot level up as anticipated at the time. Is it not the case that the whole so-called levelling-up pantomime is more about Tory PR, spin and pork barrel politics than any attempt to reduce inequality?

Lucy Frazer: The answer to that point is absolutely not. The hon. Member forgot to mention that Scotland got £177 million—[*Interruption.*] The total is £349 million across both funds. The Opposition are making points about party politics, so I would like to point out that 45% of investment across both rounds has been allocated to areas held by Opposition parties.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Culture, drama and theatre are very much among the UK's great soft power assets. West Worcestershire is in the heart of the midlands, which is why I am thrilled that Malvern Theatres has been awarded nearly £20 million to level up drama opportunities across that part of the west midlands. I say to colleagues who were not successful this time around that we were not successful last time. We took on board the feedback and improved the bid, and now we have been successful. Keep on asking, is what I say to the other bids.

Lucy Frazer: I thank my hon. Friend for her wise advice. Culture is very important and I am very pleased that we are levelling up in her area.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Why do we not stop the pretence that this has anything whatever to do with levelling up? Councils have to spend a lot of time bidding for one of about 300 pots of money. There is no real strategy at all and no joining up between the different bids. They look more like photo opportunities so that Ministers can go around the country announcing the successful results. Why will the Minister not listen to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee? We called for the bid process to be dropped for the most part and for Government Departments to instead consider how they can reposition the totality of their spending on a strategic basis to help the poorest parts of the country. The Secretary of State agreed that that is what should be done, but the permanent secretary said no progress has been made. Just say it—she wants a photo bid. Come up to Sheffield in South Yorkshire and stand at a bus stop. She will have a long time to wait before one comes along, because once again we have been unsuccessful with the bid we put in.

Lucy Frazer: I am very sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not been successful. There is, of course, a round 3. There is co-ordinated action across Government to ensure that we support and level up. I am sorry he does not feel that £2 billion for levelling up across the country in terms of culture, transport and improving the areas where communities live is not worthwhile. We believe it is.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): While I cannot hide my disappointment about today's announcement with regard to Swindon, it is right to say that we have benefited to the tune of approximately £100 million from previous announcements, including from the future high streets fund and the towns fund. Will my right hon. and learned Friend and officials work closely with me and Swindon Borough Council to ensure that we are able to be successful in round 3, in particular with regard to the projects relating to Health Hydro and the Oasis, which are so important for the future of my town?

Lucy Frazer: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. I am sure it will be possible to discuss how Swindon can continue to grow. His area has indeed been successful in previous rounds. He mentioned the towns deal, which was allocated nearly £20 million. South Swindon will continue to be well represented—I know he fights for the area on a day-to-day basis.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): If we rank the 317 districts in England, we will see that Nottingham is the 11th most deprived. Despite our clear need, not one of our three levelling-up bids was successful, yet the Prime Minister's own very wealthy constituency was awarded £19 million. When will the Government end this ridiculous charade of favouritism and truly level up places such as Nottingham by restoring the billions in funding that Conservative Governments have cut since 2010?

Lucy Frazer: I am sorry the hon. Lady was not successful, but the area as a whole has been successful. As I mentioned, areas outside London and the south-east have received more per capita. I recommend that she looks forward to the third round.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Dover is a priority 1 area and we were unsuccessful in the first round. We engaged with officials, whom I thank for their professionalism and guidance in the very transparent and open round 1 process. That enabled us to put in a different, successful bid for £18 million for our new creative and digital hub, bringing jobs and skills to Dover. I would be grateful if my right hon. and learned Friend could encourage everyone who has been unsuccessful to take that guidance and keep going.

Lucy Frazer: I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's good advice, because those who were unsuccessful in round 1 have been successful in round 2. Round 3 is coming up and I look forward to announcing further funds in due course.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): This has been another kick in the teeth for the people of Leeds from this Conservative Government. After cuts totalling £2 billion to Leeds City Council's funding since 2010, a bid to redevelop Fearnville sports centre in my constituency has been rejected yet again. All six bids from Leeds were rejected. There are zero pounds for Leeds, while in the Prime Minister's wealthy constituency up the road, there is £19 million for him. Is it not the case that what this is really about is not levelling up, but Tory favouritism and the Tories looking after their own? Leeds deserves far better.

Lucy Frazer: As someone who grew up in Leeds, I think it is a great area. It has had significant regeneration over the years, which I have seen at first hand. Of course, further generation would be welcome. On the point about Opposition parties, I reiterate that 45% of the funding has gone to Opposition areas.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I warmly welcome the funding that has been secured for transport projects in Staffordshire, including in Cannock, which will support the regeneration of Cannock town centre. May I invite my right hon. and learned Friend to Cannock to show her what our plans are and how this is going to make a real difference to my constituents?

Lucy Frazer: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her successful bid, and of course I would be happy to visit to see progressive work in action.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My levelling-up bid for a closure and redevelopment in Pencoed was rejected, for the reason that the spend could not be in the 2022-23 financial year. That was despite Department for Transport Ministers saying that this was the only way in which the level crossing issues could be resolved, and despite the Welsh Secretary and the Transport Secretary announcing increased services on this line, which means that the crossing will simply be closed. Yet in the Conservative neighbouring seat of Bridgend, funding is granted to the Porthcawl pavilion. The convenience of this speaks for itself: communities such as mine, which

have large levels of deprivation, are ignored and Conservative seats are supported. The Minister needs to get a grip. If the phase 3 funding is coming, it needs to be made clearer, officials need to work better with councils and we must not have the debacle—because that is what it was—of the phase 2 funding process.

Lucy Frazer: I wish to clarify that the bidding process was transparent and clear. It will be published, as was done for round 1. I know that the hon. Gentleman's area has had money from the UK shared prosperity fund in the past, and I am sure that if he makes further bids, they will be look at according to the criteria.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement today and for her notification to me last night.

Mr Speaker: It was not a statement. Unfortunately, it had to be an urgent question.

James Sunderland: I thank the Minister for her notification last night. Clearly, the decision not to proceed with Bracknell's bid was disappointing. It is a good bid; it regenerates Bracknell's town centre and was submitted by a solvent and well-run council. Will she confirm that in principle more affluent areas in the south-east will not be precluded from successful bids? Will she meet me to help Bracknell refine that bid to ensure success in tranche 3?

Lucy Frazer: The Department is keen to ensure that those areas that have not received round 1 or round 2 funding understand why that was the case and how they can improve their prospects in the future. I, or another Minister, would be happy to have a meeting to discuss how we can progress any further bids.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whatever concerns there may be about the process as a whole, I can only welcome in the warmest possible terms the announcement of funding for the new Fair Isle ferry. In that announcement, the Minister has given hope for a future to one of the remotest and most economically and socially fragile communities in the country, and I am enormously grateful for that, as are the people of Fair Isle and Shetland as a whole. Of course, that does come at the second time of asking, so I pay tribute to the council officials and officials in the Department, who have worked together to learn from the experience of the first time of asking. Will she assure me that if Orkney Islands Council now comes back for a second time of asking with its also very worthy project, it will be given the same help and support?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's comments, because they show that not only is funding being spread across the country and across parties, but that serious and considered work with feedback does make a difference. I cannot give him any assurances about any future funds, but those will be announced and dealt with in due course.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Dudley was the birthplace of the industrial revolution, so industry, heavy industry and manufacturing have been the story of Dudley over many decades. For the very same reasons,

however, for many decades, it has also been one of the areas of the country with low investment, with a lot of offshoring and therefore with those forgotten communities that we have often heard about, so it is clearly very disappointing that Dudley has not been successful in its levelling-up fund bid. Can the Minister assure me that her officials will work with Dudley Council's officials to ensure that at least in the third bid Dudley may be successful?

Lucy Frazer: I thank my hon. Friend for those points. Feedback will be given and I am sure that officials will work in the manner that he suggests. I would like to point out that Dudley got £25 million from the towns fund, which I hope he welcomed, but of course we can do more.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): In her letter rejecting our bid, the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), said that she knew how much time and effort were spent on our ambitions for South Shields town centre. With respect, she doesn't. It is an absolute insult. Our freeport bid was rejected, our towns fund bid was rejected and now two levelling-up fund bids have been rejected, all in favour of wealthier areas. When will this Government stop using public funds for their own political advantage?

Lucy Frazer: I am sorry that the hon. Member has been unsuccessful. As I mentioned, there is a third round. I look forward to announcing any results of that in due course.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool's successful bid for £40 million from the fund will deliver a new multiversity skills complex, which will help to deliver skills for the jobs of the future. That takes the total amount of additional Government investment that Blackpool has received since I was elected to a staggering £300 million. Does the Minister agree that it is only under this Government that towns such as Blackpool, which have been left behind for decades, can truly be levelled up?

Lucy Frazer: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning work to improve the area of Blackpool. It is areas like that that we absolutely want to level up, to improve living standards and the lives of communities for those people who are living in Blackpool.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): There is bitter disappointment that the really good bid from Holbeck—one of the most deprived parts of my constituency, which is the 18th most deprived in the country—has received nothing. As the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said, huge efforts were put in and hopes were raised, only to be dashed when bids were unsuccessful. Since this is all about control, surely it is now time to devolve the money to local areas so that they can determine their own priorities according to their own decisions, rather than continuing to ask them to jump up and down at the whim of central Government.

Lucy Frazer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his points. There was £8 billion in funding and of course not everyone can be successful, even though a lot of very good bids were made. He makes a very important point about devolved powers; he will know that this

[Lucy Frazer]

Government have taken great strides in devolving power to Mayors across the country. Indeed, we very recently announced a number of other areas that are gaining devolved authority. We are continually looking at how we can further devolve powers to ensure that power and authority are directed to local areas, driven by local communities.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am extremely disappointed that Stroud was not successful in its levelling-up fund bid. Stroud District Council chose not to make an application in the first round, but it worked really hard on the most recent application. I hear from colleagues today that, when they lost out initially, they worked with ministerial teams and the civil service to improve their bid. I want to ensure that we can get Stroud District Council up to Westminster to meet whoever is needed to improve our application and that we get our GFirst local enterprise partnership involved, too. Will the Minister take that back to her colleagues so that we can arrange that session?

Lucy Frazer: I know that my hon. Friend campaigns very hard for her constituency in this and other areas. Of course we can confirm that we will be able to work with her local authority to ensure that a successful bid can be put forward.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the British people have an innate sense of fair play? Independent analysis of the largest cities and towns in England identified Bradford as the UK's No. 1 levelling-up opportunity. None of the four Bradford bids was successful in this round. Does the Minister believe that the people of Bradford will think that that is a fair outcome, or that the process stinks?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned earlier, as someone who grew up in Leeds, I understand how important that area is and how much more we can do. As I have also mentioned, we had £8 billion and were only able to allocate £2.1 billion in this round, but further funds are available, and round 3 will take place in due course.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It was extremely disappointing that Keighley was not successful in its bid for additional levelling-up fund moneys, over and above the £33.6 million that had already been ringfenced for it through the towns fund. Following discussions with the Department, I understand that Bradford Council's application for the fund was not detailed enough to meet the standard for a successful bid. That is reflected in the fact that none of the four Bradford seats was successful, and, of course, the council did not make an application in the first round. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the Keighley bid, and will she also ask her officials to write to Bradford Council as a matter of urgency to explain how it can significantly enhance the quality of its bids so that Keighley does not suffer as a result?

Lucy Frazer: Keighley has already received some feedback and we will of course provide more. We want to ensure that areas that deserve funding receive it, and that that is not scuppered by councils' not making their bids as strong as possible.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): In true grubby, greedy fashion, levelling up vastly benefits Tory-voting areas across the UK. Of the £1.6 billion going to English councils, £1.1 billion is going to areas represented by Tory Members, and Scottish councils are receiving only £177 million. There is nothing for Coatbridge, which made a fantastic bid, and nothing for our neighbours in the city of Glasgow: that is staggering. Does the Minister not agree that grubby pork-barrel politics is not levelling up Scotland, but leveraging us out of this Union?

Lucy Frazer: As I have said, significant funds are going to Scotland. The Barnett formula applies to every budget, and Scotland overall has received record sums across the board. I am proud that £20 million will be spent on developing important cultural assets in Aberdeenshire's coastal towns.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Wolverhampton has been incredibly well supported by the Government, who have made strategic investments in, for instance, the National Brownfield Institute, the City Learning Quarter and the modern methods of construction taskforce in order to anchor an industry in Wolverhampton, change life chances and upskill the local population. I am very grateful. I am also very proud that we are home to the second headquarters of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, although I am disappointed that our latest bid to regenerate a stretch of canal in my constituency was not successful. Will the Minister guarantee that the Department will work with me, and with Wolverhampton City Council, to ensure that any corners that need to be tidied up will indeed be tidied up so that our bid—which was acknowledged as having great merit—will be successful next time?

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to confirm that the Department can provide that assistance. As my hon. Friend mentioned, Wolverhampton has received significant Government funds, including £25 million from the towns deal, but of course we can always do more.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Before Christmas, the Government pulled £41 million out of the super health hub project in Stonehouse, putting its future at risk, and now they have turned down Stonehouse's £20 million levelling-up bid to create jobs. Given that Stonehouse is in the bottom 0.2% of areas according to the economic measurements that the Government produce, how can it be right that, when 99.8% of areas are richer, it was not deemed suitable for being levelled up?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member's constituency has not done badly overall—it has previously been given £4 million through the UK shared prosperity fund and £12 million through the future high streets fund—but I understand the points that he has made and, as I have said, a third round is coming up.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): As a Gedling resident, I am naturally disappointed that the bid submitted by the Labour-run borough council was not successful. According to feedback on its first-round bid, it was disparate and insufficiently compelling, so I look forward

to the prompt feedback on round 2. However, given that the council has been unsuccessful in respect of a number of funding pots, will the Minister meet me, as a matter of urgency, to go through the history of its funding bids, chapter and verse, so that we can gain a better understanding of where things are going wrong and better bids are submitted in future?

Lucy Frazer: I will be happy to do that.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): With rich country areas such as Guisborough and Richmond successful, what does the Minister have to say to the people of Billingham? Is it, “You are not deprived enough and you are undeserving”, “I didn’t have enough money and I needed to put what I had into the Prime Minister’s constituency and those of Tories he sacked from his Cabinet”, or, “I’m sorry, we are Tories, and we have areas where we need to shore up the Tory vote”? It stinks.

Lucy Frazer: I would not say any of those things to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents because I have repeatedly said that 45% of the funding has gone to Opposition areas. There were £8 billion-worth of bids, which were excellent, and unfortunately the fund was £2 billion. I am pleased that his area got £16 million of future high streets funding quite recently.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I was pleased that Doncaster was successful in round 1, but I cannot hide my disappointment that we were unsuccessful in round 2. The bid was for Edlington to have a leisure centre and for the high street to be made good—it is in a terrible state. However, I tell the children in our schools that they should never, ever, ever give in, and nor will I, in my campaign. Will the Minister meet me so that I can start my next campaign and Edlington will get its levelling-up fund in the next tranche?

Lucy Frazer: Yes, I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I applaud his Conservative principles of never giving up and making sure that every area is covered.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The round 1 bid for Reddish to refurbish Reddish baths as a new business hub was rejected. The round 2 bid for Denton town centre to refurbish the Festival hall as a new community hub and regenerate Denton town centre was rejected. The Minister says that councils should waste more money on a round 3 bid, when clearly the Government have got something against Denton and Reddish. Why should Tameside or Stockport councils waste officer time when it is clear that, if at first you don’t succeed, fail, fail and fail again?

Lucy Frazer: What we have heard across the House this morning is that people who were unsuccessful in round 1 were successful, after taking on board feedback, in round 2. The pot was significantly over-subscribed. Of course we can improve areas and I look forward to round 3.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Come on. We have heard that an estimated £15 billion has been cut from council budgets under this Conservative Government since 2010, including £160 million from my council in

Luton. The impact has been that children’s centres have closed, bus routes have been chopped and social care is squeaking at the pips now to look after our older people. We are meant to be grateful that councils have been given back £2.8 billion, when £15 billion has gone. Does the Minister really think that we are going to believe the Government?

Lucy Frazer: This morning we have an urgent question on the levelling-up fund, but that is not the only funding that is coming through the Government. The hon. Lady mentioned social care, and she will know that my right hon. Friend the Prime recently announced an additional £7.5 billion for social care and £27 billion to ensure that those who are struggling with the cost of living are supported over the course of this year.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As someone who, until earlier this month, was a local authority leader and the place-based regeneration lead for Greater Manchester, I know better than most just how much time and resource local authorities up and down the country have invested in this process. What assessment has the Minister made of the costs incurred by local authorities in doing so, and does she agree that they would do better spending that money on frontline services? Does she agree that this process should be scrapped in favour of allocating levelling-up funding based on need?

Lucy Frazer: I do not believe the UKSPF funding was allocated like that. Greater Manchester got £98 million. Of course it is important that the areas that need it are assessed, which is the basis on which we assessed the £2 billion-worth of funding we announced this morning.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Barnsley East has been rejected for funding again, yet the Prime Minister’s wealthy constituency received funding in both rounds. Will the Minister stop pretending that levelling-up funding is about helping areas that need it most and accept that there are serious questions to answer about how and where it is allocated?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady should look at the technical note, which will be published in due course, to see how the assessments were made.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Minister and her Department for writing to me at 11.30 pm last night, an hour after the information was released to the press, to tell me that Hull City Council’s transport bid had been rejected. The bid was about Hull being the third most congested city in the country, with people waiting, on average, 73 hours a year in traffic jams. Hull has poor air quality and worse traffic than Bangkok and São Paulo. Will she admit for once that, having rejected Hull for the towns fund, the Government have absolutely no interest in levelling up Hull?

Lucy Frazer: The Government are very interested in levelling up Hull. There were more than 500 bids, more than we had in the first round, asking for £8 billion to be spent. Unfortunately, we did not have those funds, so only £2 billion could be allocated.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I woke up this morning to the news that the “Rishi Riches” of Richmond have received funding for a second time—having their mouths stuffed with gold. The right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) flew into my constituency in a private jet and drove in a limousine past cold council houses and past the Minister’s former school site, which is now dilapidated. The six bids from the people of Leeds got no money. In the third round, the money should be devolved to the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin. The people of Leeds have heard the Government loud and clear, and in the next general election they will be consigning the Government to the dustbin of history.

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned earlier, we are regenerating Catterick, the area of Richmond where the infantry are based. It is important that the people who serve our country are looked after. Ukrainian troops were also based in the area while they were training.

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The unsuccessful bids of North Shields and Wallsend were capped at 80% by the Government, who deemed our area not to be a priority, yet the Prime Minister’s leafy constituency and many marginal Tory seats were deemed a priority. Will the Government urgently commit to a review of the levelling-up fund’s allocation criteria to ensure that money goes to areas where it is really needed, such as North Tyneside?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned, the criteria will be published in due course. Forty-five per cent. of the funding has been allocated to Opposition areas.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Further to your point at the start of proceedings, Mr Speaker, I am led to believe that Conservative list MSPs were also told well before the MPs who sponsored the project applications.

Some of the most deprived areas of the country are in my constituency, which also missed out on its green freeport bid, which went to the much wealthier east. The fraudulently titled levelling-up fund is meant to replace EU funding previously allocated to deprived areas. How is it possible that areas of multiple deprivation missed out while the Prime Minister’s constituency, one of the wealthiest in the UK, nabbed £19 million, and while £45 million went to help fix the mess of the roads in Dover caused by the Government’s kamikaze Brexit? Is the Minister not utterly ashamed at some of these announcements? If not, why not?

Lucy Frazer: Well, I hope the hon. Gentleman is very pleased with his very successful first-round bid of £38 million for improvements related to the advanced manufacturing innovation district Scotland.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The promise of levelling-up funding rings hollow in many areas. The Government’s decision to overlook local projects in Axminster and Seaton in Devon, where I live, and also in Gloucestershire and Shropshire reminds people in these counties that they continue to be taken for granted. I know that Army personnel at Catterick garrison in the Prime Minister’s constituency would prefer to have homes fit for heroes rather than funding for a new glass pavilion in that town. What assurances can the Minister give the House that the Government’s method for assessing rural bids was objective?

Lucy Frazer: It is very important that we level up in Devon. We absolutely do not take it for granted. I know that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency recently received funding for a new school in Tiverton and that East Devon secured £15 million through this fund.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am happy for all colleagues who were successful in round 2. I was disappointed to see that the bid to remediate Shawfield in my constituency was unsuccessful. The team at Clyde Gateway delivering the project have worked incredibly hard and have a proven track record. Can the Minister confirm how detailed the feedback will be for unsuccessful bids so that it can inform potential future bids from constituencies and give them the best chance of success in round 3?

Lucy Frazer: Feedback will be provided. If the hon. Member has further questions in relation to that feedback, she can raise them, and they will be answered.

Mr Speaker: Finally, I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her time. I am expressly thankful for the levelling-up funding received in the last tranche, but I am concerned that Northern Ireland is not receiving its share in this round. Can the Minister outline what has been allocated to Northern Ireland and, particularly, to my constituency of Strangford, which is in desperate need of levelling-up funding for shovel-ready projects such as the Whitespots environmental scheme, which is ready to go and will create jobs and be a real boost for the Northern Ireland economy?

Lucy Frazer: This was a fund that covered the UK. Northern Ireland got £71 million in this round, which totals £120 million over the two funds together. I am very pleased that the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union has previously received £5 million.

Afghanistan: Ban on Women Aid Workers

11.22 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on the ban on women aid workers in Afghanistan.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I wish to thank the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for raising this important issue and for pursuing this matter in such a determined and tenacious way. He served with distinction in Afghanistan and brings extraordinary knowledge and understanding to this matter.

Since August 2021, the Taliban have imposed a series of restrictions, effectively erasing women and girls from society. The ban on Afghan women from working for non-governmental organisations represents a further violation of their rights and freedoms, and it is unconscionable.

This decree will have devastating effects. More than 28 million people are expected to be in humanitarian need in 2023. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my noble Friend Lord Ahmad have been clearly and publicly stating that this ban will prevent millions of Afghans from accessing lifesaving aid. Around 30% to 40% of all staff in non-governmental organisations across Afghanistan are women. They are critical to humanitarian operations. They have access to populations that their male colleagues cannot reach, providing critical lifesaving support to women and girls. According to the UN, approximately 47% of humanitarian organisations have currently either partially or completely suspended activities as a result of the edict.

Foreign Office officials are working with the United Nations, NGOs and other donor Governments to understand the impact of the ban and ensure a co-ordinated response. We support the UN's pause on non-lifesaving humanitarian operations and we are working closely with NGOs to ensure that lifesaving humanitarian assistance can continue wherever possible.

On 9 January, I discussed the matter with the UN Secretary-General in Geneva at the Pakistan pledging conference addressing the issue of the floods. On 6 January, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad spoke to the UN deputy Secretary-General before her visit to Afghanistan, and he is meeting Afghan women this morning. Our permanent representative in New York is engaging with other parts of the UN system to ensure that countries are unified in their condemnation of and response to the decree.

On 13 January, during a UN Security Council meeting on Afghanistan, the UK reiterated that women and girls in Afghanistan must remain high on the Security Council agenda. Our UK mission in Doha will continue to express our outrage about the impact of the ban on the humanitarian crisis and lobby the Taliban across the system to reverse their appalling decision.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Minister; I know he takes these matters extremely seriously and has a wealth of knowledge, so I am grateful for his response to the House. He will understand the deep concern at the Taliban's ban on women aid workers, meaning that 150 NGOs and aid agencies have had to pause their work in Afghanistan.

That severe disruption comes at just the wrong moment, as the country faces a terrible humanitarian crisis: 28 million people need aid, and famine conditions are setting in. People are dying, and more will die, without women working in humanitarian relief. Despite some minor concessions in healthcare settings, many organisations can resume programmes only with the reinstatement of women across all functions. I pay tribute to the courage of women working in Afghanistan for organisations such as Oxfam, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the International Rescue Committee, Médecins Sans Frontières, ActionAid, the HALO Trust, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Save the Children, UNICEF, the World Food Programme and many more besides.

While calling for a lift to the ban is the right course of action, we must respect the complexities of the situation. The catastrophic withdrawal in August 2021 has undermined the UK's ability to leverage influence, but our long-standing relationship with Afghanistan is precisely why we should try to make a difference, targeting development aid, using back channels, engaging neighbours and regional partners and energising our allies.

Further to the Minister's statement, will he say more about the conversations he and the noble Lord Ahmad have had regarding the establishment of a common position that safeguards the inclusion of women in humanitarian work? Can he say what role the Prime Minister's special representative on Afghanistan is playing? Crucially, can he confirm that there will be no cuts to official development assistance to Afghanistan? This is not the time to reduce our support.

Sadly, our recent history with Afghanistan is underlined by passivity. There is a clear choice to make: change course now, or condemn ourselves, and the Afghan people, by repeating history again. Let us not make that mistake.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his pertinent comments. As he rightly says, there are 28 million people in need of support in Afghanistan and the position is deteriorating. He pays tribute to the courage of women throughout Afghanistan, and the whole House will want to endorse his comments. Women will suffer from this appalling decision, but women are also critical to the delivery of aid, as both he and I have pointed out.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the work of the special representative. The special representative is fully engaged in all aspects of the Government's policy. He stressed the importance of not reducing aid and humanitarian support and relief in Afghanistan at this time, and the Government are seized of that point. He asked with whom we are working; he will have noticed that the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation has condemned the Taliban's appalling decision, and he may well know that Amina Mohammed, the deputy Secretary-General, is there now. She is coming in to the Foreign Office on Monday to brief us and Lord Ahmad is, as I speak, meeting leading and influential Afghan women.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This ban reminds us again that the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating. The Minister should be aware—and I think he is—that there is increasing frustration from across the House that, despite British Council contractors, GardaWorld workforce and Chevening scholars still

[*Mr John Baron*]

being in Afghanistan, in fear of their lives and hunted by the Taliban, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme introduced a year ago has failed to relocate one person. Since our debate in Westminster Hall on this issue last week, what progress has been made by the Government to put that right?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. This is a subject upon which he is both extremely learned and extremely agitated. I will be speaking in a debate brought forward by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) later today in Westminster Hall, where I hope to give a full update, but let me make it clear to the House that we recognise the increasing frustration of which he spoke, and in particular the points he has been making about GardaWorld workers, British Council contractors and Chevening scholars.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his determination to secure this important urgent question, approaching your office on a regular basis all week, Mr Speaker. It is such an important topic that he has brought to the House, because what is happening is a tragedy. After 20 years of western intervention and the sacrifice of so many brave men and women to help build a better life for the people of Afghanistan, the Taliban's barbaric and disgraceful rule and warped interpretation of Islam has culminated in a near complete ban on the participation of women in public life. Not only have schools and universities been closed for women, despite earlier promises of a "Taliban 2.0"; prominent Afghan women such as the former MP Mursal Nabizada face violence and murder simply for being women.

More worryingly, in a country facing severe humanitarian hardship, women aid workers have now been banned from operation, in a move that has effectively stopped the vital work that these agencies do to keep alive millions of poor women and children in Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas. I appreciate the Minister's response to my written questions on this pressing matter and the confirmation that Ministers have raised the issue with the United Nations Secretary-General and his deputy. I recognise limited but vital movement by the Taliban in allowing the resumption of health-related activities, but the people of Afghanistan simply cannot wait for further small concessions.

May I ask three specifics of the Minister? First, are ongoing discussions taking place with countries that have a working relationship with the Taliban—for example, Pakistan and China? Secondly, will he commit to staying in dialogue and working closely with NGOs that are doing valuable work on the ground? Thirdly, and crucially, what progress are the Government making on the Afghan resettlement scheme, specifically for former British Council workers, as per the request from the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. As she rightly says, this is not just about the violation of the rights of women; it is also that women are critical to the delivery of life-saving humanitarian support.

In respect of the hon. Lady's three questions, the answer to the first two is yes: ongoing discussions with NGOs are taking place—there is a continuing dialogue. There is also a continuing dialogue on a very regular basis with all our partners and like-minded countries and with nations in the region to ensure that we present a united front, to try to improve this dreadful situation. On her third question, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall later today, where I hope to cheer up my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron).

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome this urgent question from my old Army comrade, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). What is happening in Afghanistan is a reminder of the folly of our departure in 2021. The state of Afghanistan is deteriorating, and not just in terms of the plight of women; there is no banking system and no economy. The country is sliding once again towards civil war and once again becoming a safe haven for terrorism. The UK is the UN penholder for women, peace and security, so what more are we doing with the United Nations to stand up to the Taliban? What support are we giving to NGOs such as the HALO Trust, and when will we finally start to reopen our embassy in Kabul?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Defence Committee for his comments. In respect of his questions, I can tell him that the humanitarian co-ordinator of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Martin Griffiths, will visit shortly. In respect of my right hon. Friend's other questions, we keep these things under almost daily review. We are doing everything we possibly can to make sure we progress this situation as best as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): First, I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this urgent question. This ban comes in the cruellest depths of winter, when famine and frostbite are knocking at the door, and it also jeopardises the global campaign to eradicate polio, where women play a crucial role in raising awareness. Will the Government now look at how they can urgently fund and support polio programmes in Afghanistan? Can the Minister say a bit more about what meetings the Government will be convening with counterparts around the world to discuss what more can be done to protect women's rights in Afghanistan? Can he comment on what discussions he has had with regional partners on international engagement with Afghanistan going forward?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of important points. With regard to polio, Britain has been one of the leading nations, if not the leading nation, in trying to push for its eradication. I will shortly be seeing in Britain people involved in the voluntary sector on polio to drive forward what has been a pretty successful campaign in this respect. Equally, it is going backwards in Afghanistan, for reasons he will very much understand. In terms of the work we are doing to improve the position in Afghanistan, I should explain to him that something like 47% of aid agencies either partially or wholly have curtailed their activities.

That underlines the dangers that he points out, which are made even worse by the point he makes about the cruel weather at this time of year.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I know that Members across the House will share my deep sadness at the awful story of the murder of the woman MP, Mursal Nabizada, just this week. I thank the UN deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, for her visit to Afghanistan. It is vital that women's voices are heard on women's issues, and I hope my right hon. Friend will have seen the letter signed by many senior women on the Government Benches to him last week. The majority of women in Afghanistan are only allowed to see women health visitors. Girls are only allowed to be taught by women teachers. If NGOs cannot employ women, women will not be able to see a doctor or midwife, girls will not be able to seek even a minimal education and they will end up in forced marriages and poverty. I urge my right hon. Friend not to reduce our own financial commitments, especially for this year, while all actors continue to negotiate for the operational space they need to support women.

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for her comments; she knows a great deal about this subject. I will pass on what she has said to Amina Mohammed when I hopefully see her on Monday. I have received the letter that my right hon. Friend and others signed, and we will be responding. In terms of our commitments, we have met the commitments this year that we have made, and we are seized of the importance of continuing to give the maximum amount of support we can, together with other countries and colleagues, for the reasons that she has given.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): No one can fail to be horrified by the rapid roll-back of rights and opportunities for women and girls. For myself, personally, and for this Chamber, the murder of Mursal Nabizada and her security staff at the weekend brought into sharp focus what is happening. May I ask two very specific questions? First, is the Government's position that NGOs should continue with male-only staff? Secondly, for those NGOs that have paused their programmes because they do not want to have male-only staff, is their funding secure for this year?

Mr Mitchell: I cannot give precise figures on the hon. Lady's second question, but on the first question we are completely pragmatic. The danger of cutting off aid as a result of this appalling decision is that it will not affect the elite in the Taliban, but it will affect women, girls and others across the country. We take a pragmatic view. With regard to the health sector—I should have made this point earlier—it is not clear the extent to which women are working in it. In parts of it the Taliban have allowed them to continue. We press for that space to be extended as much as possible.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is not just by banning women aid workers that the Taliban marked themselves as an evil and medieval regime, but by stopping girls from going to school. In his discussions

with the deputy Secretary-General, will he continue to emphasise the importance of every child in the world getting 12 years of quality education?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. friend is absolutely right. If you want to change the world for the better, you educate girls. Britain is absolutely committed to driving forward a programme that she and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) have done so much to prosper.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After the persecution of Sikhs, Hindus, Hazaras, LGBT+ people and other minorities, the ban on women aid workers and on girls' education is utterly deplorable and is dragging the country back into a dark medieval age. Afghanistan is in the middle of the world's worst humanitarian emergency, with parts of the country on the brink of famine. It is vital that this ban is not used as an excuse by donors to cut funding. Will the Minister commit to no funding cuts from the UK to Afghanistan while negotiations between the de facto authorities and the diplomatic and humanitarian communities are ongoing?

Mr Mitchell: What the hon. Gentleman says is entirely correct. The commitment I can give him is that we are enormously seized of the difficulties of the situation. We are doing everything we can to ensure that the negotiations he refers to are as successful as they can be.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his actions in this regard. Clearly, because other donors are reducing their funding, it is even more important that our funding is safeguarded and concentrated on those people who need it most. Can he give an absolute reassurance that not a single penny of our aid gets into the hands of the Taliban to restrict the rights of women in Afghanistan?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right that all our support is through non-Government agencies in Afghanistan. We do not have normal relations with the Taliban, but we recognise countries, not Governments. We engage with the Taliban in a pragmatic and sensible way, but we do not fund them.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This is an appalling situation. Just today it has been reported that the Taliban have ordered shopkeepers to decapitate their mannequins or cover their faces—a chilling reminder of how the Taliban are eradicating even depictions of women. Are we not able to have conditionality on the assistance we offer Afghanistan at this time, to ensure that women's basic human rights are upheld?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to describe that as chilling. The trouble with conditionality is that it may not have any impact on the Taliban Government, but if we follow it through it will have a serious impact on the people we are trying to serve. These are delicate areas. We negotiate as best as we can for the people we are trying to help.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Linda Norgrove, who was born in my constituency, was an aid worker who was killed by the Taliban. The foundation set up in her name does tremendous work to

[*Jamie Stone*]

help aid workers in Afghanistan, which includes trying to get British university places for female Afghan medical students so that they can keep their education. Some states in the world will have some sort of relationship with Afghanistan. The Minister has mentioned the good work of the United Nations, but what efforts are being made to contact the particular states that might have greater influence over Afghanistan to get them to help us to reverse this ban?

Mr Mitchell: We are all desperately sorry about the appalling death of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, but cognisant of the good work that has resulted from her passing. He makes an important point about co-ordinating with other countries, which is something that we do all the time. For example, that was one of the specific things that we discussed when I met the Prime Minister of Pakistan in Geneva on 9 January, and we made the point that, where Pakistan has influence, we hope it will exert it—and it has been doing so.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): This medieval misogyny—we ought to call it what it is—is doing huge damage to Afghanistan's future. Does the Minister share the widespread concern that, since the Taliban have now closed universities to women, including banning them from studying medicine, and in some areas, have ordered that male doctors are not to treat female patients, we may get to the point where there are no women doctors left in Afghanistan to treat women who are ill?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about such matters and he is absolutely right. When he describes it as “medieval misogyny”, he has, once again, put his finger on an accurate point.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister knows that the actions of the Taliban are taking Afghanistan back, step by step, to the barbarism of the recent past, and it is women who are the victims of that barbarism and brutality. The ban on women working in NGOs in Afghanistan has a major impact on Afghan women aid workers, who are often the sole breadwinners for their families and are being left destitute. What flexibility are the Government, as a donor, giving to those aid organisations to be able to keep those women on the payroll?

Mr Mitchell: Within the parameters of proper and orderly governance, we do precisely that, as the hon. Gentleman would expect. To the first part of his question, we are working with all like-minded countries and regional powers in so far as we can to make that point through the United Nations. I will draw his specific comments to the attention of Martin Griffiths, the UN OCHA co-ordinator, who is going there shortly, as I said.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): In June 2022, a team of female doctors and nurses drove for six hours across treacherous terrain to reach victims of a massive earthquake that had killed more than 1,000 people. On arrival, all the men had received treatment while the women waited for female assistance to arrive. In light of the ban, what plans do the Government have to provide aid to women and girls in the region following natural disasters?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute to the women doctors who carried out that brave task in June 2022. I am appalled to hear what the hon. Lady said about the unequal treatment of men and women. We will continue to make sure that we do everything we can to ensure that aid is targeted, as best it can be, at those who need it most throughout Afghanistan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers, which are greatly appreciated by all hon. Members present. On unspoken support such as hygiene and family planning products, what is available for women and what more can we do to ensure that there is access to basic women's healthcare? As that support is unspoken and basic, perhaps there might be an avenue through Pakistan or other countries to get it to women in Afghanistan, who need it very much.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Family planning and hygiene are supported. Specifically, we try to ensure that clean water, sanitation and food get through to those who need them. As we heard, 28 million people are in acute need in Afghanistan at this time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

Business of the House

11.49 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 23 January includes:

MONDAY 23 JANUARY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland Budget Bill.

TUESDAY 24 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 26 JANUARY—A general debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 27 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 30 January includes:

MONDAY 30 JANUARY—Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill.

TUESDAY 31 JANUARY—Opposition day (12th allotted day), a debate in the name of the Leader of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the UK Infrastructure Bank Bill [Lords], followed by a debate on a motion to approve the “Charter for Budget Responsibility: Autumn 2022 update”.

THURSDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Private Members’ Bills.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and for her good wishes last week. As she is about to find out, I am indeed back to something approaching full voice. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who so ably stood in for me.

Yesterday, the Leader of the House voted against Parliament taking back control: against MPs deciding which retained EU laws we should drop, repeal or replace—laws covering workers’ rights, environment protection and national security. Does she really think these important issues are best left to the whim of the revolving door of Government Ministers? They are hardly exemplary lawmakers given the chaos they have caused over the last few years. Our primary job as MPs is to legislate; this is what we do. Can I ask her, as Parliament’s representative in Government, whether she made the case in Cabinet for MPs to be given a proper say on behalf of our constituents? Does she not want the British people’s elected representatives to take back control any more?

We must be given the means to scrutinise the Government properly on these laws. It is how parliamentary democracy works—the clue is in the name—so why have the Government only introduced a half-finished online dashboard of EU regulations they plan to scrap? Do they

plan to complete this dashboard, and if so, when? Should the public not know if laws are slipping through the cracks and set to be scrapped by accident, and how does the Leader of the House plan to square the practical difficulties of getting through thousands of these this year? This is not making Brexit work.

Can the Leader of the House tell us what is happening with the media Bill, please? It contains important provisions to promote our great British broadcasters on smart devices as well as safeguarding public service broadcasting in the streaming age. The Channel 4 debacle and the general Government chaos have caused unnecessary delay. I understand that we are only going to get a draft Bill. Is that correct, and when will there be a proper announcement?

I heard from the Leader of the House’s speech at the Institute of Government conference on Tuesday that she is a big fan of Government impact assessments. Who knew? She described them as very handy and most helpful in the Ministry—I could not agree more—so why have the Government not published the one on the impact of the sack nurses Bill? We should have seen it before this even reached Parliament, and there is still no sign. Where is it? Yet again, this is a Government swerving scrutiny. What have they got to hide? Is it that the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill is supposedly all about safety, yet does not actually mention safety, or is it because it does not actually provide minimum service levels on days when there are not strikes, which after all is the vast majority of the time? When will we see this impact assessment?

The Leader of the House also said on Tuesday that if people stop believing that democracy works for them, “like Tinkerbell’s light”, it will die. I love that line, and I agree. However, unlike in “Peter Pan”, there is no chance of this Tory Government’s light being switched back on. Never mind fairies, the British people do not believe in Tories; only Labour can switch on the light. It should not take magic fairy dust to preserve democracy. It starts with a principled Government leading by example, a Prime Minister who tells the truth, the right Ministers at the Dispatch Box properly equipped to answer questions our constituents want us to ask, and legislation tackling the real problems from 13 years of Tory failure, not headline-grabbers dropped as soon as the Back Benchers get bored. I know these duties of a functioning Government will never land with the Tories, but they will with Labour. The right hon. Lady’s Government might be away with the fairies; this Labour Government in waiting are ready to treat Parliament with the respect British people deserve.

Penny Mordaunt: Happy Chinese new year to everyone and congratulations to HMS Oardacious, which I mentioned in a previous session, on its record-breaking row across the Atlantic.

It is very good to see the hon. Lady back and in full voice, and I am glad she has been paying attention to my speech—I am very flattered by that. Before turning to her specific questions, she invited me to compare and contrast our record against hers. Let me take just one example—waiting lists is a topic on our minds at the moment. We obviously had a huge catch-up job to do during covid and new diagnostic centres are bringing down those waiting lists, but let us look at the figures for those waiting more than a year for treatment. According

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to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, before the pandemic, under 10 years of a Conservative Government, the figure was 1,643, and when covid hit this autumn it was over 400,000. That is the scale of the challenge we face and is what I was concentrating on in my speech. It is the same story all over the UK: waiting times are longer in Wales. But what were the figures under Labour? With no covid—and, let us be fair, after 10 years of a Labour Government—they were 578,682.

Would the hon. Lady like me to go on to talk about Labour's treatment of junior doctors, or the scandal of MRSA or C. diff infections in our hospitals, or the lunacy of private finance initiative schemes which saw us paying £300 to change a lightbulb, or the treatment centres that had machines that went "ping" but did not treat any patients? I could go on, but let me address the points she has raised.

The EU retained law Bill has good scrutiny: it has dedicated Committees both in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. We can do a number of things focusing on and prioritising particular areas of reform or carrying over laws if we think that is the right thing to do.

I understand the pitch the hon. Lady and her party are making to be the party of taking back control; indeed this week Labour announced legislative plans and a take back control Act. There were no details of course, so let me suggest what that might look like. A take back control act might have been voting with us to deliver Brexit; it might have been walking through the Aye Lobby on our borders Bill, or championing new trade agreements, or supporting us in the competition Bill and the Procurement Bill or the EU retained law Bill or—I live in hope—supporting us on the legislation we will bring forward to tackle small boats. All those Bills increased fairness and freedom for our citizens, improved wage growth and gave improvements to consumer power, improvements to help businesses grow and improvements to speed up the take-up of scientific breakthrough.

Labour's take back control Act is not a piece of legislation; it is a piece of performance art. While we power up and level up our communities, while we catch up with covid, while we raise up the nation—millions more in work, 1 million fewer workless households, 10% more in good or outstanding schools—Labour sucks up to union bosses, pulls up the social mobility drawbridge because of its dogma, and tells its MPs to shut up on social issues such as gender recognition.

Other business will be announced in the usual way.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Of course, solar panels have their part to play, but Gainsborough is going to be ringed with 10,000 acres of solar panels, more than the rest of the east midlands combined. May we have a debate on this issue and particularly on Government guidance on whether solar panels should be put on good agricultural land? There is a presumption against solar panels on grade 1, 2 and 3a land, but not yet on 3b land, and all the leadership candidates in our election promised they would shift solar panels from good agricultural land in places like Lincolnshire to urban areas and roofs or warehouses; may we have an urgent debate please?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that important point. That would be a good topic for a debate. I am sure that he knows how to apply for one and that it would be well attended. Given that Environment questions is not until much later in February, I shall write to the Department on his behalf to raise his concerns.

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

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): You know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have had this role for only a few weeks, but I was under the impression that I would get a few more relevant answers to my questions. Instead, what I get every week is rubbish prepared lines read out by the Leader of the House—performance art, if you like—written by someone who either has no knowledge or care for Scotland and its people or whose aim is to make Scotland sound like a basket case, because cynically they know that mud sticks if something is repeated often enough, even if it is not true.

Perhaps we should have a debate on the quality of ministerial answers to questions. As a political opponent, one cannot help but be grateful for this weekly illustration of the contempt in which the Westminster Government hold our beautiful country and indeed the voters who inconveniently keep rejecting the Leader of the House's party and supporting mine. It is almost as if our electorate can see through the drivel that they are being fed. If her aim is still to be Prime Minister for the whole of the UK—while it lasts—I am not sure whether annoying great swathes of Scotland's people is really the way to go about it, but far be it from me to dissuade her.

May we also have a debate about unintended consequences? Just this week, a senior Minister dismissed the views of a holocaust survivor. The Government have also continued to infuriate NHS workers, rail workers, ambulance drivers, union members, trans groups, Scottish independence supporters, the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government, and shunted through a Bill that will snarl up many hundreds of civil servants in red tape—one could not make it up—simply because of their blinkered hatred of the EU. Finally, there was the decision to use a sledgehammer to crack the delicate nut of devolved relations through the use of the "governor-general" clause. If the Government keep that up, they will not have any friends left—apart from their many generous corporate sponsors.

Despite it all, I will attempt another question, because this is important. Yesterday, I was pleased to see the Government shifting their position on trans conversion therapy, but sadly they seemed to backtrack the very same day. Will the Leader of the House assure us that that she will use her good offices with her colleagues and make every effort to prevent the forthcoming Bill from being used to stoke culture wars, as her colleagues attempted recently in the Scottish Parliament? I am sure she agrees that trans people deserve nothing less.

Penny Mordaunt: I shall try to make my answers incredibly relevant. The hon. Lady raised questions of relevance and unintended consequences, and she mentioned blinkered hatred. She will know that in our sessions, which I enjoy very much, I am a great campaigner on relevance. I always try to make my answers relevant.

I hope that, one day, the SNP will make its questions relevant to the issues facing the people of Scotland, such as healthcare and education, and all those things that they want their Government to grip, and not be so focused on constitutional reform, important though that is to the SNP.

The hon. Lady talks about unintended consequences. In all seriousness, we do not have to believe in the union of the United Kingdom to recognise that we all have a duty of care to every citizen in every part of the UK, no matter which part of the UK we are from and represent. That means having a regard for the social fabric and the social contract of the UK. The power that she refers to has been in existence for nearly 25 years—it is only marginally younger than the deputy leader of her group—and this is the first time that we have used it. It is not like we just discovered it down the back of the sofa. What has happened is a significant and rare thing, and is a serious thing. The powers were created as part of the devolution process in part because of the potential of such a scenario. It is because we have been placed in this position—the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill would have serious implications for the working of the Equality Act 2010—that we have done what we have done. It would have been better if the SNP had had regard to those unintended consequences; it is not as if they were not aware of them. The Minister for Women and Equalities raised the issue in correspondence and meetings with their Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, and officials had been raising it for some time. Given where we are and the worry that the issue will cause people, I hope that we can resolve the situation swiftly and in a spirit of co-operation and pragmatism. Our citizens, including those who are trans, deserve that.

The hon. Lady's final comment was about blinkered hatred; I would say that the SNP ought to check their own behaviour before they start pointing the finger at other people on that front.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Yet again, my constituency office in Wellingborough has been attacked; this time a brick was thrown through the window. Luckily, nobody was hurt. If whoever did that thinks that I am going to be intimidated, they are wrong. Like Members across the House, I came to this place to serve my country and constituents, and to stand up for what I think is right.

Perhaps more important are the staff in my constituency office. There is absolutely no reason for them to be put in danger. I wonder whether the Leader of the House could arrange a debate in Government time about our staff, the work they do and the fact that they should not have to put up with this nonsense.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that I speak for all Members in the Chamber in saying how sorry I am to hear that my hon. Friend's office has been attacked in that way; I know it has happened on numerous occasions before. Like the House authorities, I am sure, I would be very happy to assist if there is anything further we can do to deter and find the perpetrators of this horrible act.

My hon. Friend is quite right. All of us in this place have pretty thick skins, and we choose to do this job and face the dangers that come with it. But our staff should not expect such things to happen to them. I have also taken representations from staff in this place about

what they have to endure from particular protesters, who are clearly protesting against us as individuals and Members of Parliament, but staff are caught up in that as well. That is quite wrong. I hope my hon. Friend will come to see me. We will see what more we can do to protect him and his staff so that they can go about their business as his constituents wish them to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish the Leader of the House and Members across the House “Gong hei fat choy!” for this weekend—the beginning of the year of the rabbit in the Chinese calendar, I believe.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business Committee day on Thursday 2 February. We propose a debate to commemorate LGBT History Month on that date; we are going to assess which other bid to accept for the second debate on that day. I ask Members across the House, as they did last week in numbers, to continue submitting and supporting bids for Backbench Business Committee debates, both here in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall.

In response to the earlier urgent question on the levelling-up fund, the Minister told us that over 500 bids, valued at £8 billion, had been received and that 111 bids, valued at £2.1 billion, had received awards. But those awards are one-off payments, while local authorities across the country have been stripped of about £15 billion a year in lost revenue support grant. My own local authority in Gateshead has lost approximately £180 million per year in real terms. Can we have a debate in Government time about local government finance and the total inadequacy of the council tax system to properly fund our councils and the services that our constituents desperately need, week in, week out?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for advertising forthcoming debates, which is always very helpful to colleagues, and thank him for working so constructively with my office to ensure we plan time well and give people as much notice as we possibly can of those opportunities.

I fully appreciate the hon. Gentleman's concerns. All Members will want to lever in as much funding for their constituency as possible. There is a very good tool on the Government website, gov.uk, which maps all the funding going into constituencies via the very many funding streams there are, so people can get a good overview about what is happening where and why. We had to deal with a situation when we came in to make sure the Government were balancing their books. We also felt it was incredibly important to hold council tax rises down. Under the Labour Government they rose by 110%. He will see if he goes on to that tool that we are putting enormous amounts of money into areas, particularly those that have been deprived of funding for many years.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Several schools in my constituency have contacted me about the proposal to extend the school working week to 32.5 hours for those in the voluntary sector. May we have a statement from an Education Minister to explain when the proposal

[*Dr Matthew Offord*]

will come in, if additional resources will be provided and if it will be discretionary for headteachers? Will headteachers be allowed to discuss with their governing bodies whether they wish to have a longer school day, or indeed a shorter one?

Penny Mordaunt: The measure that was introduced is a non-statutory expectation. I would think and hope those discussions would take place. With regard to additional support, Education questions is not until late February, so I will write to the Department for Education on my hon. Friend's behalf and ask that it contacts his office with further details of the support that is available.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In November, I asked the Leader of the House whether we could have a debate on leisure services, given that so many of our leisure services are facing huge problems. Yesterday, people in Birtley in my constituency heard that their swimming pool is likely to close very soon. May I urge her to arrange a debate in Government time, so we can all discuss the issues relating to leisure services reviews and cuts that are facing our residents?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for again raising this very important issue. I think, if memory serves me correctly, since she last asked us for a debate we have had one on community sport and leisure facilities. The next Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions is on 26 January and I encourage her to raise the issue then. It is a vital issue. I am a big fan of swimming pools. They teach our young people life skills, as well as help to keep people fit and healthy, so I thank her for raising that important point.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that the cross-party all-party parliamentary group on veterans is currently running a survey into the experiences of veterans across the UK when claiming compensation, war pensions and other fiscal support from Veterans UK. As a fantastic champion for our armed forces and veterans, will she please commend that survey to all Members across the House and, more broadly, to our 2 million veterans in the UK, noting please that our survey has two weeks left to run?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on that fantastic advert for this very important piece of work. I encourage all Members to promote that survey and the survey that the Office for Veterans' Affairs is also running. That is a much broader consultation, but the work of the APPG that he chairs is very important because it looks in great detail at the fiscal issues which we know are of huge concern to the veteran community.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Christian Wakeford.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will try to cause fewer fireworks than this time last year.

Radcliffe was awarded a new high school in wave 14 of the free school programme. However, having first been threatened by the then Education Secretary, it is

now being delayed by an inept Department for Education. May we please have a statement or a debate in Government time on the progress of wave 14 schools?

Penny Mordaunt: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has obtained funding. As I said in response to an earlier question, Education questions is not until a bit later in February, so I will be happy to write this afternoon to the Department for Education and get him an update on what is happening with that particular project. But it is good to hear that his constituency has secured money for that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): All our thoughts and prayers will no doubt be with the poor people of Ukraine, who are suffering from the illegal invasion by Russia. This is not the first time that Russia has invaded sovereign territory. Thirty years ago today, Soviet troops invaded Baku in Azerbaijan, trying to prevent the independence movement from succeeding. The result was 150 people killed outright and 800 severely injured. The end result was the break-up of the Soviet Union, demonstrating that in the end force does not work. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing the survivors and the relatives of the victims of Black January commiserations, and in expressing solidarity with the people of Azerbaijan?

Penny Mordaunt: It has been a particularly grim week, looking at the situation in Ukraine and the results of Russia's war in Ukraine, in particular the scenes from Dnipro. We can all imagine what it would have been like sat there having breakfast with family and then suddenly your home is not there along with your husband, your father, your children, your household pets. What we have seen this week is appalling and I hope the war will swiftly be won by the Ukrainian people. My hon. Friend is right that it has echoes of horrors of the past and I thank him for drawing attention to the anniversary of Black January, when Soviet troops were deployed to Baku. It is an important part of the history of Azerbaijan and there are many people in the UK who will also want to remember those sad times.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): This time last week we heard in a High Court ruling that wild camping on Dartmoor national park, which people have had a right to do for decades, will no longer be legal. We learned that a former hedge fund manager is curtailing the rights of people by essentially imposing a curfew on Dartmoor, when access to nature has been essential to many people for so long. Will the Leader of the House agree to make time to debate changes to legislation, so that we can protect the respectful right of wild camping in Dartmoor national park?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that situation. The relevant departmental questions will not be until later on in February, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for an Adjournment debate. He will know how to do that, but I will also make sure that the relevant Department has heard his concerns today.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Dudley is the largest town in the country without its own railway station, and connectivity is very poor. It is a borough of over 300,000 people—some 200,000 in built-up areas.

There are reports that inflationary pressures are bringing into question the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill metro extension. May we have a statement or at least a ministerial assurance very soon that the metro extension will be delivered as planned?

Penny Mordaunt: The next Transport questions is on 2 March, but my hon. Friend will have an opportunity next week to ask about this because there is an Adjournment debate on the metro extension. I hope he will make use of that opportunity to raise these issues, but I shall, of course, make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The levelling-up round 2 funding announced last night was a kick in the teeth for my community in Erdington. Despite the attempts by the Minister who responded to Labour's urgent question to pretend that the process was fair, we know the truth. The Prime Minister's constituency received £19 million of funding but Erdington High Street got nothing. An urgent question is simply not enough, so will the Leader of the House grant time for a proper debate on the total failure of the Government's levelling-up agenda?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that the bid from the hon. Lady and her local authority for round 2 funding was not successful. I understand that the Department is going to be in touch with her and her local authority to talk about the bid, give good feedback and, we hope, carry the bid forward, as it will be doing with other colleagues. This is the second round and there will be further funding rounds, and I certainly stand ready to help her and her local authority to access that funding. Of course, it is just one funding stream of many. Again, as I say, she can look on the Government's website to see exactly where all those bids have gone, across every funding stream.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Promoting biodiversity is an important issue for many of my constituents, and companies can play a very positive role if they pay attention to it. Under this Government, companies are doing a much stronger job on their carbon reporting, but will the Leader of the House advise me as to what I can do as a Back Bencher to promote attention to biodiversity in our corporate reporting and get Ministers to move that forward?

Penny Mordaunt: First, let me thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done to champion this incredibly important agenda. We have a real opportunity here at the moment, not least because the Environment Secretary is a fanatic about biodiversity and has championed it throughout her parliamentary career. He will know that Environment questions is not until 23 February, but I know that he will already have made contact with the Secretary of State on this issue. I hope we can also learn from the good practice set out by organisations in his constituency as to how to ensure that this is embedded in every organisation and every business across the land.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Many pensioners are struggling during this cost of living crisis, with women pensioners disproportionately the poorest and more likely to be completely reliant on

the state pension and pension credit. Women are also more likely to be in part-time work below the lower earnings threshold and therefore get no credit for their state pension at all. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out what measures she thinks the Government should bring forward to try to tackle the shocking and ongoing gender pension gap?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for that, as this is a subject close to my heart. When I was the Minister for Women and Equalities, I wrote the road map that looked at the inequality that women face at every stage of their lives. Of course, by the time they get to retirement they have had multiple layers of inequality that have reduced their financial resilience. I point her to the campaign by the Department for Work and Pensions on pension credit uptake; a fantastic toolkit has really increased the take-up of pension credit in the constituencies of those MPs who have done that campaign. If she has not done it already, I urge her to do it. The next DWP questions is on 23 January, when I encourage her to raise her concerns with the Secretary of State.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): The A338-A346 is more or less a sheep track that runs between Salisbury and Swindon in my constituency. It was laid out in an age when the heaviest traffic on it was horse-drawn wagons. Now the road is clogged up every day by hundreds of heavy goods vehicles running through our villages, particularly the Collingbournes. I know that the Government are reviewing the connectivity between the Dorset coast and the M4, but will the Leader of the House tell us when that review will report? May we also have a debate in Government time on the problem of excessive heavy goods traffic on our country roads?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important issue of concern to his constituents. He will know that Transport questions will be on 2 March. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State is aware of the issue that he raises, and I thank him for raising it today.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituent Gary Arnold entered into a business with the Saudi royal family some years ago. Unfortunately, that relationship soured, but rather than this matter being resolved through the courts, he has been subjected to a campaign of unlawful detention and travel bans, and he has been convicted, with a two-year prison sentence, in his absence. When I wrote to the Foreign Office, it said, understandably, that it cannot get involved in legal disputes, but this is far more than that—this is state-sponsored persecution of one of my constituents—and I think we can do an awful lot more than that to protect our countrymen. May we have a debate on what more the Government can do to protect our citizens who are faced with these situations?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Gentleman's case. He will know that Foreign Office questions is on 31 January, but this issue cuts across several Departments; it is about justice and our trade support network as well. I will make sure that all relevant Departments have heard what he has said today. If he wants to pass my office the details of his case, I hope we will be able to give his constituent the support he needs.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): A number of MPs were interested to know that the Prime Minister took a jet to Leeds earlier this week, and this morning he took one to Blackpool. Will the Leader of the House check and report back to the House as to whether the Prime Minister is claiming his frequent flyer air miles?

Penny Mordaunt: All Ministers want to ensure that our transport is as low-cost and as environmentally friendly as it can be. If we look at ministerial travel, we will find that we always try to do that. It is important that Ministers, and in particular the Prime Minister, are supported to do their jobs. I want him to be as effective as he possibly can be. I know that he is doing a number of other things today, as well as the visits around the country, and I want him to make all those appointments.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate on the importance of civil society links for promoting understanding and awareness of international development issues? The Scotland Malawi Partnership has successfully promoted such people-to-people links since it was founded in 2005, and since 2008 it has been led by David Hope-Jones, who leaves his role as chief executive on Friday, after 15 years. Perhaps the Leader of the House could join me and colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, which the SMP has provided excellent secretariat services for, in thanking David and wishing him all the very best for the future.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. That was an excellent question because often when we talk about international development we just focus on Government money and what is being dished out from the taxpayers' purse, but our international development relationship across the UK with the rest of the world is much more than that. It is about the money raised at the local pub or at the local women's institute, and the relationship that those places have with particular projects around the world, which can span many, many years, with deep friendships and partnerships formed. He has given an excellent example of that today and I, too, put on record my thanks to David Hope-Jones for all the work he has done and wish him well in the future.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In the 18th century, a Government Minister used to stand at the entrance to Westminster Hall at the end of the parliamentary Session and reward MPs who had voted loyally with the Government throughout the year with dollops of cash. Now, I am not trying to give ideas to the Government, and I hope that everybody would accept that that is utterly corrupt. I also happen to think that the operation of the levelling-up fund and of the towns fund is completely corrupt, because it is not based on need, it is not based on the poorest communities in the country and it is not based on levelling up. It is discretionary and it is competitive, which rigs itself deliberately against the poorest communities in the land, as we have seen over the past 24 hours. Can we have a debate in Government time on corruption in the operation of slush funds in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is the Chair of the Committee on Standards, so he will be very able and equipped to investigate this further.

Sir Chris Bryant: Really? That's great.

Penny Mordaunt: It is his Committee; he can do what he likes. I would just say this to him: first of all, we have a number of funds. We have the levelling-up fund, the community ownership fund—

Sir Chris Bryant: Corrupt.

Penny Mordaunt: The community renewal fund—

Sir Chris Bryant: Corrupt.

Penny Mordaunt: The UK shared prosperity fund—

Sir Chris Bryant: Corrupt.

Penny Mordaunt: The Strength in Places fund—

Sir Chris Bryant: Corrupt.

Penny Mordaunt: All the towns funding—

Sir Chris Bryant: Corrupt.

Penny Mordaunt: There are many, many funds. The hon. Gentleman is saying that they are all corrupt. They are all available to view on gov.uk, and you can see where funding has gone.

I would also say to the hon. Gentleman that these bids are not assessed by Ministers; they are assessed independently. They are scored and it is transparent. Good feedback will be given to those who did not progress in this round. Quite often, what happens is that bids that are not successful in one round are successful in successive rounds, because those areas that needed improvement have been done.

Finally, I would say to the hon. Gentleman, because of the way in which he has put his question, that he has slight form in accusing people of doing things that on investigation they have turned out not to have been done. It was very recently that he accused one of my colleagues of manhandling somebody who turned out not to have been handled at all. I would just urge a little caution in how the hon. Gentleman makes such accusations.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): We have just had an urgent question on levelling up: an urgent question that was necessary only because the Government were too ashamed to come forward with a statement. Some of the successful bids for funding—amounting to about a third of what Scotland would have received from EU funding, I should say—were quite astonishing. Areas such as Renfrewshire, which has Scotland's largest city, Glasgow, on its doorstep, missed out on any funding. That comes just after it missed out on a green freeport to a much wealthier area. Can we have a debate on redistribution, levelling up and pork-barrel politics, and particularly on the criteria applied to levelling up?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know the tax dividend that is there for Scotland: over £2,000 more is spent per head in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK. As I say, there are a number of live funds to which constituencies and local authorities in Scotland can

apply. Just from the levelling-up fund, Scotland has had £349 million. If the hon. Gentleman has been unsuccessful in a bid, I am sorry to hear that, but the Department will work with him and his local authority to improve the bid, and hopefully it will be successful in subsequent rounds.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In March this year, unfortunately, WH Smith in Wood Green is closing, which means that the post office is closing. It has not been able to find another site; 600 people have signed a petition, which I hope to present to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, at a future point. As this is an issue not just in Wood Green but across the country, would it be appropriate to have a debate in Government time to really sort out the importance of the post office to so many people and ensure that plans are in place if the likes of WH Smith have to suddenly close?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that. Because questions to the relevant Department are not for a little while, I shall certainly write to it today to make it aware of that issue. The hon. Lady will know that there are many examples of innovation; sometimes pubs and other seemingly unrelated organisations have stepped up to provide a base for post office services to work out of. I know that the Department is a repository of ideas and good practice. I will ask officials to get in touch to see whether we can help the her to facilitate the finding of a site and an organisation to house those very important services for her constituents.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It is good to see that the Government have paused the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill and are making progress on negotiations with the EU, but can the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to come and update the House, as a matter of urgency, on his negotiations?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall make sure that both the Foreign Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary have heard the hon. Lady's concerns. It is good that progress is being made. As someone who sat on the withdrawal agreement joint committee under two chairmen, I can say that we have always worked constructively and in a pragmatic way. The EU is now meeting us on those ideas. I do hope that we will be able to resolve the situation soon, to the benefit of all our citizens across the whole UK and those in Europe too.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Later in the spring, I will be doing a charity wing walk, following a charity skydive and a charity zip-wire that I have done for Fundraising for Florence. Florence is an eight-year-old girl from Dukinfield in my constituency who has an incredibly rare genetic condition called GM1. It basically means that her body, bit by bit, is shutting down, and she will be lucky to live to 11, so we are making memories for Florence and fundraising for that purpose. Can we have a debate in Government time on GM1, so that we can raise awareness with Ministers of this terrible degenerative disorder?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate the incredibly brave hon. Gentleman on flying for Florence. As he says, he is not just raising funds, but raising awareness and hopefully creating some good memories for her and her family.

I also thank him for pointing to a serious condition that is not often given a high profile; he has enabled that to happen today, and I thank him for it. I will make sure that the Secretary of State is aware not just of the issue, but of the hon. Gentleman's fundraising efforts.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is quite clear that the Leader of the House believes in fairness of approach for all citizens, regardless of where in the United Kingdom they live. Time and again in this place, I have raised the iniquitous unfairness of pregnant mothers in Caithness having to make a 200-mile-plus round trip to give birth. Is it not time that we had a debate to explore these unfairnesses within our United Kingdom?

Penny Mordaunt: That sounds like an incredibly bad situation. I know that the hon. Gentleman, because he is a very dedicated constituency MP, will have raised the issue many times and will no doubt have been working with healthcare in his area. I will ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care has heard about the situation; Health questions are on 24 January and I urge him to raise it then. Although health is a devolved matter, I think that one of the strengths of the NHS is that all four systems of the United Kingdom can learn from one another, our chief medical officers can talk to one another and those in maternity care and other disciplines can learn from one another. I am sure that the Secretary of State will want to hear about the plight of the hon. Gentleman's constituents and suggest some things that might be able to help.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent's little boy Joseph was badly hurt by a discarded needle while playing on one of our gorgeous beaches. His mam would like to see a ban on non-retractable needles, but after writing to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and, as usual, waiting months and months for a pitiful response, her request has not been properly considered at all. Can we have an urgent debate on the danger posed by these needles?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear about that situation. The hon. Lady is right that some of the problems that we face with medical devices and so on can quite often be designed out. As I say, Health questions are on 24 January; I encourage her to raise the matter then. I will certainly let the Secretary of State know about her idea.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Research tells us that diabetics suffer with disproportionately high rates of mental health problems. A report published by Diabetes UK in 2019 found that 50% of diabetics consulted said that they would be comfortable talking about their emotional wellbeing, but seven in 10 of these people say that they are rarely or never supported to have those conversations. Given how stark the statistics are, the Government have clearly been letting diabetics down. There is an evident need for dedicated mental health support, so will the Leader of the House grant a debate on adequate mental health support for those who live with diabetes?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. Let me also declare an interest in that I was a director of Diabetes UK, a great

[Penny Mordaunt]

organisation that does fantastic work. As he says, people with long-term conditions encounter all sorts of additional complications and situations. I shall certainly ensure that the Secretary of State is aware of the concerns that he has raised, but this also points to the immense importance of community care, specialist diabetes nurses and experts in the field, and I know that Diabetes UK also wants to ensure that the pipeline of people going into those specialisms remains strong.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Susan left her partner following domestic abuse. She correctly updated the Department for Work and Pensions with all her new details, but the DWP then tried to put her next cost of living payment into the now closed joint bank account. When she inquired about the missing payment, it turned out that for some reason the DWP's solution had been to pay the money to her ex instead, so she has not received it. May we have a ministerial statement explaining how the Government will better manage payments to victims of domestic abuse, and—importantly—confirming that Susan will get the money she deserves and needs in order to live?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that situation. This is one of the reasons we have our offices and, as constituency MPs, we are there to help people facing such issues. If the hon. Gentleman wants to pass me the details of the case, I will do what I have done before and raise it immediately with the DWP to ensure that his constituent's liquidity is not suffering. I will also ensure that the Secretary of State has heard about the case, so he can assure himself that it is a one-off and is not happening to other people in similar circumstances.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this week, I visited St Mungo's complex needs hostel in Clapham, in my constituency. It does fantastic work in helping homeless people and I pay tribute to its staff and volunteers, but they are struggling to cope because of the cost of living crisis, and the cold snap predicted for next week will only make the situation worse. In their 2019 manifesto, the Conservatives pledged to end homelessness by 2024, but, as my work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness has shown, that is not going to happen. May we please have an urgent debate in Government time on what the Government are going to do to help people who are facing homelessness?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me join in the thanks and praise that the hon. Lady has given to those staff and volunteers, who clearly do an incredible job. Since 2019, homelessness has halved. Both the DWP and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities are focused on tackling the issue and, indeed, we have made huge strides—helped in part, ironically, by the opportunities that we had during covid to bring people in, and the measures that were taken at that time. It is a continuing battle, but we will continue to make progress on that number and ensure that there is somewhere safer for everyone to go. We are also tackling the issues that lead to people being in that circumstance in the first place.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The recent dismal performance of TransPennine Express is a cause of considerable consternation, not only in this place but among many of my constituents who use Urmston railway station, where 50% of stopping services are operated by TransPennine. What that means in practice is that some 50% of services are currently subject to near constant delay or cancellation. What more does the Leader of the House believe her Government could do to hold TransPennine to account, and, specifically, will she agree to a debate in Government time on this sustained underperformance and the misery it is wreaking on my constituents and commuters across the north of England and Scotland?

Penny Mordaunt: This is not the first time we have heard such criticism about that particular franchise and that particular route. I know that the hon. Gentleman's concerns are shared by many Members on both sides of the House, and I thank him for raising them. Transport questions will take place on 2 March, but I will let the Secretary of State know that the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue again today. Let me also suggest that this might be a topic for a debate, given that so many Members have similar concerns. There is more than one possible route. I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee would be very sympathetic—its Chairman, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is nodding vigorously—and the hon. Gentleman knows how to apply for an Adjournment debate.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on what has been done to deal with the sharp increases in hate crime shown by recent statistics, and in particular with the real concerns of the LGBT+ community? I declare an interest, as someone who has been a victim. According to statistics, two of the three largest increases were in hate crimes against people on the basis of their sexuality, which were up by 41%, and those against people on the basis of their transgender identity, which were up by 56%. Hate crimes on the basis of disability were up by 43%. All hate crimes are abhorrent—the incidence of racial hate crimes remains stubbornly the highest—but, particularly in my own communities, there is real fear. In Cardiff we are only two years on from the tragic murder of Dr Gary Jenkins. Can the Leader of the House find time for a serious, respectful and impactful debate on the issue?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious situation. The LGBT+ survey carried out a number of years ago by the Government to get a clear view of what it was like to live in the UK and be LGBT+ pointed to the increasing amount of abuse and hate crime that individuals were suffering, which was causing people to be concerned about holding hands with their partners in public places. The Home Office has done a huge amount of work on the issue, and will continue to do so. He will know that Home Office questions will take place on 6 February, but I think this is an excellent topic for a debate, and I encourage him to apply for one.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My team are dealing with several cases in which constituents are not being given timely support by their

energy providers because phone lines are heavily oversubscribed. One problem is that providers are struggling to credit accounts with Government support, and customers are not paying by direct debit. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate, in Government time, on how energy support schemes could be improved for households?

Penny Mordaunt: During last week's business questions a great many energy issues were raised, from prepayment meters to support not being passed on. We have seen, historically, particular energy companies hanging on to people's credit and not transferring them to a new provider. As well as writing to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—I will do that again on the back of the hon. Lady's question—I have spoken to the relevant Minister and emphasised that this suite of issues is of particular concern to Members. I will keep the House abreast of work that the Department is doing to resolve these serious issues, which will have an impact on people's ability to afford household bills and on their personal liquidity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, along with others, I attended the launch of the Open Doors World Watch List, which highlighted the top 50 countries where Christians face violent attacks and extreme persecution because of their faith. Nigeria featured highly, at No. 6 in the top 10 countries where the intensity of persecution has increased to a significant level. On Christmas Day, 53 Christians in Kaduna State in Nigeria were kidnapped, and their families are living in suspense, fear and dread as they wait for their loved ones to return. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make a statement on how the UK can assist Nigeria to reduce terrorist activity and free those kidnapped Christians?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this tragic case. I take this opportunity to thank and praise Open Doors for the work it does. I know that many Members attend that event, and it is incredibly helpful to get that picture about what is happening. Many Members are concerned about freedom of religion. The Government have championed it as well, which is why we have established an envoy on the matter. I will make sure that the Foreign Office has heard the hon. Gentleman's comments today. Foreign Office questions is next on 31 January. I would normally encourage the hon. Gentleman to be there to ask the Foreign Secretary about the matter, but I know that he requires no such encouragement—I know that he will be there.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement.

Point of Order

12.50 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just after midday, my local authority in Gateshead asked if I was aware that the Prime Minister had told it that he intended to visit my constituency this afternoon. I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have received no such notification from No. 10 Downing Street. Whether he arrives or not is another matter; there seemed to be some conjecture about that in the local authority, but it has been told that there was an intention to do so. What can I do to ensure that not only the Prime Minister but other Ministers of the Crown inform me when they plan to visit my constituency?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Mr Speaker has been clear that MPs, and particularly Ministers, should inform other Members in advance when they plan to visit their constituency. I am sure that he would expect the Prime Minister to set an example. The Leader of the House is still here and will have heard the hon. Gentleman's point of order, and I am sure that others on the Treasury Bench will ensure that his concerns are fed back and that appropriate action is taken.

Preventing Future Mass Atrocities Around the World

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Sarah Champion will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and will call Sarah Champion to respond to them in turn. May I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not to the relevant Minister, and that interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front-Bench Members may take part in questioning should they wish to do so.

12.51 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to make a Select Committee statement marking today's publication of the Government's response to the International Development Committee's inquiry and report on atrocity prevention. I would like to thank the Committee Members, staff and specialist advisers, and all who gave evidence.

Next week we mark Holocaust Memorial Day. The horror, loss and trauma of Nazi genocide and crimes against humanity are still felt by survivors, descendants and communities today. But mass atrocities have not been relegated to history. We see these horrors in Ukraine today, where Putin's indiscriminate bombing subjects civilians to endless misery, death and destruction—appalling crimes that we all condemn.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina last year, my Committee met organisations still grappling with the hurt and havoc wreaked by the genocide and crimes against humanity more than 25 years ago. But right now, while the media sometimes forget, the same horrors are being played out in Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, China and Myanmar, for example. The promise, made in the wake of the holocaust, of "Never again" has been broken again and again. Genocide and crimes against humanity are never inevitable, and they can often be prevented. To do so, however, we need to be prepared, we need to co-ordinate, we need resources, and we need political will.

As a flourishing democracy, major economy and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the UK has a particular power to act. That is why my Committee decided to launch an inquiry into whether the UK is doing all it can to prevent mass atrocities. The subsequent invasion of Ukraine, which occurred only a few months after the launch of our inquiry, underlines the urgency of this work. Although multilateral institutions have a fundamental role to play, our inquiry went beyond the UK's work in bodies such as the United Nations. We must recognise that Russia and China both wield their veto power to provide cover for their own crimes and to block responses elsewhere. But the deadlock that this forces at the Security Council should not inhibit our own national policy.

The Committee asked whether the UK was using the full range of its own tools to prevent bloodshed. Our primary interest was in the peaceful steps that can prevent violence or de-escalate it at the earliest stages. Our inquiry heard from UK ambassadors, civil society organisations, lawyers and academics, all with a stake in preventing and ending atrocities. I thank them all for their input and for their patient work over the years, acting as a force for peace.

Our inquiry found that, over the last year, there has been a transformation in how the Government address these issues. Spurred on by the integrated review of 2021, the commitment by many in this House and the dogged work of civil society, there is now a new team at the heart of Government: a mass atrocity prevention hub. I am proud to say that the Committee's inquiry has driven further welcome changes. The Government now recognise atrocity prevention as a distinct objective across Government, deserving attention in its own right. They now accept that mass atrocities can occur outside of conflict as well as within them, meaning that they will have to prioritise the plight of populations in Xinjiang and North Korea as well as those in Syria and Ethiopia.

Following our inquiry, the Government are now reviewing the training and resources they offer our diplomats, to ensure that our embassies can spot and act on the early warning signs of identity-based persecution and violence. Our diplomats often instinctively know when things go awry, but without access to proper mandatory training or detailed policy, they have sometimes been left high and dry. I acknowledge and thank the Government for these commitments. They signal that the UK may be moving towards a new, more cost-effective model of foreign policy, which addresses atrocity prevention more consistently. This model needs to develop civil servants' capacity and skills, to pursue this goal across Government, making the best use of British diplomacy and aid programming to save lives.

Prevention is infinitely less resource-intensive than responding to the consequences of inaction. However, given these positive steps, I question why the Government decided not to accept the central recommendation of my Committee: namely, to adopt a national strategy to prevent and respond to mass atrocities. Without a strategy, I struggle to see how the Government will measure whether their efforts stack up and deliver real change for those at risk. I fear that, once again, individuals and communities will fall through the cracks of UK policy. They are the ones who will pay the ultimate price.

Of course, the UK cannot and should not seek to shoulder responsibility alone, but it must be strategic. A new model requires a plan that extends to the whole of Government.

It requires dedicated budget lines, whether within the sanctions team, in key embassies, or within the conflict, stability and security fund. Most of all, this emerging model needs political leadership. Acting to prevent mass atrocities must be part of our national security decisions. We must use the latest intelligence to prevent and prepare.

All relevant Ministers must be around the table. I want to see the Minister for Development sitting on the National Security Council, advising on how to use aid programmes to tackle the root causes of atrocities. I want to see the Minister for Security prioritising this

issue, safeguarding our shores from the products and influence of countries that persecute their own citizens. I want to see the Minister with responsibility for South Asia and the Commonwealth ensuring that the Government are inclusive and remembering that sustainable and equitable peace centres on the needs of marginalised groups. I want to see the Home Secretary ensuring that our asylum and immigration policies match our commitments to honour the lessons of the holocaust and stand with those fleeing atrocity crimes today.

Let me pause here to underline the importance of our report for our domestic Departments. It is a mistake to think that this phenomenon of identity-based discrimination and violence exists only in some parts of the world and not here in the UK. It is a mistake to think that our obligation to confront mass atrocities begins and ends with our international policy.

One of the easiest things we can do is to provide sanctuary to those fleeing genocide, crimes against humanity, persecution and conflict. Easier still is to avoid demonising and dehumanising the men, women and children seeking safety. Preventing these crimes requires consistency and ethical leadership, and I hope the Home Secretary reflects and acts on this, as how we act now will determine our place in the world for generations to come. It will also shape the dangers we face.

Over many years, the world watched as Syrians were subjected to horrific violence, bombardment of hospitals and civilian areas, and mass graves. We are in denial if we do not see how this paved the way for Putin's crimes in Ukraine today. We know that the perpetrators of atrocity learn directly from one another, yet those of us who stand against atrocities have often failed to do the same.

Mass-atrocity crimes are not restricted to certain parts of the world. The war in Ukraine reminds us that Europe is not immune to these horrors. Worrying tensions have returned to the western Balkans, despite the call to action that the Srebrenica genocide should have provided. Climate change, new technologies and dangers to democracy only threaten to worsen the atrocity risk that the world faces, so do not think such crimes cannot happen here.

The Government will release an update to the 2012 integrated review in the coming months, and I urge Ministers to centre atrocity prevention within that update. It must set out how atrocity risks will be mitigated across Government, from trade, exports and supply chains to asylum and border policies. We need to see a cross-Government strategy on atrocity prevention. I fully support the Foreign Secretary's belief that the goal of foreign policy is to make a difference, not just to comment. Our report, which I proudly commend to the House, provides a plan for how to do just that.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her Committee's excellent report and for her personal commitment to this issue, as evidenced by her powerful speech today.

The Government have a manifesto commitment to implement the Truro review, including recommendation 7 on

"setting up early warning mechanisms to identify countries at risk of atrocities, diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes, and developing support to help with upstream prevention work."

Does the hon. Lady agree that adopting the road map outlined in her Committee's report would not only fulfil this recommendation but would mean that, when we say "never again" on Holocaust Memorial Day next week, the Government can match their words with concrete action?

Sarah Champion: I fully support the hon. Lady's comments. She has been a leader in trying to highlight and prevent the persecution of religious groups around the world. She has done a sterling job.

Early warning is key. We have seen that very simple steps lead to the de-escalation of violence, and this Government have an opportunity, if they use the hon. Lady's report and the Committee's report, to make a real difference by preventing these crimes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for raising this issue so consistently. What could be more important in our foreign policy than working to prevent mass atrocity?

The UN reports that the M23 armed group killed at least 133 unarmed villagers and raped at least 22 women over just two days last November. A separate UN report alleges that Rwandan armed forces provided material support to M23. The US, France and Germany have all publicly recognised these horrifying findings and have spoken out, but our Government have failed to do so. Does my hon. Friend agree that a consistent approach to atrocity prevention requires the Government to start recognising and telling what will be, for them, uncomfortable truths?

Sarah Champion: I have been appalled at what is happening to the Congolese people. The main point of our report is that there is a national strategy. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned recommendation 7 of the Truro report, which says the strategy must be "legal not political." It is shocking that the UK Government have not called out what is happening in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and I am keen that the Committee looks into this further.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): This is a remarkable report, and the hon. Lady should be commended for her leadership in this matter. I wonder whether we should be pressing the Government to do more in critical areas. I am a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Magnitsky sanctions, and we are dragging our feet on sanctioning the architects and perpetrators of abuse in many parts of the world, particularly China. We have sanctioned fewer people in China than most countries have, certainly far fewer than the USA has, and we still do not recognise that there is a genocide taking place in Xinjiang, where rape is used as a weapon of that genocide. Would she like to comment on that?

Sarah Champion: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his leadership on this topic. What is happening in Xinjiang would now fall within the Government's remit because they have acknowledged that atrocities not only happen in conflict. One of our central asks is that

[Sarah Champion]

atrocities prevention goes across Government so that this country uses every tool and speaks with one voice. I hope the Government grasp this opportunity to step up and be a world leader on atrocities prevention.

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

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her statement. She talks about the need for cogent and effective early-warning mechanisms, and I could not agree more. Sadly, around the world there are too many instances of genocide and crimes against humanity to draw on. Reflecting on where we are in Europe, we seek never to forget the holocaust and to ensure that it never happens again, yet it was only in the 1990s that those same practices happened again. It was bizarre to observe those horrific scenes on colour television, with the victims wearing Nike clothing. When we visit Bosnia and Herzegovina, we see that all too clearly.

What does the hon. Lady think these early-warning systems might do to the increased temperature of the tension and conflict in Republika Srpska? How can the European continent, and the wider world, protect the people of Bosnia by addressing what is bubbling up before our eyes in Republika Srpska?

Sarah Champion: I congratulate Members on both sides of the House who began raising these regional issues nine months ago. The Government listened, and I know our diplomats over there have been instrumental in trying to de-escalate the tensions in that region. If we do not do that, it will literally wash up on our shores. This presents a major security risk to Europe and to this country, so I urge the Government to keep up those talks and to keep making it clear what the consequences will be for people who promote such violence.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I thank the hon. Lady for her Committee's outstanding report. I commend all the Committee members who helped to produce it.

Is the hon. Lady aware that we have condemned all violence and all violent groups in the DRC and Kivu? I have spoken to the Foreign Ministers of both Rwanda and the DRC to urge them to end the violence and to support the Nairobi peace accord, to which the British taxpayer is contributing £500,000 to help move the process along.

Sarah Champion: Yes, I am aware that the Government have condemned the violence in the DRC. One of my

concerns is that we perhaps need stronger and more public words, as the Rwandan Government seem to be involved in this escalation.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Liberal Democrats warmly welcome the International Development Committee's report, "From Srebrenica to a Safer Tomorrow". The all-party group on Bosnia and Herzegovina hosted a former president of Bosnia last year. The former president praised the work of the UK 20 years ago, and in particular that of the late Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon as UN high representative. But now we see the separatist president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, refer to "our Serbia" and "our Russia" in the same breath. Does the hon. Member think that the Government's decision not to accept the report's recommendation that the Government introduce a cross-departmental strategy for preventing and responding to mass atrocities takes account of some of this worrying rhetoric that we are seeing from Republika Srpska?

Sarah Champion: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. The Committee went out to Bosnia—to Mostar. We were genuinely shocked by the palpable tension on the streets and the deliberately inflammatory language and policies that are coming out of Dodik and others. The ambassador at the time and the current ambassador have been working incredibly hard to highlight this, but we need to do more. We need an international condemnation of what is going on over there otherwise it will replicate itself.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): This is an important report and I associate myself with the words of the Chair of the Committee regarding the witnesses and the staff members who have worked on this. Does my good friend, the Chair of the International Development Committee, agree that preventing mass atrocities not only is a moral imperative, but delivers wide-ranging security benefits for Britain?

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend and Committee member for his question. Absolutely, obviously, it is the right thing for us to do morally, but early intervention preventing this has wide-ranging benefits for our national security. People do not realise that terrorist groups are looking to radicalise the unrest that is happening. We are looking at the murder, which leads to refugees and asylum seekers coming to this country, making it impossible for them to go back home again. So, absolutely, early intervention and prevention has to be both morally, economically and in terms of human cost the best thing to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Select Committee Chair for her statement and for answering the subsequent questions.

Backbench Business

Jagtar Singh Johal

1.12 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the imprisonment of Jagtar Singh Johal.

Let me begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to proceed today. I noticed, while going over my notes in preparation, that it is almost a year since I first submitted the request, yet the Committee has indulged my requests to delay owing to the changing circumstances of the case. I think it was more in hope than expectation that my friend, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), offered me the slot last week, and I am delighted to see them in their place today, as well as other members of the Backbench Business Committee.

I do not intend to spend much time today going over the specifics of the case. These are a matter for the public record, following: the Adjournment debate that I was granted in November 2018; the Westminster Hall debate of June 2021; and, indeed, the urgent question heard by the House in September last year. Indeed, in the five years since Jagtar's arrest, I have brought up his case on the Floor of the House on more than 30 separate occasions. This, along with the excellent work of my colleagues from other political parties across the House who have continued to raise my constituent's case in parliamentary questions—

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I have arranged meetings with Foreign Secretaries, Ministers and Prime Ministers, but my efforts have been as nothing compared with the incredible assiduous work of my friend, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). His pursuit of freedom on behalf of Jagtar and his family is admirable and I am determined to offer any support that I can as he continues to fight this case.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has been a stout defender of Jagtar's rights, and I am grateful for his continued support and for that of some of his colleagues.

As I was saying, the engagement across parties in debates and in meetings with Ministers shows the strength and durability of the feeling in this place to address what is becoming one of the most—at least I would say—prominent injustices in modern UK foreign policy. That is, essentially, the purpose of this debate. Through the speeches and interventions made in the House today, I want the Government to see: that Members across this House, across parties, and across the nations of these islands, have no intention of forgetting Jagtar Singh Johal; that the choice that they made not to deem his continued detention an arbitrary one until recently to not be without consequence; and that even five years on, we will be here, and for another five years if that is indeed necessary. Once again, we ask them, through the Minister, to call for his immediate release.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on all the work that he has done on behalf of his constituent, and, indeed, his constituents. Plenty of constituents in Glasgow North are regularly in contact with me about this issue—not just people who worship at the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple in Otago Street, but members of the Amnesty groups and the wider community. They understand that Jagtar has been arbitrarily detained. The United Nations understands that that is what has happened to him. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must recognise that and that they have to call for fair due process and, ultimately, for Jagtar's release?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We are at the point now where that needs to be vocalised on the Floor of the House. It is one thing to say it in private, but it does need to be vocalised by the Minister.

The United Kingdom Government are, of course, not the only relevant party: the Government of the Republic of India, their judiciary and their police forces are the ones who continue to hold my constituent in a fashion that is consistent with arbitrary detention—

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I wish to add to the contributions that have been made about my hon. Friend's endeavour in relation to standing up for his constituent. On the point that he just made, we know that, in August 2022, there were reports that MI5 and MI6 operatives supplied information that has led to the torture of a British citizen in India. That is, of course, a breach of his human rights and, to my mind, it is an act of treachery on behalf of the UK Government. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: That matter is about to go before the courts, Madam Deputy Speaker, but let me say that that type of approach by previous UK Governments is not unknown. I hope that the courts will recognise that we need further information on the involvement of the British Government in the arbitrary detention of my constituent and his possible torture.

As I said, the UK Government are not the only relevant party. The Government of the Republic of India, their judiciary and their police forces are the ones who continue to hold my constituent in a fashion that is consistent with arbitrary detention. I would like them to watch this debate and recognise that this has not escaped international attention and nor will it do so.

Last May, when the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention submitted a report on the case, it could not have been clearer. It said:

“Mr Johal's arrest and detention are arbitrary...as there is a lack of legal basis or justification, and amount to unlawful abduction, incommunicado detention and unreasonable pretrial detention.”

It continues that

“none of the domestic or international law requirements was complied with during Mr Johal's arrest. Mr Johal was bound, hooded and taken by unidentified police officers. During that time, Mr Johal was never informed that he was being arrested, nor was a family member with him. Under Article 21 of the Constitution of India, no person is to be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.”

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

We subsequently heard last year, following the excellent work of the charity Reprieve, that this arrest was almost certainly the result of intelligence shared by the British Government. There is, of course, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), an ongoing legal case. I hope we will one day be able to establish the circumstances that set this terrible personal tragedy into motion, although it would save the family the stress of the court process if the UK Government were to be up-front about their role in the case as soon as possible—but I am afraid I do not think that will happen.

We are here one week before 26 January, when India celebrates Republic Day and marks the 73rd anniversary of the constitution's coming into force, effectively heralding the culmination of a long and often bloody struggle to create the modern Indian state out of the unjust and rapacious reality of British colonial rule. Standing in this Chamber, within this Palace constructed partially with the proceeds of the wealth extracted from India during the colonial period, every one of us must be mindful of so much when addressing the actions of the Indian Government, as I hope I have always been when referring to this case.

The Republic of India is a great state—indeed, it is more than that; it is a great civilisation. During my Adjournment debate in November 2018, I ended with an appeal that,

“transparency, due process and the rule of law”—[*Official Report*, 27 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 222.]

be upheld in this case. The course of time has certainly not altered those sentiments, but it allows us to reflect on whether they have been upheld. I am afraid that not only do I, the majority of hon. Members present, the Johal family and countless legal experts hold the view that transparency, due process and the rule of law have not been upheld in Jagtar's case, but so does the United Nations.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on once more securing a debate on behalf of his constituent Jagtar Singh Johal. This is a matter I have raised on numerous occasions on behalf of many concerned Slough constituents. Does he agree that, since the UN working group on arbitrary detention issued an opinion finding that Jagtar “was subjected to torture” and that his detention was based on “discriminatory grounds”, it is incumbent on the Foreign Office to issue Jagtar's family and legal team with all the consular support and advice required in their fight to get him released and see justice delivered?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is another doughty campaigner for my constituent and works closely with me. I do not disagree, but I must put on record that, in difficult times, the consular teams have stepped up to the plate in many ways and have worked tirelessly to assist the family. The difficulty is political leadership.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution. I am aware, as hon. Members across the House will be, of the good work he is doing in championing Jagtar's family.

Does he agree that this is only the latest example of a growing trend of UK Government incompetence and inaction when faced with British nationals detained abroad, and that it is vital that we ensure that previous blunders are not repeated in the case of Jagtar Singh Johal?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: There has been a litany of personal disasters when it comes to consular support, but I say again that that is not the staff, but the lack of political leadership, the impact of change since 2016 due to Brexit, the number of staff members taken away from different desks covering different countries and the amount of churn going through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. That has been profoundly difficult, and it has dire consequences for all our constituents on the ground.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on his determined effort on behalf of his constituent. Does he think there is anything to be learned from the result of the Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe case and how that transpired? What learnings are there from that case in terms of both campaigning and how that was worked through with the Foreign Office and how that might secure Jagtar's release?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The hon. Gentleman raises a range of issues, but I am afraid that the debate will not give me long enough today to open up Pandora's box on the differences between my constituent and others, although some differences are self-evident. I put it on record that the support from the Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe campaign for my constituent and his family has been 100% solid. On the differences between dealing with theocracies and what are supposed to be close allies, we have seen clear differences between the two cases come out politically over the past couple of years.

In the week before Republic Day, I made a plea to the Indian Government, and the judiciary, which is quite correctly independent, to reflect on the preamble to the great foundational document of the Republic of India that they will celebrate next week. Let us recall the words:

“JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and opportunity;”

and then of course:

“FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the Unity and integrity of the Nation.”

Those are fine words, befitting a great global state, which, if trends continue, stands to become a great global leader of the 21st century, but that will require not only economic might and demographic advantage but translating great sentiments into great actions: fair and open institutions that have the trust of the people.

This week we saw Jagtar's case again adjourned until March due to witnesses not being presented, just as it was in November, and those more well-versed than me in Indian legal matters think it could continue to be adjourned at eight-week intervals for some time. If the prosecution cannot produce witnesses, they are not only wasting everyone's time, but wasting the best part of my constituent's life.

Goodness knows we still have our problems with institutions on these islands, but that should never stop anyone or any political state striving to be better. In that spirit of self-reflection, I will bring my remarks to a conclusion by asking the Minister to think about changing their strategy. Neither the family or I doubt the commitment of the Government to raise this often and at the highest levels; yet here we are, five years on, having seen very little movement in the case. Indeed, only one of the nine cases involving Jagtar has advanced in any meaningful way. The current approach simply is not working.

When the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), conceded in a letter to the Leader of the Opposition that it was the Government's view that Jagtar had been arbitrarily detained, the family and all the many people interested in Jagtar's welfare naturally expected that that would be followed by action from the British Government. We know that the Government have called for the release of UK citizens arbitrarily detained abroad: will they now do so for Jagtar?

I hope by the time we hear from the Minister—maybe rather quicker than we hoped—we will have an answer to this straightforward question and others that will be brought forth by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. With miscarriages of justice such as this, it is often some time before victims and families see action; when we are seeing one continuing to take place before our eyes, then we must redouble our efforts to stop it. I put it to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Government can do their bit too.

That is the spirit of this debate. I look forward to hearing the voices of those who contribute, and they have the gratitude of the Johal family. I hope their voices will echo not just across the road to King Charles Street, but across the globe to India. We will not give up on Jagtar. It is time to set him free.

1.28 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and in particular to my co-chairmanship of the Indo-British all-party parliamentary group and of the APPG for India (Trade and Investment). I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) not only on securing the debate, but on his long campaign for his constituent. He has been diligent in seeking support and justice from both the UK and Indian Governments for a very long time on behalf of his constituent, as is absolutely right as a Member of this House.

Jagtar Singh Johal, who was resident in Dumbarton, was detained in India, I believe, on 4 November 2017. The charges he faces, as the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, relate to terror conspiracy cases. They relate to an outlawed militant group: the Khalistan Liberation Force. That is a proscribed organisation in India. Membership of such an organisation is a crime, if proven. I understand that Mr Singh has been formally charged in eight separate cases of assassination, terror and violence. Clearly, those are very serious offences indeed. The cases were investigated by India's National Investigation Agency.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We clearly have a bit of a disagreement. The Indian courts, the NIA and the police had five years to bring cases against my constituent for the charges against him, yet they have progressed only one of those, and even then, it was using evidence that was likely—whether the hon. Gentleman agrees with it or not—obtained using torture. Does he think it is time they actually brought a case to court and got on with it?

Bob Blackman: Justice delayed is justice denied. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that this case should proceed in court as fast as possible. We have to remember that in India, the judiciary is impartial and is based on the UK model. We should also be clear that keeping Jagtar in prison for this length of time without bringing charges and without proper process, so that he can either answer those charges or, indeed, be found guilty of them, is unfair and unjust.

Eddie Hughes: My understanding is that Jagtar got married relatively soon before he was arrested. This delay in justice being delivered is having an impact on not just Jagtar himself but his wife, who I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet when she visited Parliament. She must be distraught at this extended period, and that impact must resonate through not just his family but the entire Sikh community. I get regular representations from my gurdwara in Willenhall about their concerns, and I am keen to strongly advocate on their behalf.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, everyone associated—Jagtar's family, his friends and the Sikh community—will be very concerned about his safety and his being detained for five and a half years.

The concern here is whether Jagtar is indeed a member of and associated with this banned organisation. As I understand it, that has been thoroughly investigated by India's National Investigation Agency. That organisation has links in not only the United Kingdom but France, Canada and Italy. India's designated anti-terror court has taken cognisance of the charges filed against Mr Johal in these cases. My understanding is that he is presently in judicial custody and undergoing trial proceedings, as the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire alluded to.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Member has missed the point of this debate entirely. What we are debating today is not what Jaggi has been charged with. We are debating getting him home now, and that requires ongoing support from the UK Government, not an eight-week review, as we have been having.

Bob Blackman: I recognise what the hon. Lady says. One of the questions I have for the Minister is: can he confirm that Mr Singh has been given access to legal representation at all times?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: This is vital, because if he has been denied legal representation, that is a denial of his human rights. Equally, has the high commission maintained contact with not only Mr Singh but the Indian authorities, to establish exactly what is going on?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I am posing questions for the Minister to answer because I genuinely want to hear what the view of the British Government is on these points. The key here is the actions of our high commission in representing not only the hon. Gentleman's constituent but, importantly, a UK national.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I am sorry that I was not here for the first sentences of his speech. Is there not another area of concern here? As I understand it, having met Jagtar's brother the other day, one of the reasons the Indian authorities seem to be particularly keen on keeping him as part of the conspiracy allegations is that, as he is the only person who is not Indian, that is the only way they can make specific allegations about the others being engaged in an international conspiracy.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman suggests that this might be the case. We know that India—and we will be talking about Republic Day next week—faces a number of terrorist atrocities and terrorist attacks. We therefore have to be very careful when we are looking at what the Indian Government, the Indian police and their crime agencies are doing to combat that terrorism.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: In relation to the banned organisation of which the hon. Gentleman said my constituent was a member, he must remember that that so-called banned organisation was not banned until 2018, and my constituent was arrested in 2017. Rather than throwing accusations and aspersions without evidence, which would not stand in a court of law, does he agree that he should use his contacts in the Indian Government to ask them to bring forward witnesses and bring the case to court?

Bob Blackman: It appears that the hon. Gentleman now accepts the fact that Mr Singh is a member of a banned organisation.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No, I did not say that.

Bob Blackman: Well, it seemed me that that is exactly what he was alluding to. The fact is that under Indian law, Mr Singh has the right to bring his case to the courts. The accusations of torture—which, of course, would be illegal under international law—should be listened to in the Indian courts, so he should bring that case to the Indian courts through his lawyers and legal representatives. That is vital.

Can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that consular officers from the high commission have been granted access to Mr Singh more than 60 times during the duration of his arrest and detention? That means we are ensuring that the high commission is doing its job and that proper access and proper assistance is provided to our citizen, to ensure that we will eventually get to a conclusion of this case, however long it takes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As there are no further Back-Bench contributions, we will move to the SNP spokesperson.

1.37 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing another debate on this issue. He has advocated relentlessly and resolutely for Jagtar since his constituent's detainment over five long years ago. I am really pleased to hear the praise from across the House for his dogged pursuit of this case on behalf of his constituent. I also pay tribute to MPs across the House who have raised Jagtar's case and to the tireless advocacy of campaigners and Sikh communities across these islands, including in my constituency, which is home to Edinburgh's gurdwara.

The UK Government must recognise the strength and breadth of feeling on this issue. A Scottish and British citizen is the victim of a grave injustice. We cannot let up until Jagtar is safely home. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire noted, the UN has confirmed that Jagtar has been detained arbitrarily with no legal basis or justification and recommended that the appropriate remedy would be his immediate release. Transparency, due process and the rule of law have been absent in this case. That is a view held by the UN as well as various legal experts.

My hon. Friend eloquently cited the Indian constitution and appealed to the Indian Government to live up to its ideals. I sincerely hope that they will heed his call. He asked the Minister a straightforward question: will the UK Government call for the release of Jagtar, as they have done for other UK citizens arbitrarily detained? The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) stated that was his view, and it would be good to hear whether that was the official FCDO position, too.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Many of the representations I have received from constituents share my view, which is respect for India and its independent Government, respect for its constitution, and a natural concern about any form of terrorism in India or anywhere else, which has to be tackled. The concern that my constituents have expressed time and again—I have also related it in the Chamber before—is the lack of openness and transparency in the whole process. Just to add to what the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has said, from the earliest stage most were simply asking for adherence to due process. That clearly has not been the case, and that is why there is such concern around this case. The concern also relates to the openness and transparency of our own Government and their involvement in this case, too. The appeal today is for openness, transparency and due process, and I think that would result in the release of Jagtar immediately.

Deidre Brock: Perfectly put. I commend the right hon. Member for that contribution and agree with him. I have to say I was disappointed by the contribution of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) said, I think he has rather missed the point of today's debate, so I will focus on those parts of his contribution that I agreed with.

The hon. Member said that justice delayed is justice denied, and I agree with that. He said that keeping Jagtar in prison without pressing charges is unfair and unjust, and he has acknowledged that Jagtar's friends

and family continue to be deeply concerned about his welfare. I also welcome the fact that he asked for assurance from the Minister about whether Jagtar has had appropriate legal representation and the part that the high commissioner has been playing in all this.

Jagtar, his family and everyone campaigning for his release deserve an explanation as to why the Government have failed to implement their policy to seek the release of arbitrarily detained British citizens. Jagtar, as has been mentioned numerous times, has been detained for more than five years, and only one of the nine cases against him has proceeded in that time. The Government's current approach is simply not working.

The Government are of course categorically opposed to abuses such as torture and the death sentence, so surely it is in their interest to take swift remedial action and secure Jagtar's immediate release. Indeed, the UN special rapporteur on executions has made clear that in death penalty cases, where the detainee is detained on spurious grounds as a political statement or in circumstances of clear human rights violations, the home country should be making representations to the detaining state. The UK, it appears to me and many others, is failing in its duty to one of its own citizens by not doing so.

It should be highlighted again that in August last year, Jagtar's legal team, along with human rights organisations Reprieve and Redress, uncovered evidence suggesting that British intelligence agencies may have contributed to Jagtar's detention and torture by sharing intelligence with the Indian authorities. I believe a claim has been lodged in the High Court against the FCDO and the Home Office alleging unlawful sharing of information where there was a risk of torture. Rather than forcing Jagtar and his family to go through a long court process, the Government should acknowledge their role in his mistreatment and provide an apology to him and his family for the harm he has suffered.

Jagtar has bravely highlighted human rights abuses against India's Sikh population and has sought accountability for historical anti-Sikh pogroms. For that, he has endured the unimaginable trauma of being abducted in front of his wife, just three weeks after their wedding, and then being tortured into giving a false confession. It has been more than five years since the UK Government promised to prioritise Jagtar's case and take extreme action in the event of his torture. When will the Government make good on these promises? Will Ministers finally engage with the Indian Government to secure his release? I look forward to the Minister's contribution.

1.44 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for securing this debate and for demonstrating continuing and admirable tenacity in his support for his constituent and his family during this terrible time of imprisonment. He knows that he has the support of all of us across the House to find a just solution to this ongoing saga.

It is with deep regret that we are in this situation yet again, spending time in the House on this case, which should have been resolved some time ago. As my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) has said, we have had not just urgent questions, but statements, Westminster Hall debates and now this big Backbench Business debate. This matter has been the subject of debate by so many Members on so many different

occasions. What we would like to see from the Minister today is more clarity on whether this British citizen is receiving just treatment. That is what each of us can expect abroad and that is what many look to the Foreign Office for.

I agree with the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire about the ongoing steadfast support from the consular services in India, and I put that on the record on behalf of all Labour Members. The staff of the FCDO in India have sought consular access on many occasions and have been supportive, but the situation remains unsustainable. As shadow Asia Minister, I have raised the case directly with the Indian high commission here in London. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the Leader of the Opposition, and the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), have both met Mr Johal's family and made their own representations to the Government to urge that his case be resolved and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, to ask for clarity on the process.

We know that in a recent reply to a written parliamentary question to the Minister for the Indo-Pacific region, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), she admitted that no direct representations have been made on Mr Johal's behalf by the Foreign Secretary to the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi since the end of October 2022. Why not? Ongoing pressure in this consular case must be applied, particularly given that the former Prime Minister—it is a bit confusing when we start talking about former Prime Ministers, but I mean the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—accepted that Mr Johal was arbitrarily detained. The Minister, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) will have heard today the breadth of feeling of Members of the House. I am keen to hear his response in full to some of the questions raised by Members and I will press a couple of key issues myself.

Is the Minister confident that Mr Johal, a British citizen, has been treated fairly over the past five years? Is he at liberty to enlighten the House on suggestions of British Government secret service involvement in Mr Johal's case? Will he confirm that the Prime Minister will urgently discuss the case of Mr Johal in his next meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi? The saga has gone on for far too long, and we owe it not just to Mr Johal as an individual, but to the shared sense of justice, on the part of India and the UK, to resolve the issue. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras wrote in his letter to the then Prime Minister on 31 May 2022:

“The UK has a deep and enduring bond with India, and it is vital our governments work together to constructively resolve cases such as this.”

Can the Minister say whether Mr Johal has been treated fairly? Can he rule out the question of torture in this case? Can he confirm that this matter will be raised at the earliest convenience at the next meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and our own Prime Minister?

1.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire

[Leo Docherty]

(Martin Docherty-Hughes) for calling this debate, and I am grateful for the contributions of other Members, including the Opposition Front-Bench spokespersons, the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire for his tireless energy on behalf of his constituent. He paid tribute to the consular support received by Mr Johal and I agree with that sentiment. We are always terrifically proud of the consular staff in the FCDO. They have been particularly active in this case and we are grateful for their continued efforts.

It may be useful to confirm straight up that Mr Johal has had access to a lawyer since his arrest, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. On consular support, since his arrest in 2017, more than 50 such consular visits or calls have taken place, led by the relevant consular regional operations manager. We appreciate their work and I am pleased to report that Mr Johal received one of those consular visits this morning.

Colleagues will understand that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon is the Minister for India, but his being in the other place it is my pleasure to respond on his behalf. Let me begin by saying that this matter rightly continues to cause great concern across the House and the Sikh community. I recognise how incredibly difficult the past five years have been for Mr Johal, his family and his friends.

We want a resolution to this protracted and complex case. Let me assure Members that we are doing what we can at the highest levels to support Mr Johal and his family, and we will continue to do so. The Foreign Secretary did that with his counterpart Dr Jaishankar during his visit to India last October. During visits to India earlier in 2022, the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), also raised this case with Prime Minister Modi and Dr Jaishankar.

As I said, the Minister of State Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon continues to lead efforts on this case. He is in regular contact with counterparts across the Indian Government. He most recently raised Mr Johal's case with the Indian high commissioner to the UK on 13 December. Just this week, the Foreign Office's most senior official, the permanent under-secretary Sir Philip Barton, raised this matter with his Indian counterpart. More broadly, a working group of UK and Indian officials is discussing measures to improve support to all British nationals detained in India. We are in regular contact with Mr Johal's family to offer our support and updates on our engagement with the Indian authorities.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On engagement with the family, can the Minister confirm on the Floor of the House that his Government accept that my constituent was arbitrarily detained?

Leo Docherty: I will come to that in a moment. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has issued its opinion about Mr Johal's case. We take it very

seriously. We are focused right now on giving him the welfare support that he needs and we will continue to raise our concerns about his case directly with the Government of India.

The former Foreign Secretary met the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire and Mr Johal's brother last June to discuss the matter. The current Foreign Secretary is due to meet the hon. Member and Mr Johal's brother later this month. Our consular staff are in weekly contact with Mr Johal's family to support them as best we can through this difficult time.

Mr Johal has made allegations of torture and mistreatment during his detention. We take such allegations very seriously. Let me be clear: torture, and cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment are prohibited under international law. We have consistently raised concerns directly with the Indian authorities at the highest levels. That includes requests for an effective, impartial investigation into the allegations, for Mr Johal to have access to an independent medical examination, and for his right to a fair trial to be upheld. He is facing multiple charges; the trials have started for some of those. Our consular staff will continue to monitor the developments closely throughout the process.

Mr Johal has been accused of offences for which the maximum sentence is the death penalty. The UK is strongly opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances. I therefore appreciate how deeply distressing the situation must be for Mr Johal and his family. Our consular staff in India visit him regularly to offer support, and did so most recently this morning.

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): I wanted to check whether the review would include what was reported in *The Times* just last year that the UK security services had some involvement in Mr Johal's arrest. Will the review include that as part of the investigation?

Leo Docherty: I will not comment on intelligence or security matters on the Floor of the House of Commons, in adherence to the Government's long-standing and settled practice.

Consular staff often attend Mr Johal's court hearings in India as observers, most recently on 13 January. They are in regular contact with Mr Johal's legal representatives.

Amy Callaghan: I am going to ask the same question as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes): will the Minister confirm on the Floor of the House that Jagtar Singh Johal has been arbitrarily detained in India?

Leo Docherty: As I said, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has issued its opinion about Mr Johal. We take this matter very seriously. We have consistently raised our concerns about Mr Johal's case directly with the Government of India. We are focused on doing everything we can to provide him with consular welfare assistance.

Last February, lawyers acting for Mr Johal issued a civil litigation claim against the UK Government in the High Court. These are ongoing legal proceedings and we must let them run. As such, I cannot comment on that matter, in line with the settled and long-standing practice of the Government.

There are calls on the British Government to do more, particularly on the Floor of the House today. Our actions in this case and all such cases are tailored to the specific and complex individual circumstances. Where we consider that there is credible evidence that an individual is arbitrarily detained, we will continue to work publicly and privately to support them and tailor our assistance to the circumstances of the case. We are committed to doing what we can to most effectively assist Mr Johal. In his case we have raised our concerns, including his allegations of torture, with the Indian Government on more than 100 occasions, and we will continue to do so. In 2021, the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and Prime Minister Modi committed to work together to resolve long-running and complex consular cases. We have made some progress, including a recent case regarding two British nationals. We will continue to work together to that end.

The UK relationship with India is very important and is based on trust and collaboration. India is a key partner on the world stage, including through its G20 presidency. That strong relationship allows discussions on challenging topics. That is an important part of the deep, mature and wide-ranging relationship that we continue to have with India. Complex consular cases and other sensitive issues form a regular part of our dialogue with India and will continue to do so. We will continue to make those representations on the behalf of all British nationals.

1.58 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being in the Chair in this important debate. I thank Members on all sides of the House who have contributed not just in the debate but in the last five years in support of my constituent. What I hope to see, and I do not think I have heard it yet from the Minister, is a change in strategy to be more frank and robust when raising Jagtar's case, because the current, I have to say, softly, softly approach is not working. When I first raised the case in 2017—it seems a lifetime ago in politics, especially in this House—I was assured from the Dispatch Box that the Minister just stood at that the UK Government would take “extreme action” in the case of a UK citizen's being tortured. The time for action has now passed, after a lengthy period.

I am disappointed that accusations and aspersions about my constituent have yet again been made in the House. I note that the Indian Prime Minister was a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a paramilitary Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation in India that was banned three times in the Indian republic, but I do not see anybody taking him off the streets hooded or arbitrarily detaining him or half of his Cabinet, given their membership of that organisation. I hope that in our meeting with the Foreign Secretary next week, what could not be spoken about in the Chamber today may at least be said privately.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the imprisonment of Jagtar Singh Johal.

Russia's Grand Strategy

2 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Russia's grand strategy.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate again, because I secured a debate last year about the same topic. Then, I outlined Putin's global policy and I set out how Russia was threatening Ukraine as part of a campaign of blackmail and hybrid warfare directed at the Americans and NATO. I explained how Russia's grand strategy was being conducted across the whole spectrum of foreign, defence, security and domestic policy. I discussed Russia's warlike strategic headquarters at its national defence management centre at the old Russian army staff HQ on the Moskva river. Today, I make the same fundamental point as I made last year: Russia has a grand strategy, but we do not.

The idea of global Britain demands a global strategy, which means grand strategy and must be a whole-of-Government enterprise. It is fair to ask, “If Russia has an effective grand strategy, why has it not done better in Ukraine?”, because when the war started, all the assessments predicted that the Russian army would be much more successful. The answer is simple: Putin's decision bypassed the usual strategy process and went against the views of his general staff.

This is about the difference between policy and strategy. Policy is the aim—the political objective—and strategy is the interactive process by which that policy objective might be achieved. Putin was driven by his obsession to subjugate Ukraine. He overrode the general staff's strategy process and disregarded the limitations of the army. It could be considered odd that he did that, but he had used lethal force before with great success. In Georgia and Crimea, surprise and speed brought him a quick victory, although on those occasions the general staff were behind him; in Ukraine, they advised him against going to war.

Of course, Putin is not the first to override his general staff in pursuit of an obsessive policy; the same was Hitler's undoing. It seemed, until a week ago, that it might also be Putin's, but he has learned from his mistake and has rediscovered strategy. Last week's appointment of the chief of the general staff Gerasimov as the overall commander brings the general staff back into the planning and command chain. Other commanders, warlords and private military companies will be brought under his authority. As Gerasimov gets a grip of things, I am afraid that we must expect to see Russian performance in Ukraine improve considerably.

Russia is not giving up, so Ukraine's survival will now depend on western military and economic help being delivered a lot more rapidly and in far greater quantities than it has been so far. Unfortunately, the approach of the UK's current foreign and defence integrated review refresh process is underpinned by an explicit but premature assumption that Russia will lose in Ukraine and will then prioritise investment in maritime, particularly sub-surface, as well as space, cyber and special forces. It argues that Russia will not invest meaningfully in land forces, but our eastern European and Nordic colleagues do not share that view.

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

The integrated review refresh risks over-optimism that would allow us to tilt our posture and capabilities away from the most immediate threat in Europe and, instead, towards long-term gambles on technological superiority and a focus on the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS and the tilt to the Indo-Pacific are certainly policies, but they are not backed up by any strategy process to determine if they can be achieved with the limited ways and means that we have available.

The policies of global Britain and AUKUS are admirable and, conveniently, cheaper, but they are not enough on their own. Painful though it is, we need much stronger land power as well. We must still gear up to defend the UK and to deter a war in Europe against a peer enemy. Of course, Russia will invest in sub-surface, space and cyber, but it shows no sign of dispensing with large-scale ground forces, heavy armour and artillery. If anything, the Ukraine war has convinced the general staff of the need to reinvest in their army.

The Nordics and the Poles know that Russia is a land animal. Strategic missile submarines excepted, Russia sees its navy as flank protection for a land war and its air force as the third dimension of that land war. Despite evident lack of progress and perceived weaknesses, Putin shows no signs of intending to stop, of scaling down his demands, of looking for a way out or of making serious proposals for peace. In fact, Ukraine is expecting a new all-out assault in the spring or even sooner.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In the debate last year, I made the point that I felt that we were already in a cold war, which some disagreed with. Does my hon. Friend think that our European allies have changed their position on that or is there still a resistance to accepting that a new cold war is well and truly under way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I think that we are in denial of not just a cold war, but a hot war. The hot war that is being conducted in Ukraine is laced with rhetoric and invective about NATO being the threat and about the United States of America provoking that threat, so NATO and the United States must somehow be defeated in this war. If we do not understand that Putin is now conducting a hybrid and political war against Europe and NATO, backed by a hot war in Ukraine, we are not yet living in the real world.

If the process of reinvigorating Russia's armed forces and preparing for a further assault on Ukraine is not derailed and Putin is successful, by 2024, the west will face a more formidable Russia that believes that it can establish its place in a future world order by force of arms. This is a long-term strategic challenge that requires a long-term strategic response from the UK Government, all European Governments and NATO.

Putin's strategy depends on time. We all admire Ukraine's bravery and agility, which have left the Russian army in something of a quagmire, but it would be an epic tragedy if we now allowed Russia the time to mass its forces, so that its brutal war of attrition could become overwhelming. It is crucial for the west to increase the tempo of its supply of weapons systems to Ukraine, so that Ukraine, rather than Russia, can be first to develop the mobile formations necessary to break the current

battlefield deadlock. The reality is that Russia's whole grand strategy is on a knife edge and the next few months could be crucial.

We should not be deterred by Putin's so-called red lines. In war and crisis, red lines are political and flexible. We proved that when Russia's build-up to the invasion last year crossed several NATO red lines, and we did nothing. Likewise, Putin's incorporation of Donbas into the Russian Federation was intended to set up a red line of Russian territory being attacked, but when Ukraine attacked, it turned out there was no red line.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On the point about how we in the west might have set some red lines, I thought at the time that the west was not being firm enough in the red lines it was laying down. What we saw in mid-February was the US President and others talking only about sanctions, and how there would be nothing more than sanctions as a consequence of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I regard the United States as our closest and most important ally and personally I love the United States of America, but on its response to this crisis—it has been voluminous compared with that of the rest of Europe and a lot of money has been devoted to it—its signalling has been very weak. What matters in wartime is not what red lines we set; it is what we actually do.

I am afraid our own Government made a terrible error when we set a red line about the use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013, and then what did we do? We backed off when chemical weapons were used. The effect of that has been to weaken the influence of the United States, the United Kingdom and the whole of the west in the countries that really count in this war as potential allies or neutral states—for example, the Gulf states, which despaired of our lack of resolve in that conflict. Red lines are less important than what we do, and what we must now do is send far more matériel into this conflict to support the Ukrainians, so that the Russians are deterred or fail to achieve what they attempt to do.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On my hon. Friend's point about doing as opposed to just saying, with which I entirely agree, does he agree with me that part of this is that the German Government should now release their legal hold over the export of Leopard tanks from European allies to the Ukrainians to allow them a chance to counter-attack?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I certainly think that is the case, and I think the constant fear of our escalating the conflict has been misplaced because Putin has escalated the conflict anyway. There is nothing we can do to prevent him from escalating. In fact, the signal we have sent by being too timid and too slow in sending support into Ukraine has encouraged him to escalate. There is no deterrence in timidity, which is what too many western Governments have shown.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): To drag together that point with something my hon. Friend said earlier, surely such timidity also follows failure to have the capability to be more assertive.

In other words, now that their defence budgets have been stripped out, western Governments are worried that any attempt to try to show that they are more belligerent, shall we say, exposes the very fact that most of them are simply incapable of delivering any of that belligerence at all.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I entirely agree with that, but in more direct response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), the timidity of the Germans not just to release their own tanks, but to allow the tanks of other nations, such as Poland, to be sent into the conflict to support the Ukrainians sends more than a signal of timidity—it is appeasement. I am sorry to use that word, which I know has a loaded connotation, but it is appeasement. However, we must congratulate Germany on having come a very long way from the days of Gazprom being chaired by a former Chancellor of Germany and Angela Merkel making Germany dependent on Russian gas as a matter of policy. We have come a long way, and we should welcome the fact that Germany has committed to spend €100 billion more on defence, but we are still yet to see what that really means, and it means nothing if Germany is not prepared to help send heavy armour into this conflict.

If I may say so, we have committed to send 12 tanks, but why not 120 tanks? What are our tanks for? Are they there to sit around on Salisbury plain and in Germany to decorate the British Army's capability, or should we tool them up and get them into this conflict so that the taxpayer can actually get value for money out of this investment? If necessary, we can launch an urgent operational requirement to acquire some more tanks to replace those that we will probably not ever see again in our own country.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I will, but I do want to press on, and I will probably be overrunning my time very shortly.

John Howell: I will try not to interrupt my hon. Friend for too long. Does he agree with me that the timidity on the part of the UK is exemplified by the fact that when I asked Zelensky how many air defence missile systems he had, he said 10%—that is all? When I got back to the UK, there was an email from a well-known Cabinet Minister saying, “Be very quiet about this, because we do not want to stress the fact that we are giving him so few.” Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a prime example of such timidity?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: We should not trash what the Government have done, which is considerable, but we should point out that the failure to do much more—much more—is going to cost us in the short term, the medium term and the long term. We must also dispense with the false hopes that some kind of regime change would be likely to reverse the Russian urge to control its near abroad, or to use its army as a tool for suppressing dissent and keeping the country together.

My conclusion is that if the UK is going to help lead the NATO alliance, which protects Europe against Russia, we need meaningful land power to make an effective contribution, supported by mobile air cover and a Navy

to deliver the Army to where the action is. For that, we need a new mobilisation system to come out of the integrated review refresh, and a procurement system to back it up that looks much more like a system of urgent operational requirements, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford suggested during the statement earlier this week, than the absurdly slow and costly peacetime procurement process that we somehow insist we have to maintain, despite its delivering—or not delivering at all—equipment, at vast expense, with limited capability.

This demands a drastic—even revolutionary—change of UK grand strategy, which I suppose is why we seem to avoid having one and, I suspect, why the IRR is stuck where it is. In the long term, how do we find a way to stop burgeoning state-backed health and welfare systems crowding out defence and security spending? In the short term, Whitehall in general and the Ministry of Defence in particular must accept that, if we continue to spend defence money as we have done over the last 20 years, we really are lost. We need a complete revolution in defence acquisition and procurement, making it look and feel much more like a continuing series of urgent operational requirements—a system based on wartime emergency procedures that, historically, delivered much cheaper and more timely equipment. We need to regain the ability to adapt our force structure, kit and tactics to outmatch an active enemy, just as the Ukrainians have done and the Poles are doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am drawing to a close. There are growing pockets of awareness and belief in the value of strategy in the civil service, the diplomatic service, the security services, the National Security Council, the MOD, the Foreign Office and No. 10, but Whitehall as a whole is still miles away from the kind of capability and capacity for constant strategic analysis and assessment that would provide Ministers with the right questions and might lead them to the right answer. Why do we not have a Minister in the Cabinet Office for national security who is responsible for answering on grand strategy? Without the right apparatus and the right culture in government, we will always be behind the curve of events, as we seem to be now, and mis-appreciating what is really happening. We need to find the right answers to the new and evolving threats the UK and the whole of the free world must confront before it is too late.

2.19 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I agree with nearly everything the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) has just said, but I am going to make a very different speech, not to disagree with him, but just to put a different tone to this. I have believed for a long time that it is essential to Russia's grand strategy that it must expand: we knew that in 2008 and again in 2014, and, frankly, we should all have been thoroughly aware of it long before 24 February 2022 when the second invasion of Ukraine happened. I am absolutely clear that we must make sure that Putin and the Russian Federation loses.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to get more materiel to our friends and allies in Ukraine. I do not, however, think that is just a matter for the UK and I worry that sometimes the UK provides, let us say, 12 tanks and Spain provides two and France provides three and none of them work together. The time has

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

come for us all to sit down as allies and ask how we are going to ramp up production of perhaps one or two brands of tank so we are deliberately and solely constructing them to get them to Ukraine as fast as possible. People have been arguing for that for at least a year now, so it is a shame we have not got on with it.

Mr Francois: The hon. Gentleman is right because logistically that would make it far easier for the Ukrainians. Leopard is the obvious choice because it is used by so many other allied countries, but German export law currently prevents that unless the Germans waive it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that they should do that to allow the Ukrainians the Leopards they need?

Sir Chris Bryant: Yes. I do not do this very often but I was saying “Hear, hear” earlier in agreement with a point the right hon. Gentleman made. I am reluctant to be too down on the Germans, however, for the simple reason that they have had to make a very dramatic and sudden about-turn in their whole understanding of their defence policy, but they do have to get over this hurdle. Many other countries in Europe want them to and are eagerly pressing them to, and the time is long past for them to do so. Perhaps we need a European security treaty to deal with some of these issues and get that materiel to where it is most needed and in a way that it can be readily used.

I want to talk about something slightly different: how we can help Ukraine rebuild. So far, along with many other countries in Europe, we have frozen but not seized assets. On 9 September 2022 a joint statement by the World Bank, the European Commission and the Government of Ukraine estimated that the current cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine was \$349 billion. That is now a four-month-old estimate and the sum will grow exponentially as the war continues. We have all seen the pictures of what has happened in Dnipro; we know of the railways, roads and bridges that will have to be reconstructed, let alone the schools, the housing and the rest. Ukraine is going to need a very substantial amount of money.

Alec Shelbrooke: The NATO Parliamentary Assembly was in Washington in the first week of December, and at that time 42% of residential properties in the whole of Ukraine—not just on the frontline—were uninhabitable. That serves to put some flesh on the hon. Gentleman's point.

Sir Chris Bryant: That is very helpful and when the Foreign Affairs Committee was in Ukraine last February, just before the second round of the invasion, we were visiting villages which were being reconstructed, and we were wondering whether that was a wise policy, but of course people need homes. So there is a very significant need: Ukraine estimates Russia has caused \$1 trillion-worth of damage since the start of the full-scale invasion last February and that is not allowing for the costs in Crimea and parts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Under international law Russia will owe Ukraine reparations at the end of this war—I hope the Minister will be able to confirm that—as was recognised by a United Nations General Assembly resolution passed on

14 November. About \$350 billion-worth of Russian central bank reserves have been frozen by democratic countries around the world, and £26 billion of that is frozen in the United Kingdom. Those figures come from the central bank annual report. Based on the estimates of the World Bank, the European Commission and the Government of Ukraine, the amount that will be owed to Ukraine by Russia as reparations at the end of the war—we could argue it is already owed now—is likely to be several times greater than the central bank reserves theoretically belonging to the Russian state presently frozen worldwide. So it is safe to assume that the central bank reserves we have frozen in the UK are already owed to Ukraine under international law. I would argue that it is a question of when, not if, they will be spent on and in Ukraine. On 30 November 2022 the European Commission President confirmed plans to use €300 billion of frozen Russian central bank reserves as well as more than €19 billion of Russian oligarchs' funds for the reconstruction of Ukraine, and I applaud that decision.

The UK has so far provided £3.8 billion in aid to Ukraine in the first eight months since the second invasion, but the central bank reserves we are holding in the UK are six times that amount. It is time that the UK Government passed legislation to repurpose frozen Russian state assets so they can be used to aid Ukraine during and after the war; if the Government do not do that, perhaps some Back-Bench MP will bring forward a ten-minute rule Bill on 7 February to do it.

On the whole I do not like Governments seizing other people's assets; on the whole it is a bad idea, but there are situations in which we choose to do it, such as when the assets are clearly unexplained wealth that has almost certainly come from corruption. In essence, the UK can find money from three places to support Ukraine. It can come from taxpayers, but taxpayers have funded £3.8 billion already so there is not much spare cash in the bank so far as I can see. Secondly, it can come from frozen oligarch funds. There is a difficulty with that as those are the assets of private individuals and seizing them is likely to be a costly and drawn-out process. The legislation necessary to seize such private assets would necessarily involve a court supervision—because we believe in the rule of law—in order to protect the oligarchs' rights to their property under the European convention on human rights, or for that matter under normal British law. I am sure these cases will also be defended by some of the richest, most legally savvy and deep-pocketed people on the planet, and the resources available to the Government agencies tasked with confiscating those assets would inevitably be very modest. So I think both those routes are pretty much exhausted at present.

On the other hand, seizing state assets of the Russian Federation will be quick. It is a political decision and there will be no lengthy lawsuits. Unlike oligarch assets, these are state assets, specifically the £26 billion of central bank reserves clearly belonging to Russia, a nation deemed an aggressor by the United Nations, that has been ordered by the UN General Assembly and separately by the International Court of Justice to withdraw its troops from Ukraine, and which has failed to do so and continues its aggression against Ukraine. These funds could be made immediately available to Ukraine should we adopt the legislation to do so. Canada already has similar legislation in place.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): The hon. Gentleman's case would be considerably enhanced if international courts were to find the Russian military guilty of war crimes during their conduct of this so-called special military operation. Does he agree that that would provide even further justification for what he is arguing?

Sir Chris Bryant: It would undoubtedly add a fifth leg to a four-legged stool, but a four-legged stool is strong enough. I do not want to have to wait for that moment to be able to do this, because Ukraine needs the money now to be able to put food on the table and proceed.

There are two further issues that I ought to knock off in case the Minister says, "Oh, well, yes, this is a very good idea but it is terribly difficult to do, you know, and I can't think that we can possibly get round to doing it", which is what Ministers nearly always say. That was not meant to be an impersonation of the Minister currently on the Government Front Bench; it was an impersonation of any normal Minister when they get to the Dispatch Box and hear somebody proposing something difficult or courageous.

First, there is sovereign immunity. State assets are almost always protected from seizure by the concept of sovereign immunity. However, there have been exceptions, such as to satisfy damages awarded by international courts and arbitral tribunal. I would argue that Russia's continuing refusal to comply with international human rights law—and this goes to the point just made—by attacking civilian housing and infrastructure, and its wilful refusal to follow orders of the International Court of Justice and the United Nations General Assembly are ample grounds for creating such an exemption.

There is also a point about retaliation. Some argue that if we seize their assets, they may seize ours. To be honest, I think it is pretty likely that the vast majority of British assets in the Russian Federation have already been lost, written off or expropriated by the Russian Government.

Finally, some say that countries may choose not to keep their reserves in the United Kingdom if they believe that they can be seized. However, if we severely restrict when reserves can be seized, that concern is minimised. Furthermore, if we acted in concert with our allies to seize the reserves, as we did when we froze them, we could create a powerful disincentive for states to engage in unlawful acts of aggression. I think we should do that. The reserves of an aggressor would never be safe, as there would be no country with a stable currency to protect them.

In the end, we want to ensure that a war of aggression, which has never been formally declared to be a war crime in itself, is seen to be a way in which an aggressor loses their assets. I urge the Government to consider that process carefully so that we can ensure that Russian state assets go to Ukraine as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

2.31 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), who made some powerful points. Here we are again debating Russia's strategy. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex

(Sir Bernard Jenkin), who held a similar debate a year ago. It was a year ago that I and, indeed, others in the Chamber predicted that Russia would invade Ukraine. Few believed us. That reflects a poor understanding of Russia as well as of Russia's strategy and what Russia stands for.

When we play the board game Risk, we quickly appreciate how difficult it is to defence the largest continent. It covers 11 time zones and, over millenniums, its sheer size has made it vulnerable to invasion. That has come from the Vikings, the Mongols, the Teutonic order, the Polish, the Lithuanians, the Napoleonic French and twice in one century from the Germans. Russia eventually appreciated the value of choosing a strong, central, authoritarian leader to hold its disparate principalities together, backed by the Orthodox Church, pursuing a policy of expansionism. Simply put, Ivan the Terrible pushed east, Peter the Great pushed north, Catherine the Great pushed south and, of course, Stalin pushed west. That is the Russian mindset: if we are not expanding, we will be attacked.

After world war two, perhaps we thought that things might be different. It took the US diplomat George Kennan's observations of Joseph Stalin's re-election speech—there were no other candidates—to make Washington realise that America's wartime ally was going back to its old ways. His "Long Telegram", as it became known, formed the cornerstone of America's post-war grand strategy called "containment", which eventually won the cold war.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, we naively hoped that Russia would perhaps again join the international fold. Sixteen years later, when President Putin addressed the Munich security conference in 2007, we did not require another long telegram to interpret his clear intentions: Russia was resorting to type. The west ignored his blatant warnings and, only a year later, Putin began redrawing the map of eastern Europe, beginning with Georgia.

Richard Foord: I agree with the right hon. Member that Russia uses its size to bully and intimidate other countries. He may recall that, last May, Dmitry Kiselyov used his Sunday night show to talk about how Russia has the capability to

"plunge Britain to the depths of the ocean".

With Russia's approach of singling out the UK, does he agree that we must stand strong with our NATO allies, given that collectively we have so much more strength as 32 NATO countries?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that intervention, which takes us back to the first speech. It is clear that we continue to be spooked by the rhetoric from Russia. It requires political will to stand up, rekindle that cold war statecraft and look our adversary in the eye, conscious of the escalatory ladder. Today, I ask: when will the penny drop?

Today's conflict is not just about Ukraine. Our post-world war two global order was built on the pursuance of democracy, accountability, freedom and the rule of international law. That has never looked as fragile as it does today as both Russia and China have openly broken away from those objectives, not just pioneering a more authoritarian approach to governance but encouraging other countries to follow their lead.

[Mr Ellwood]

We should finally accept that the elites in both Russia and China want to see not just America but the west weakened. So it is welcome news that we finally see some serious NATO hardware heading Ukraine's way, with greater resolve to stand up to Russia. Once again, I welcome the UK leading in that, ever pushing the envelope of acceptable international support for Ukraine, but as I hope the debate illustrates, we continue to limit ourselves to tactics and military assistance. We do not think enough about strategy.

The conflict is not likely to end any time soon. Russia's ability to endure hardship is far greater than ours in the west. Putin wants to drag the conflict out, so I offer this strategy to help conclude the conflict in 2023. First, let us agree the mission. The ramifications go well beyond Ukraine. Let us all agree what the mission is and what success actually looks like.

Secondly, as I have said so many times in the Chamber, let us secure UN safe haven status for the port of Odessa so that all, not just one fifth, of those vital grain ships can reach international markets and lower the cost of living everywhere. Thirdly, let us establish a major Ukrainian armaments factory in eastern Poland. Gifting kit is absolutely the right call now, but it is not sustainable in the long term, so we should let Ukraine develop its own equipment, whether it be the Leopard or anything else, in eastern Poland.

Fourthly, let us list the Russian state-sponsored Wagner militia group as a terrorist organisation. Fifthly, let us directly sanction President Putin. He is responsible for the war, so let us freeze his personal assets as well. Sixthly, as Ukraine will not be joining NATO any time soon, let us invite Ukraine to join the joint expeditionary force, which is the critical security umbrella that will help deter Russia from attempting to invade in the future.

Finally, to further leverage our leadership and support for Ukraine, let us appoint a senior UK-Ukraine envoy, answerable directly to the Prime Minister, who would help co-ordinate Whitehall support and align our efforts with those of our international allies. The first duty would be to organise a major Marshall plan conference in the spring and begin post-conflict assistance planning. Those are seven strategic objectives to help put the fire out and stand up to Russia.

I will conclude by shining a rather sad light on our own defence posture. We are heading into another cold war, more dangerous than the last, and it saddens me to say this, but we are ill-prepared militarily for the threats coming over the horizon, particularly when it comes to the British Army. Three critical components that contribute to the quantity and quality of our land warfare capability and more widely to the full spectrum of armed warfare are the tank, the armoured fighting vehicle and the recce vehicle.

Our tank, the Challenger 2, was introduced 25 years ago. Back then, we had over 900; today, we have cut our main battle tank numbers to just 148. Those will now finally gain an upgrade, but that will not be complete until 2030. Our armoured fighting vehicle, the Warrior, was introduced 30 years ago—a competent but now dated workhorse, able to carry infantry and protect them with its 30 mm Rarden cannon. All 700 are being axed and replaced by the Boxer—a wheeled, not tracked,

vehicle—and we are choosing the variant that has no turret, so no serious firepower. Those will not be completely introduced until 2032. Finally, there is our recce vehicle, the Scimitar. That was introduced over 50 years ago. It should have been replaced by the Ajax three years ago, but a litany of procurement problems means that it is still unclear when that will happen.

I make it clear that as the European security picture deteriorates, all this is frankly a mess—a dog's dinner. No wonder the head of the British Army, General Sir Patrick Sanders, broke ranks last week to say that this is all unacceptable. Our Army is now too small and it is using equipment that is already obsolete. The new integrated review must address the sad state of our land forces and their combat effectiveness. We need a bigger defence budget or we will learn the hard way how our economy is impacted by the failure to invest in and utilise our hard power.

To conclude, my message to the House today is: let us look beyond Ukraine. International storm clouds are gathering once again and on our current trajectory the world is set to splinter into two dangerously competing spheres of ideological interest. What Russia is attempting to do here is just the beginning. There is a worrying absence of international leadership—of strategy—as to how we collectively respond. This is no time for strategic ambiguity and no time for quibbling about our defence posture. Containment, once again, is required. Our actions on the international stage in the past earned us a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Eight decades later, how the world has changed! Let us show that we deserve to keep that seat at the top table and rekindle our political will.

2.42 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this important debate once again. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Russia's second invasion of Ukraine on 24 February was a critical moment in our history. It firmly dispelled any myth that Russia was "misunderstood" or acting in the interests of its own territorial integrity. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and its land grab in Georgia, were clear warning signs of yet further aggression to come. In the past decade, Putin's Russia has purposely sought to overturn current rules-based relations. It looks backwards, to a Russian-dominated Soviet bloc, which divided the European continent and sought complete control over the people. Although we must continue to address the geopolitical threat created by Putin's regime, we cannot lose sight of the real-world human consequences of Putin's war.

Today marks the 330th day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Over the course of less than one year, the lives of Ukrainian people have been entirely transformed. What Russia sees as a grand geopolitical strategy has become a tragic daily reality for millions of Ukrainian people.

Before Christmas, I had the privilege, along with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), of joining the British charity Siobhan's Trust to provide humanitarian aid to the dispossessed people of Ukraine. David Fox-Pitt from

Siobhan's Trust joins us in the Gallery today. He is a shining example of soft power and British diplomacy—dressed in a kilt, with his three pizza ovens and volunteers from all over the world, he feeds over 4,000 people a day. Travelling to the newly liberated villages, which are sometimes without power and water, he provides pizza, hot drinks and cheer. His charity, his work and his volunteers are to be commended.

I went to the recently liberated region of Kharkiv and I saw first hand the brutality of Putin's regime. But I also saw the Ukrainian people, brave and resilient, showing immense fortitude in the face of extreme adversity. "We will win—it will be hard, but we will win", they told me. We know that Putin's regime rightly fears the immense resolve of the Ukrainian people. It is for that very reason that Putin has chosen to hold his sham referendums. He is desperately trying to convince his own people that the invasion is in fact an act of defence. The attempt to drive this form of rhetoric is baseless and reflects the growing, not diminishing, strength of the Ukrainian people.

Putin's desperation can be felt just as clearly in his attacks on Ukrainian national infrastructure. Over past weeks, energy infrastructure in the Kharkiv region and in Kyiv has been badly hit. As the Russian regime continues its offensive on civilian life, the evidence of mounting war crimes becomes clearer and clearer. When we visited Ukraine in December, I saw the sheer scale of the atrocities and destruction that simply cannot be translated on to TV screens or into print.

In Kharkiv, I saw the numerous blocks of flats gutted by missile attacks—people's homes, targeted and destroyed. I saw the burnt-out Russian tanks in Tsupivka. The whole village was devastated; its churches and schools were bombed. People's houses were peppered with the shrapnel from bombs and bullets, in newly liberated Ruska Lozova. In Slatyne, I saw the school destroyed by missile attack. There was a huge crater where part of the school once stood, with live missiles still visible in the frozen ground. The whole area was littered with land mines, left by the Russian army—so many that we were told only to step on the snowy tyre tracks or pre-existing footprints. For innocent Ukrainians, land mines planted by the invading forces will cause untold devastation and heartbreak for decades to come: Russia's grand strategy laid bare as nothing more than barbarism.

I met a local volunteer infantry unit—men who, prior to the war on Ukraine, were just ordinary citizens. One volunteer soldier told me that removing the dead bodies was the worst: the people in the houses and buildings killed—murdered—by the Russians. He said that moving the bodies was very hard, and showed me a photograph of a dead little boy laid out on a bench. The boy's father had clung on to him. The father would not let go and had to be pulled away from his son. "It is hard," the soldier said. He told me about his men who had found it too hard—who had gone home and shot themselves. He told me that he was worried for his men and that help is needed for them now.

People told me time and again that Ukraine needs more weapons, more modern tanks, more effective missile systems and armoured ambulances. They desperately need more training for paramedics so that the wounded can be treated before they arrive, sometimes dead, in hospital. But what is clear is that the war crimes committed against these innocent people will be the true legacy of Putin.

The determination of the Ukrainian people cannot be overstated, but the humanitarian situation is critical. Temperatures in Ukraine over winter hover at minus 3° and can plummet to minus 20°. With the Putin regime targeting infrastructure necessary for basics such as cooking and the heating of homes, people are facing impossible decisions. Many are left with no other option than to flee their homes. Over 155,000 Ukrainian refugees have entered the UK so far. Putin relies on generating fear among the Ukrainian population. Standing side by side, both in this place and with our European allies, we must continue to provide the necessary support to those fleeing the war.

As Putin attempts to redefine the borders of Ukraine with illegal referenda, the UK must continue to aid Ukraine in its fight to maintain sovereignty over its own territory. Russia's land grab is not just a matter of politics; it is a fight for freedom and the basic right to live free from tyranny and aggression. Preventing a victory for Putin is necessary not only for the people of Ukraine; it is vital to contain an expansionist, totalitarian Russian state.

International solidarity on this issue remains critical. Putin must understand that he is isolated—he is alone. The UK and my own Bradford South constituency stand proudly with the people of Ukraine. This House and the United Kingdom must continue to play its part. Slava Ukraine.

2.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When I started the process in the Council of Europe that had Russia expelled, I was unsure where it would end up. One of the things I have done since then is to introduce what I hope will turn into a new convention or treaty that will hold Russia to account for its aggression against the environment. Human lives and human aggravation are already accounted for, but there is nothing to be able to hold it to account for aggression against the environment.

Secondly, I have asked for a current affairs debate on two countries: Serbia and Kosovo. Why have I asked for a debate on Serbia and Kosovo? Because it is clear to me that Putin is making a big effort to make Serbia a second front to take our attention away from Ukraine. I think he is also doing it as a result of wanting to expand Russia. It is a pretty good example of that.

In 2015, the Russian state media, Sputnik, began broadcasting anti-EU and anti-NATO disinformation. It began broadcasting it not from Russia, but in the western Balkans from its regional base in Belgrade. Only at the end of last year, on 13 December, a rally was held in Belgrade to demand the intervention of the Serbian Government in Kosovo. Members may think there is nothing to be said about that, but many of the people attending that rally were waving Russian flags and chanting hateful and racist comments.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: In fact, it is even worse than that. The state-controlled media in Serbia simply broadcasts Russian propaganda and has recently accused Ukraine of killing its own civilians, when in fact those civilians were being killed by Russian missile attacks.

John Howell: I am glad my hon. Friend has taken away a large part of what I was going to say, which has made it much easier to concentrate.

[John Howell]

Russia and Belarus have provided Serbia with 14 MiG-29 fighter jets. Eight are donations from Belarus and six are from Russia, and Serbia has bought the rest. Russia has also beefed up Serbia with 30 T-72 tanks and 30 other armoured vehicles. The Pantsir-S1 air defence system has reportedly also been sold to Serbia, along with the longer-range Buk air defence system. A shipment of Kornet anti-tank missiles has also arrived from Russia. The co-operation in military activities has gone from 50 in 2016 to over 100 joint military exercises in 2021. It is no wonder that, according to the US Department of Defense, Serbia provides the “most permissive environment” for Russian influence in the Balkans. When Kosovo took reciprocity measures regarding the temporary licence plate issues in 2021, Serbia escalated the military provocation, flying Russia-donated MiG-29 fighter jets and continuing to make available Russian helicopters on the border with Kosovo.

We know the short-term reasons why Russia is doing this: to stop Kosovo having a role to play in the EU and in the Council of Europe. We have defied Russia in the Council of Europe and given Kosovo seats so it is able to participate in debates, even though, for the moment, it cannot vote; that is because of the opposition of Serbia and that will be dealt with.

This is a serious situation because it affects not just Kosovo. We must not forget that Serbia is also influential in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hon. Members may have seen that, only last week, in the Republika Srpska, the Muslim part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader, with great pride said that he was giving Putin the highest medal of honour for his “patriotic concern and love for Republika Srpska.”

I ask you. Members can judge for themselves what that concerned.

We are dealing with some very unpleasant people. The Republika Srpska has the site of the genocide of Srebrenica. We are not allowed to call it a genocide because the Serbians do not like that term being used for it, yet it was a genocide of almost 8,000 Muslim people killed in that area.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Our inability to call a genocide is not just limited to Serbia. Our biggest problem is that we simply will not and cannot call any action a genocide, even when it demonstrable, until it goes through the United Nations, yet other countries such as America have declared genocides in China; we sit silent.

John Howell: It does not have to go to the UN; it could go to a reasonable court. In two recent cases in Germany—I have forgotten what the particular issue was—a genocide was declared and that has allowed us to pursue that. That is the position taken by a number of charities that take the lead in this area.

In order to keep an eye on what Russia is doing, we need to have our eyes open, we need to have eyes in the back of our head and we need to be aware of all of the incidents that are occurring around Europe. It is a great shame that the effect of Russia is creeping out of places such as Serbia and is affecting attitudes in the west to places such as Kosovo. I very much regret that and I hope that we can take that issue forward in supporting Kosovo against Serbia.

2.58 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this debate, which has the same title as the debate last January. In preparing for today, I have read what he and other Members said then. I think it is very generous to talk about a Russian “grand strategy” because I regard Russia’s leadership in the Kremlin as an opportunist outfit. Russia loves the idea of a divided west and when it sees us divided it takes full advantage, especially when it can smell western weakness, a lack of will or disinterest.

I am not going to come up with any fine words on this subject—certainly none as fine as those of a predecessor MP for Tiverton, Lord Palmerston. In 1858, he wrote:

“The policy pursued by the Russian Government has always been to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy or want of firmness of other Governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it was met with decided resistance, and then to wait till the next favourable opportunity”.

I would like to draw on a couple of examples from the past 125 years in which we have continued to see imperial Russia or the Soviet Union taking an expansionist approach, only to be pinned back by western democracies and others. I would also say that we should avoid throwing all caution to the wind, because the root of Russia’s approach, in my view, is injured pride—not just in the Kremlin, but among most Russian people. Finally, the House should think not only about a grand strategy for the UK, but about a strategy for NATO. We need to work collaboratively with our NATO allies to ensure that the alliance is working on a strategy.

We all know that Putin’s historical essays have been entirely discredited by historians, but they are useful to us. They are a useful guide to his intent: I think he models himself on some of his predecessors from the 17th and 18th centuries. At the end of the 18th century, Catherine the Great is supposed to have said of her enormous land empire:

“I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them.”

That certainly fits in with what went on during her reign: after she came to power, the country’s westernmost border moved from east of the River Dnipro to west of Kyiv, so we can see that Putin has some stand-out role models from the time of the Tsar and the years before that.

What we have been seeing in Russia in the past 15 years is a restoration of pride following a period of imperial collapse. Of course there is no direct comparison with the UK, but if we want a sense of how Russians feel, some Conservative Members may remember how they felt in the early 1980s when there was, perhaps, a restoration of British pride after having had to manage the economy in the 1970s with the aid of a loan from the International Monetary Fund. It is that feeling that your country has been put down and is coming back—the rising of a phoenix from the flames.

Yet in the Kremlin, Russia is intimidated by the lack of attractiveness of its centralised political tradition: its post-communist neighbours are attracted by western co-operative structures. Before last year, I thought that those in the Kremlin who are responsible for Russian grand strategy knew the difference between coercion and violence—coercion might involve the threat of violence, but would stop short of using force—but we have seen that that is not true.

This debate is so useful for thinking about grand strategy partly in terms of ends: if we think of grand strategy in terms of ends, ways and means, it is useful for us to think today about the Kremlin's intent. There have tended to be reasons why Russia has on occasion seemed willing to permit Ukraine to be independent of it. In 1918, the first world war having ended, Lenin said:

"We need both hands free",

and permitted Ukraine to become independent. In 1991, Yeltsin had his own motive for enabling Ukraine to become free: to sideline Gorbachev as President of the Soviet Union.

But that is history. I was so encouraged to hear the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, saying in December 2021 that

"that's the kind of world we don't want to return to, where big powers had a say, or a kind of right, to put limitations on what sovereign, independent nations can do".

Sir Chris Bryant: Surely the key moment was the signing of the Budapest accord. Was there not something of a failing on the part of this country and others? It was an innocent failing, but we signed up to something that was so nebulous that it could never really be enforced, although in theory it looked as if we were guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Ukraine, in exchange for which it surrendered its nuclear weapons.

Richard Foord: I entirely agree. The Budapest memorandum was not worth the paper it was written on. It had no legal standing; even the word "guarantee" has different meanings in different languages, and the Ukrainians could certainly have interpreted it very differently from the British, Americans and others who drafted it.

During military conflicts in which the UK has been engaged over the last two or three decades, we have heard the claim that we have no quarrel with the people of "X"—insert Serbia or Iran—but only with its Government or, often, its dictator, but I do not think we can repeat that claim in this instance. When we look at opinion polling in Russia, it is pretty staggering to see how much popular support there is for the war in Ukraine. According to what has been said by Ukrainians I have talked to in the last couple of weeks, they regard the fact that we talk in the west about Putin or Putin's war as successful propaganda on the part of Russia. They would much prefer us to talk about Russia in the round, and attribute responsibility much more broadly than to just one man in the Kremlin. I also think we need to avoid driving our competitors and our adversaries into Russia's orbit; not least, we need to avoid knocking China into Russia's open arms.

We need to think of the UK's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in terms of a NATO strategy, rather than the UK's grand strategy alone. In that context, it is worth recalling a 19th-century musical hall song. You will be relieved to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I shall not attempt to sing it. Members will have heard the lyrics before:

"the rugged Russian Bear

Full bent on blood and robbery, has crawled out of his lair...

We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do,

We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!"

That is an anachronism today. The UK cannot boast the ships, or the money or, certainly, the men in the Army.

Let me end with another quotation, this time from Winston Churchill. We will all have heard his famous characterisation of Russia as

"a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma",

but it is less well known that he went on to say:

"perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest. It cannot be in accordance with the interest or safety of Russia that Germany should plant itself upon the shores of the Black Sea".

We need to bear in mind that Germany is cautious because it has good reason to be cautious, given its history. Instead of criticising our allies, we should come up with a strategy, with our allies, that sees Ukraine defend its borders and defeat Russia.

3.8 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on once again bringing this important debate to the House. I also congratulate all the Members who are attending it, many of whom were here for the previous debate a year ago.

"Russia's grand strategy" is an interesting title, which leads to the question of what constitutes the counter-strategy. As was said a year ago and as has been said by several Members today, where the current actions have come from has been laid out along the line by Putin, whose actions are pretty clear. If you are a citizen of Lithuania, probably Belarus, east Poland or the Caucasus, you will notice that you are mentioned in Putin's essay of 20 July, and you will certainly not sleep easily if you think that we will step back and let Russia win the battle in Ukraine.

I have a concern that many have touched on which is that a certain amount of hubris is starting to develop among western nations when they say, "We will win in Ukraine." I very much hope that that is true, and we are doing everything we can to do so, but it does not seem to take into account the way in which Russia is now regrouping, re-strategising and re-energising, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex said in his opening speech. We have to take a strong look at how we are going to supply Ukraine and how it is to move forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) has already made the point about Leopard tanks. European defence as a whole needs to take a long, hard look at itself. There can be no excuse for countries to say, "We will supply the tanks that are needed, but we need Germany to approve it" and for Germany to say, "Well, it's up to the US." It really is not up to the US. It is really up to nations within Europe. What concerns me, and Putin will be well aware of this when we are looking at the grand strategy, is that he will see that article 42 of the Lisbon treaty—the permanent structured co-operation, or PESCO, commitment—and where that leads to could spell a real problem for NATO.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I reflect on the irony that one of the reasons why some of us wanted to leave the European Union was that it was insisting on having its own

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

defence policy and armed forces, ostensibly in order to be independent of the United States, because of course it is NATO that guarantees peace in Europe and the EU would be incapable of doing so on its own. So it is a bit of an irony that Germany is now saying that it cannot send tanks to Ukraine until the US approves. It rather gives the lie to the idea that the EU is capable of even thinking independently of American defence policy.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I do not seek to raise an EU Brexit issue here. I want to highlight where I think there is a real concern about the future of NATO, what Putin will be looking at and why it is so important that we do not allow Russia to be victorious.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) made a good speech, and I congratulate him on researching the speeches that we all made last year in this debate. It is important to know the context. He said that the Budapest memorandum was not worth the paper it was written on. That is an important statement to make because with Putin, nothing is worth the paper it is written on. When people talk about moving towards a negotiated settlement, what does that actually mean? If we get commitments on paper from Putin, it is frankly a waste of everybody's time. The only way this conflict will be resolved is by winning it militarily.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that reaching a negotiating settlement with Putin risks his doing exactly what he did last time? He negotiated a settlement and that just gave him time to regroup and come back stronger with yet more violence.

Alec Shelbrooke: I totally agree. I think a negotiated settlement is a form of appeasement because I just do not believe that it will work in the long run. I genuinely believe that if we say, "OK, however it may be; we will look over that section of it", it will just give him time to regroup and rearm and decide what he is going to do next.

The war that is now taking place represents a huge threat to the European nations because, some would say, of the ambitions and ideology of article 42—PESCO—"What is wrong with that?" It says that you would procure as a whole; that there would not be replication of procurement, with countries buying the same equipment rather than focusing on where it will go.

When I talk to our American allies at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, they certainly think developing the European defence fund is a good thing that will up spending to 2%. As we are seeing now, one of the biggest risks to NATO in its history as a military alliance is that a country such as Germany—the only country that has the equipment, or that can manufacture the equipment, needed for an operation—is able to say, "Sorry, no," or, "We are not going to do it."

Article 42 exists and PESCO has been established, so NATO needs to work out its protocols before these issues become prevalent in a procurement generation or two—in 20 or 30 years' time. It has to be addressed now because, fundamentally, it is Russia and Putin's strategy to probe the strength of western military capability.

I am very worried about Germany's attitude of waiting to see what the US does, because it is not President Biden's core instinct to make such decisions. When he was Vice-President, he and Obama had a big falling out over the surge in Iraq. And when he was a Senator, he wanted less American intervention. Intervention is not his natural instinct. I praise the Americans for the amount of money President Biden is signing off, but a situation is developing in which other European countries are hiding behind a delaying tactic, and that delay is a problem because Putin needs time to rebuild and restrengthen.

As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) rightly said, the rebuilding cost is getting bigger and bigger, probably exponentially. I have cited some of the statistics, and the cost directly reflects on our citizens. He said taxpayers have already paid about £3.2 billion, but the cost is much greater in the price inflation we have seen for energy, fertilisers, food and crops. We all know the reasons, and it will not be resolved while this continues.

Upping military capability and spending in this country, and in Europe, is vital because it will improve our taxpayers' long-term cost of living. Drawing on my experience as a procurement Minister, industry needs a far longer commitment to armament manufacturing than the sporadic increases and decreases we have seen. Industry cannot make the commitment needed to manufacture armour, weaponry and other capital equipment on a continuing basis if it is not sure how long the contract will last. That is straightforward business sense, and it is why we have to make a long-term funding commitment, and we need to encourage Europe to do so, too.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I agree with everything the right hon. Gentleman is saying. Unfortunately I missed last year's debate, but this is an honest, simple question. Back in 2017-18, when I was new to this place, were we having debates about the request from Ukraine to help it arm itself? I do not know that we were. If we were not, why not?

Alec Shelbrooke: We were having those debates, not least in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. There was a Rose-Roth seminar of the Parliamentary Assembly in Kyiv in June 2016. The Ukrainians could not have been clearer to the allies who were there about what the invasion of Crimea meant, and it was brushed aside because there were too many vested interests in the way energy policy was going at the time and, quite frankly, because there was disbelief that anything like this would happen.

Sir Chris Bryant: As I understand it, when Foreign Office officials made that point to the then Foreign Secretary, who subsequently became Prime Minister, he pooh-poohed the idea of arming Ukraine.

Alec Shelbrooke: We can find examples from across Government over that period of time. When the invasion happened just under a year ago, many conversations took place, and still take place to this day, along the lines of, "Well, Putin is terminally ill." "Look at Putin's face, he has a terminal disease." "This is the act of a dying man." People were trying to make excuses for him to understand why he did it. They should just accept

that the man is a fascist dictator who is trying to expand the Russian empire. There is the answer; it is as simple as that. But still our natural instinct says that this is so far beyond what anybody would expect that there must be another reason behind it.

The hon. Member for Rhondda is correct that people, whoever they were—in this case, it was the then Foreign Secretary—simply did not believe that this would happen. That was true among many of our European allies, but given what we now know, we must be aware that it will go beyond Ukraine. There is no point in saying that Putin would not dare to move into NATO territory. If he wins in Ukraine, then, yes, he will. It is not just Putin, but the Russian set-up—the Russian leadership. There are people beneath Putin who will carry on this war if he were to go. This involves not just one person, but a regime.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for setting the scene. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) clearly warned this House on many occasions about the situation in Crimea, but hesitation led the day on that occasion. With this debate on Russia's grand strategy perhaps what we are really looking at is where we are today and the strength that we have through NATO and the US all standing together. That is the positive attitude that we want to send out from this debate, so that Russia understands that, today, we will not take any more and that this is the line in the sand. Clearly, Ukraine's battles are our battles as well.

Alec Shelbrooke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the point that I make is this: Putin will observe this situation today with Germany and the tanks and he will also observe the European direction in defence policy. He will then start to think, "Well, how much will they push back?" The allies will sit there and say, "He won't dare to invade NATO territory." But it was only a year ago when I thought that he would not invade Ukraine. I can stand here and say that; I just did not think that he would. I thought that he was probing to see how the west would react. I thought that he was seeing what our reaction would be, but that his attention was on another part. I think at the time I was saying Azerbaijan, Armenia—mineral-rich areas. I think he thought that if we did not react to Ukraine, we certainly would not react in the Caspian sea. I just did not believe that he would do this in Ukraine. Why did I not believe it? It was because, rather than looking at what was staring me right in the face, I decided not to believe it.

We must accept right now that we need to enter into solid, long-term contracts. We need to do that with support from all parts of the House. Her Majesty's Opposition must be in lockstep with the Government in our support for Ukraine and in recognising European defence policy. The Opposition have moved on from where they were a few years ago. There is no question about NATO support now, which should be welcomed across the House. It is very important that this country, this Government and this House have the same views. Therefore, there should be no reason not to invest.

I shall be drawing my remarks to a close soon, but let me just say this before I do. We know that it is important that we do everything that we can, but let me explain why. When I was Minister for defence procurement, I went to North Yorkshire and met the troops and the Ukrainians being trained by our armed forces. I was

lucky to be there on day one when a batch of people came in. They all came from different aspects—one was 65 and one 18—but what did every single one of them have in common? They all said, "I am not losing my country." That strength of feeling for a country is worth a huge amount, but it still needs to be backed up with equipment.

Russia's strategy is clear: it will carry on expanding beyond Ukraine. It will take no notice of any treaty that is put in place. Only military capability will stop it. Europe must know that this is not the end, and it must ensure it is moving in lockstep on manufacturing and recognising—as I said a year ago, and I was pooh-poohed—that the cold war has started. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex said, we are also in a hot war, but there is a cold war along an entire border, and that costs.

As I said last year, we must get back to spending the sums we spent at the end of the cold war, when we were spending 5% of GDP on defence. How we do that is a matter for different budgets and different questions, but the reality is that we will have to, and we will have to bring other countries along. If we are to defeat the Russian grand strategy, we need a Europe-wide strategy, and that starts with ensuring that we have the commitments in place for funding, for the military and for the equipment that others need, as well as for our own defence.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. There are five right hon. and hon. Members wishing to participate in the debate and I need to call the Front-Bench speakers not later than 4.30 pm. My guess is that everything that needs to be said individually can be said in 10 minutes.

3.25 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I will take your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, because most of it has already been said—although that has never stopped us from repeating it in this place.

It is a real privilege to speak in this debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on obtaining it. I always feel slightly worried when the word "grand" is used of anything, because if we are not careful it covers a whole lot of more tactical aspects that we forget about. However, he is right that this is a debate about the grand strategy of what was once the Soviet Union, has since been broken up, and is now Russia.

To begin with, I want to dwell on a remarkable charity named Siobhan's Trust that my hon. Friend—I call her my hon. Friend—the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and I visited and worked with. Interestingly, although we are not supposed to say this, the man who set up and runs the charity, David Fox-Pitt, is sitting in the Gallery right now. He is the epitome of what is very best about this United Kingdom. When all the refugees were pouring across the border and lost in the middle of Ukraine, having been struck, the team upped sticks from where they were in Scotland, with their trucks, and headed straight for the border to try to provide food and sustenance to those people.

Siobhan's Trust got there weeks ahead of Oxfam and all the rest, and crossed the border because the team realised there were more refugees in Ukraine than were

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

coming out. They raised the money themselves, got support from companies such as Dr. Oetker from Germany and Italian pizza companies, and got trucks with pizza ovens on. They now go to places as close as maybe a mile or so from the Russian border—in fact, quite recently they went into Kherson, just after it was liberated, and fed people there. That was where they came under shellfire, and I suspect that was because the Russians knew they were there and what they were doing.

As my hon. Friend said, the charity feeds 4,000 people who are dispossessed, living in freezing conditions, often with no heating or hot water, sometimes with no water at all and certainly with no electricity. The one high spot of their day will be the arrival of the trucks from Siobhan's Trust, led by wonderfully eccentric British people dressed in Ukrainian kilts. The Ukrainians did not know they had a kilt until Siobhan's Trust arrived in Ukraine, but now they have a national kilt, and I hope it will become something that is worn on the fashion catwalks of Europe to celebrate—[*Interruption.*] I know I am not a fashion icon, but nevertheless I would be prepared to wear it.

The beauty of this is all the work the charity does. We sometimes forget about this when we get into the grand strategy, but when we were over there, as my hon. Friend said, we realised what it really means when we talk about grand strategy. It means seeing the destroyed buildings, blocks of flats that had people living in them when the rockets hit; it means being with the soldiers when they have to clear up the dead bodies in villages that have been shelled and rocketed; it means never being able to come off a single-track path because the Russians have strewn anti-personnel mines all over the fields and houses in the hope that people will enter them. That is what it really means. It means that this barbaric, dictatorial, fascist crook called Putin has wrought devastation and damage on ordinary people whose lives were pretty poor in the first instance.

One of the Ukrainian guides said to us, “The thing you don't understand is that we don't have and have never had the kind of support and money that you have. When you look at our villages that are devastated, you see pretty low-standard villages, but what has happened is that the Russians have moved all the troops they have from the east of Russia, where the living standards are even lower by a long way. For them, this is Manhattan. They rob every single house and everything that's in it, and that which they can't rob, they rape. They use rape as a tool of war and a tool of suppression. That is why we evacuated so many of our women and children from these villages—because we knew what was going to happen to them if and when the Russians came.”

As the hon. Member for Bradford South said, we went on to visit the military hospital in Kharkiv, which was very sobering. The hospital gets rocketed at least two or three times a week. When it gets hit, the people who work there carry on, despite the explosions around them, with what they are doing. Interestingly, they said to me, “Please can you go back and tell your Government that we need armoured ambulances desperately, because we cannot get the wounded to the hospitals quickly enough? We need that more than almost anything else.” Secondly, they said, “We desperately need help in terms of paramedics, to stabilise people before they get into

the ambulances. You cannot understand the difference it makes to whether or not we save their lives. We just don't have enough. If only Britain could lead the west in providing people who can educate and train paramedics for us urgently, that would save more lives.”

Thirdly, they said, “The problem now is that so many of our soldiers are committing suicide because they cannot cope with the total devastation and the mental breakdown that comes from combat stress. The UK and America are the two countries that probably know the most about this, because of Afghanistan and Iraq. We desperately need some help from the UK to educate and train our mental health specialists in how to deal with this. It's a huge problem.” It is a huge problem in America and here in the UK, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex has helped us get in touch with Combat Stress.

Matt Western: Given the right hon. Gentleman's experience in politics, I am interested to know what he thinks the UK and other countries could provide beyond what he just described in terms of humanitarian and infrastructure support to the people of Ukraine.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: There is a huge amount that can be provided from what are essentially wealthy nations. We are wealthy nations, and when we compare ourselves with where Ukraine is, we are very wealthy. It is just the determination of what we want to do. In Ukraine, they desperately need arms; they need supplies of ammunition and weapons. There is no question about that, but they also need—and this is about humanity—help to survive in all these areas. The brave men and women who are fighting on the front deserve all the support they can get, but the bit that is missing when we debate this issue is the people behind who have been devastated and shelled and have no homes. We need to find a way to help them as well. I beg the Government to talk to their counterparts in Ukraine and find a way to get the rest of western Europe to supply the things that Ukraine requires that do not have a gun on them but will save many, many lives if they are provided.

I completely agree that Russia's grand strategy is to expand. It has never got over losing the land that it held in the Soviet Union, and it wants it back; it has been absolutely clear about that. Strangely enough, countries in the west—Germany is a good example—have failed to recognise the real threat of becoming addicted to something that is supplied by a country as volatile and ill led as this. I come back to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. How in heaven's name did the rest of Europe allow that to happen? How in heaven's name did they allow Germany to bully them into believing it was none of their business? All of us—every country—takes a share of that. It should never have been allowed to be built, and I do not exclude my own country in that regard. It showed a sign to Russia that as addicted as we were, we would never do anything against Russia. That was as important as supplying them with weapons, because Russia then saw us and said, “You know what? They put money first and energy second, and that energy is from us. They will never come and stop us.”

In reality, this is our war—we cannot forget that. It is as much as if we were standing on the frontline with the Ukrainians. We have to be there with them in spirit, and we have to give them the weapons, because they must

win this war. The thing that haunts me now more than anything else from that visit is the one phrase they use, which is, "Please don't forget us." They say, "We are fighting for our freedom and our lives, and we are worried that you are getting bored of what is going on over here. Please do not forget us." All I simply say in the House today is that we must not forget them. We must be with them. This is our war; we must win it. Slava Ukraini, heroyam slava.

3.35 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): First, I congratulate my Essex neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this debate.

Following on from what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has just said, it is too easy to forget. Every day since last February, first thing in the morning, when I get dressed for work, I put on my blue and I put on my yellow, and that is because I do not want to forget. Each morning as I get dressed, and every evening as I go to bed, I think about the people of Ukraine. In particular, I think about the women. I think about the mothers of the 1,000 children who it is estimated have been killed, the mothers of the 13,000 children who have been abducted, the mothers of the sons who have died on the military lines, the wives of those who have died in the military, the brave women who themselves are fighting in the military, the Interior Minister who died in the helicopter crash yesterday, and, of course, the women, young girls and grandmothers who have been raped. We must not forget the people of Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine, however, is not just about a fight over Donbas, Crimea, Kherson, Kharkiv or Kyiv—these names that have now become so familiar to us. It is also the battleground where the war between those of us who believe in freedom and democracy, and those who thrive off autocracy and oppression is being fought out. We know that if Russia wins in Ukraine, it will not be the end. As many other right hon. and hon. Friends have said, Serbia, neighbouring countries and Baltic countries know that they risk being targeted next. What I see as Putin's eye of Sauron will have them in his sights.

Russia is not alone in this—other authoritarian states such as Iran and China are watching how we and others react, and they are ready to make and accelerate their own actions. While it is welcome that, in recent votes in the UN and other places, very few countries have been ready to put their hand up and say, "I am behind Russia, I back Russia", it is noticeable that a number of countries still sit on the fence. They are watching how this plays out, to see which way they should act—do they side with freedom-loving democracies or with those more autocratic states? Many of these countries are in the global south.

We also know that Russia's war does not limit itself to military weapons. The military weapons it has used with impunity have caused such devastation. The word "barbaric" was used earlier, and that is the right word. There are other weapons that Russia uses. It uses misinformation as a weapon of war, and we and our allies need to do more to counter that, especially that Russian narrative that Russia is only reacting to NATO aggression and US aggression. Even this morning, the Russian embassy in London was retweeting that message.

Russia uses misinformation to try to win favour in the middle east and many other countries in the global south. We must counter it.

Russia has also disrupted global supplies of food, fuel and fertiliser. It is using hunger and cold as a weapon of war. At a time when the world is trying to recover from the economic aftermath of covid and to address the devastating impact of climate change, Russian action has forced many more millions of people—the world's most vulnerable people—across the world into the hands of starvation. It does that deliberately, because Russia knows that food insecurity will cause even greater instability, conflict and migration.

Russia has used forced migration as a weapon of war to destabilise western Europe. Let us take ourselves back to the winter of 2015 and early 2016, and Russia's support for the war in Syria. The then head of NATO accused Russia and the Assad regime of deliberately weaponising migration in Syria. A million refugees arrived in western Europe, which created a panic that European countries were not ready to deal with and were ill-prepared to manage.

I remember sitting in the European Parliament at the time, listening to debates and seeing at first hand how Russia was pitting one European neighbour against another. It was driving wedges between countries and fuelling racism and the rise of the far right and the far left. It was fuelling extremism. It was undermining those in the middle ground, the centre right and the centre left. I have no doubt that that played a major role in our Brexit referendum. I remember sitting at the time, watching that play out and seeing it as a deliberate act by Russia to use that migration to destabilise our alliances in western Europe.

In Africa there are often academic debates about whether Russia has a strategy, as it is often difficult to join the dots to see what influence Russia is having. But time and again we see how Russian influence targets a country where there is instability, and then Russian action will go in there and niggle at the wounds, to destabilise that country further. Recent events in Ukraine have clearly shown how the Wagner Group is not an organisation at arm's length from the Russian leadership, but a proxy for Russian aggression. Public information shows that the Wagner Group is active in so many countries across the Sahel, from east to west. As the Secretary of State for Defence said at the Dispatch Box this week, it is an organisation that we know is guilty of many war crimes.

There are many press stories about the horrors the Wagner Group has committed in Africa and its criminal actions: massacres in Mali, illicit diamond mines in the Central African Republic, and exploitation of gold in Sudan. It has been suggested that Wagner was behind the Russian flags that we saw waving during the coup in Burkina Faso, and much of the anti-French propaganda put about in traditional francophone Africa. There are recent stories about whether Wagner mercenaries are also active in the dangerous conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This matters to us in the UK and our stability in western Europe.

Philip Dunne: Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the Wagner Group is recruiting convicts released from Russian jails for that purpose? It is arming some of the most dangerous people in Russia to spread terror around the world. That could affect all of us.

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree. Not only is the Wagner Group using Russian criminals; it is also recruiting in Africa and other unstable parts of the world such as Afghanistan, and using those people to fight these wars.

This matters to our security, because instability in many of those African countries will lead to migration, and that, of course, will lead to people making that dangerous journey on small boats to our country, which puts pressure on us and our own economy. It also puts pressure on our international development budget. Russia knows that. It knows that migration will force us to spend that money at home and not to help out in the very countries that it seeks to destabilise and that we want to stabilise. I say again, for the third time, that the Wagner Group needs to be proscribed as a terrorist group. Some people say that, if it was, it would make it more difficult for it to recruit. I was delighted to hear the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), joining me in that request. I do not see any downside to it.

We need a holistic strategy. As part of that, I urge the Minister to look collectively at all the evidence that we have about the Wagner Group from all corners of the world, to build a comprehensive picture of its actions, and to seriously consider proscribing it as a terrorist organisation. He should make sure that our comprehensive strategy will counter and neutralise the threat that it poses.

3.45 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I congratulate my fellow Essex MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), on securing this vital debate and on ably introducing it. As he rightly reminded us, we debated Russia's grand strategy just over a year ago, on 6 January 2022. During that debate, several Defence Committee members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson), predicted that Russia was increasingly likely to invade Ukraine.

The Chair of the Committee, who spoke well again this afternoon, particularly—I am sad to have to say—about weaknesses in British Army equipment, presciently reminded the House about Russia's actions:

“All this, of course, is unacceptable to the west and to NATO members, which makes the prospect of an invasion ever more likely. That is the immediate threat to Ukraine.”—[*Official Report*, 6 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 220.]

In the same debate, I said:

“I fear that the European skies are now darkening, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the winter weather...Russians traditionally admire strength and despise weakness, and what they now perceive is a weakened NATO lacking in resolve to assert its democratic right to collective self-defence. The next few weeks are likely to be very telling in that respect.”—[*Official Report*, 6 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 229-30.]

At the time, some commentators laughed at us or derided us at hawks, but in the phrase immortalised by Nigel Farage, “they're not laughing now.” Barely a fortnight later, Russia invaded Ukraine.

Interestingly, especially given that Ukraine abandoned its arsenal of ex-Soviet nuclear weapons after the break-up of the USSR, we hear little these days from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament or many of the others who naively argued for unilateral nuclear disarmament by

the United Kingdom and our allies. Even unilateralist SNP Members, who are no longer in the Chamber—perhaps they are preoccupied by their private civil war about independence and identity politics—have recently become somewhat subdued on that point. The sorts of people Lenin once described as “wise fools”—so-called intellectuals who help to make Russia's arguments for it—are now predominantly keeping their heads firmly below the parapet, at least while Russia continues to commit the most appalling atrocities against unarmed civilians, including women and children, on an almost daily basis.

Nevertheless, the invasion of Ukraine has proved a disaster for Russia and its people, if not yet for its President. Russia has become a pariah state; even China and India are softening their supportive rhetoric and would clearly like to see an end to the war. Even if President Putin were to be removed from office tomorrow, however, for whatever reason, we could not realistically expect the sudden release of Alexei Navalny and the flowering of liberal democracy in a country that simply has no such enduring political tradition throughout its entire history. For most Russians, even now, the brief easing-up under President Yeltsin was a rather chaotic aberration that lasted only a few years and was completely at variance with the historical paradigm of highly authoritarian rulers, stretching back centuries to Peter the Great or beyond. Part of Russia's grand strategy for hundreds of years has been that of highly autocratic rule over a relatively servile population. So we would be naive in the extreme to believe, even if Putin were to be deposed, that we could drop our guard against a highly aggressive and militarised state—one with no compunction whatever about killing civilians or committing barbaric war crimes, and which retains thousands of nuclear weapons to this day.

That prompts the question: what should our own grand strategy be in response? Obviously, unlike Ukraine, which gave up its—something it must now bitterly regret—we should maintain our own nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantee of our security. We should strengthen the cohesion of the NATO alliance, including welcoming in Finland and Sweden as rapidly as possible. We should also encourage our NATO allies to significantly increase their supplies of equipment, also now including heavy armour, to the Ukrainians, who are ultimately fighting for our freedom, too. So the Germans simply must stop passing the buck, if for no other reason than that, if they carry on like this, no one will ever buy military equipment from them ever again.

Put bluntly, if we do not stop the Russians in Ukraine, we will have to stop them in the Baltic states or in Poland, and that means an all-out conflict between Russia and NATO, which is far better avoided, not least by Germany itself. The respected NATO secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, has recently warned that the conflict in Ukraine could lead to NATO being dragged in. As he put it in an interview with Norwegian broadcaster NRK on 9 December last year:

“It is a terrible war in Ukraine. It is also a war that can become a full-fledged war that spreads into a major war between NATO and Russia. If things go wrong, they can go horribly wrong.”

He is right.

The United Kingdom Government's—our Government's—own integrated review, published in the spring of 2021, correctly identified Russia as our major adversary,

but it has since clearly been overtaken by events. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a total game changer in security terms, so the whole planning paradigm through which the ongoing refresh of the integrated review is being conducted has to alter accordingly. The integrated review took too much risk up front in order to strengthen our defences in a decade's time—time that we may no longer have. We made a similar conceptual mistake with the 10-year rule of the 1920s and early 1930s and we cannot afford to repeat that error.

As time is short today—in more ways than one—suffice it to say that we now need to rethink our whole approach to a shooting war with Russia, potentially even some time this year and not in 10 years' time. That means new thinking conceptually, strategically, militarily and industrially, coupled with a genuine sense of urgency—we need to get on with it—to examine how prepared we really are to fight a possibly protracted conflict with Russia. All this is just in case Trotsky was right when he famously warned:

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

In summary, if we are to deter a wider war, rather than have to fight it, which I am sure is what the whole House and indeed the country would prefer, that means having armed forces that are highly trained, brilliantly equipped and backed up with clear political intent to use them, if required. That means increasing not just our defence spending, though we must, but our preparedness to fight with minimum further strategic or even operational warning. It also means ruthlessly examining our broken procurement system and asking how many long-delayed key programmes can now be rapidly accelerated as urgent operational requirements. Frankly, we will not deter a man like Vladimir Putin with £4 billion tank programmes that do not work, submarines that are years late, frigates that are even later, destroyers and aircraft carriers that keep breaking down, or airborne early warning systems that are years overdue and do not even work properly when they turn up.

The Romans, who knew a thing or two about armed conflict, had a saying: *si vis pacem, parra bellum*—he who desires peace should prepare for war. That could almost be NATO's unofficial motto today. If we genuinely desire peace in Europe, which we all do, we had better start realistically, not just theoretically, and urgently preparing to fight for it—just in case.

3.55 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this debate for a second time. Looking at what was said a year ago, I think there was some foresight then and, if greater attention had been paid at that time, we might not be in such a bad state today. I do, however, want to differ slightly from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who said it was not just Putin—it was the whole of the Russian people. We should not demonise the Russian people. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) said in his very good speech, the Russian people have suffered terribly under the Tsars, the Bolsheviks, the Nazi invasion, communism and now under Putin. They have never known democracy and freedom. That is the tragedy that they face.

Putin is a final successor in that long line and the warning signs were there early on. Putin was originally thought to be a manager who would restore stability after the rather chaotic Yeltsin times and would not interfere too much with the oligarchs. That did not last long. We know he called the oligarchs in and made it clear to them who was now in charge.

We first saw the signs in 2006 with the murder on British soil of Alexander Litvinenko. If anybody wants reminding of that, there is a very good ITV dramatisation with David Tennant available now. We saw it again with the war in Georgia in 2008, when the west stood by and did very little. An exceptionally good documentary by Norma Percy, a superb documentary maker, is about to be screened on the BBC. It is called “Putin, Russia and the West.” I was able to see a preview of the first episode and strongly recommend it. She looks at the 2013 eastern partnership summit when Yanukovich went to Vilnius to sign the agreement that would have led to Ukraine's membership of the European Union. Just before he signed, he got a call from the Kremlin, was told he was not allowed to sign and he did not. That sparked what became known as the Revolution of Dignity at the Maidan and led to 100 people being shot down by snipers from hotel roofs. Shortly after that, Putin took advantage and Crimea was invaded. Again, we did not do nearly enough. Indeed, Barack Obama, US President at the time, when asked about the invasion of Crimea, condemned it but said:

“Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbours...Russia's actions are a problem. They don't pose the number one national security to the United States.”

If ever there was an invitation to Putin to carry on, that was it. Actually, we know—this comes out in the documentary—that the description of Russia as a “regional power” infuriated Putin because he wanted to restore what the Soviet Union had been: the second major player in global power. That has always been part of his strategy.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) asked if these matters had been debated. I had a debate in 2014, just after the Crimean invasion, drawing attention to the threat. You, Mr Deputy Speaker, participated and made some very helpful remarks in the debate. That led to the British Government's Operation Orbital, in which we supplied training and munitions to the Ukrainian forces. It is fair to say that, had we not done that, the Ukrainians would not have been able to resist the Russian invasion as effectively as they have. They recognise that and are open in paying tribute to this country for the support we gave them, and continue to give them, in Operation Orbital.

That led to the election in 2019 of President Zelensky. I was an election observer in both rounds of that election, and it was the enthusiasm of the Ukrainian people for the democratic process and their ability to change their leader—they did—and bring in somebody committed to wiping out corruption that really frightened Putin, too. He saw that if that could happen in Ukraine, it could happen in Russia as well. So the narrative was created that, somehow, Ukraine was a bogus, illegitimate regime run by Nazis, that the Ukrainian people were all oppressed and that they would all cheer when the Russians came to liberate them. Never has a more ludicrous justification been given.

We have seen the seeds of resistance not just from the Ukrainian armed forces but from the whole Ukrainian people to the Russian invasion. Kherson was one of the

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

four provinces where we were told people had voted overwhelmingly in a referendum that they wanted to join the Russian Federation. We then saw the scenes of jubilation on the streets of Kherson as they were liberated by the Ukrainian forces not that long ago.

The truth is that Russia is an authoritarian regime. I do not just want to talk about Ukraine; we also need to help to free the Russian people. This week, I had the privilege of meeting again Yevgenia Kara-Murza, who is married to Vladimir Kara-Murza, who is being held as a political prisoner in Russia. We are told that there are something like 500 political prisoners in Russia. Mr Kara-Murza is slightly different in that he is a British passport holder. I was disappointed to hear from his wife that she felt that the British Government could be doing more to campaign and help him to obtain his release.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as you and others know, the other area that I have long followed is media freedom. Russia has fallen even further in Reporters Without Borders' index of media freedom to 155th out of 180 countries. It has concluded:

"Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, almost all independent media have been banned, blocked and/or declared 'foreign agents.' All others are subject to military censorship.

All privately owned independent TV channels are banned from broadcasting... The Russian version of Euronews was suspended".

It added:

"Among the big print media outlets...those that had preserved their independence and were under constant threat of closure, like...Novaya Gazeta, have had to suspend their publications."

Media freedom does not exist in Russia. In particular, there is the recent case of the Russian journalist Ivan Safronov, who reported information that was already available for anybody to see online and has just received a sentence of 22 years' imprisonment for revealing so-called state secrets.

One day, I hope that Russia, too, will be free. To conclude, I will refer to some remarks made by the hon. Member for Rhondda. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) was successful in having Russia removed from the Council of Europe, but unfortunately Russia remains a member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. However, we have been looking at the possibility of prosecution for war crimes. It would be unprecedented in that previous war crimes cases have always been brought against perpetrators who were part of regimes that had been defeated and removed. While I would love to think that Mr Putin will be defeated and removed, that seems unlikely in the immediate future, so it may be that we will have to prosecute in absentia, but that is not a reason not to do so. A special tribunal may even need to be created for that.

There are four potential crimes here, and Russia is probably guilty of all of them. They include crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide. On genocide, as was said, we should have recognised Russia's earlier attempt at genocide in Ukraine—the Holodomor—which shows that there has been a long-standing wish to suppress Ukrainian identity. That could conceivably be called genocide. The fourth charge will be the war of aggression, and it may be possible to require reparations to be paid.

I finish by very much supporting the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Rhondda. There are vast Russian assets in this country and elsewhere in the west. It must be right that, like Canada and Estonia, we look at potentially using those assets to rebuild Ukraine, the bill for which may well already be approaching \$1 trillion. Russia has to be not just held to account for its crimes, but made to pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

4.5 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who is a great expert on Ukraine in this place. In fact, the only time I have visited Ukraine was when we went to Kyiv together—over a decade ago, I regret to say.

This is the first time I have spoken in a debate on Russian grand strategy, so I do not have the pedigree of most of the other speakers today, certainly those on the Government Benches. There is a reason for that. Before I get on to my main remarks, I want to point briefly to where I think this House has had some responsibility for allowing Russia under Putin to develop its strategy. It goes back to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), whom I should have congratulated on securing this debate—nobody knows more about strategy and its absence in this country than he does. He is doing a lot of work to try to put that right.

My hon. Friend referred to the vote in this House in 2013, in which I participated. To the great shame of this House and this country, we decided not to take action when Assad used chemical weapons on his own people in Syria. I believe that that vote led to Obama's decision that it was not appropriate for the Americans to go it alone in taking action, even though the red line that had been talked about had been crossed. I think that that was one of the most important of the many triggers that allowed Putin to take the action that he did in 2014 by invading Crimea and the Donbas, from which the subsequent invasion has flowed.

Following the invasion, the EU decided in 2015 to put sanctions on 89 Russian officials. In response, Putin imposed sanctions on 89 officials in the European Union, of whom I was one; I think I am the only remaining Member who was sanctioned by Russia in 2015. I have chosen not to speak in debates on Russia for that reason—I did not want to highlight the fact, feeling that that would not be the right thing to do. Since this latest action, of course, almost every Member has been sanctioned and it is no longer quite the badge of honour that it once was. I feel in good company now, and I am very grateful to Mr Putin for making me feel slightly less lonely.

I want to focus most of my remarks on what we can do as a nation at this stage, but before that it is worth building on what was said by other speakers about the totally bogus narrative. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon said, Putin has created a narrative for not just domestic—although that is probably the primary objective—but international consumption. He has used the narrative of wanting to restore Russia to its rightful historical place as one of the great powers by undoing the damage from the collapse of the Soviet Union to win diplomatic support internationally. He has done that in a subtle way over a long period.

I point to Russia's joining OPEC to form OPEC Plus in 2016 as a pivotal moment. Russia has used its oil and gas position and wealth to not only fund its war effort but work within international forums to frustrate attempts—particularly by the United States, but also by the United Kingdom—to encourage other OPEC members to increase production in response to the energy crisis caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Russia persuaded them to do the reverse, to decrease production, thereby keeping up the oil price and helping to fund his war effort. That was an effective mechanism he deployed using the status of victim and NATO being the aggressor, and the bogus narrative that others have spoken of. That was a critical step. It is really important that we, in leading international efforts to help Ukraine, work across international forums with our friends in the Gulf to point out to them that Russia is not their friend. They may have been somewhat disturbed by the west's approach to the protection of Gulf states, in particular the American oscillation over its relationships as it pivots to Asia, but the Gulf states are fearful most of all of the threat of Iran. Iran has demonstrated very, very graphically, through its support for Russia and the provision of military capability to Russia, which has been deployed effectively in Ukraine, that it is no friend of the Gulf. Iran is friends with Russia, and other nations need to come together with traditional western allies who are their real friends.

I want to focus my few remaining remarks on what we can do as a nation right now. I draw the attention of the House and the Minister to the refresh of the integrated review, which others—notably my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Chair of the Defence Committee, in a powerful contribution—have already raised. It is an opportunity to try to reflect on the new strategic reality. I was involved in the strategic defence and security review in 2015, and we had the integrated review in 2021. In neither case was war in Europe an active reality when those reviews were conducted. We need to recognise that the peace dividend that we as a nation and other western nations banked in the 1990s is no longer available. It has left our defence forces with funding for a peacetime environment. We are no longer in a peacetime environment. We are in a war environment and we need to recognise that through this refresh. It is therefore very timely that this opportunity has arisen, partly in response to what is happening on the other side of Europe.

A year ago, the Defence Secretary secured a record increase in the defence budget. The Minister was a Minister in the Ministry of Defence at the time and I am sure he made a powerful contribution. The £24 billion, as we have heard, is a very welcome addition to the budget. However, it is fast being eroded by inflation and it is not, as so often in defence budgets, leading to increases in capability in the here and now. Over a spending review period, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and I know all too well, these things tend to be backloaded. We cannot afford to backload and restore capability in five or 10 years' time. We need it now. Our armed forces need the confidence to be able to go out and rebuild hollowed out capability.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech. As he will recall, we served together as Ministers in the MOD. I completely commend his call

for a sense of urgency in these matters. He was a procurement Minister, so he knows how long it takes to build this stuff. We are running out of time, so I absolutely endorse the powerful point he has just made.

Philip Dunne: I am very grateful. I am well aware that my right hon. Friend, who, when we were in post was responsible for personnel primarily and then became armed forces Minister, has taken a particular interest in procurement of late. I have not always agreed with everything he has said, but I think we are absolutely as one on this issue.

What should we be looking at, in the refresh of the integrated review, to deliver the strategic shift that is needed in UK military capability? First, there must be an immediate restoration of the manpower that has been cut from the British Army. It is very clear that what is happening in Ukraine is a land conflict. Our Army's land capability has suffered cuts for years, perhaps because it has been given lower priority in the allocation of funds for new capability. That is largely because it is easier to cut a small programme, either by deferring it for a bit or by cutting a bit out, than to cut a major programme, which takes years longer to achieve, as is typically the case in the air and maritime domains.

We also need to prioritise land capability from an equipment perspective, so the second thing that the refresh needs is to look at the capability and capital equipment that the British Army requires. The Chairman of the Select Committee listed a number of items that he would like to see restored or improved.

We need to learn clear lessons about what the current conflict is delivering from the state-on-state aggressor in the Ukraine. I do not have a military background and have not studied the doctrine as the Minister has, but it is very clear that taking territory on a modern battlefield requires the ability to manoeuvre at scale under armoured protection. It is vital that our infantry mobility and our power projection on land, at scale, be restored. As we have heard, much of our equipment is now decades old. Although some of it remains more effective and capable than what an adversary might have, we just do not have enough, and what we do have is getting pretty tired.

We also need to be able to clear territory in advance, so we need artillery capability and agile unmanned aerial vehicles capable of delivering force across a battlefield. Air protection is critical to that, so we need air defence and a variety of UAVs. Much of our UAV capability has been built around delivering precision fire remotely, which has been very effective in theatres in which we have been operating, such as Afghanistan or Iraq, but would be much harder to deliver at scale across a wider battlefield.

New capability and equipment cannot be effective unless we have manpower trained to use it, so the integrated review also needs to provide adequate funding to allow force-on-force armoured training at scale, access to training areas and the ability to experiment with novel groupings and battlegroups at scale. We are in danger of giving up the capability that we had; I am thinking in particular of the training ground in Canada.

To achieve this, we need agile procurement, as I called for in a paper in 2018. That approach has been provided through the urgent operational requirements system and by individual commands through the rapid capability offices that have been established, which are doing well

[Philip Dunne]

at bringing in new capability, often procured off the shelf but typically at a small scale. What we are talking about today is on a different scale, so we need to consider acquiring some capability off the shelf. We do not have the luxury of a 10-year procurement programme that may slip, as has often been discussed in this Chamber. We have to contemplate that approach, even if it means not necessarily buying British all the time.

We can continue to provide Ukraine with equipment. We have taken a lead in Europe in providing equipment—I command the Government for their stance—and in training the brave Ukrainian soldiers in its use. However, the conflict is going on for longer than the aggressor intended and longer than any of us would like. We must assume that it will continue, and that supplies will be needed, for some time. In the integrated review, we must be prepared to backfill our own supplies of munitions and increase our own stockpiles and capability. That takes time, and it takes treasure. We need to establish strategic reserves as a consequence of the integrated review, which will allow us to sustain our own forces and those in Ukraine for a long time. We have to demonstrate to the Russians that the UK has the resolve to stand fast behind Ukraine, and the resolve to ensure that NATO is in a position to act as a deterrent to any extension of this conflict beyond where it currently is.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Scottish National party spokesman.

4.20 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing the debate. I rather feared, having I nipped out of the Chamber, that I had missed a well-aimed salvo from the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), but I am sure he will waste no opportunity to chuck another one when he gets the chance.

Putin's world view needs to be understood in order to be effectively combated. It is not enough just to mock it or rubbish it in isolation, as is so often done in the west. Instead, we must systematically deconstruct it in an intelligent and strategic manner that reflects the scale of the risks that we face in misinterpreting it. Despite its consequences, this is of course nothing more than the classic "enemy abroad" tactic: when you cannot deliver for your people at home, you turn their gaze to a manufactured enemy abroad. That has been done many times.

Let me ally myself with what was said by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) in defence of the Russian people as opposed to the Russian elite. Of course there are inputs into this malign war and offensive by the general population, but if we write off the people of Russia along with the elite, I do not know what we are hoping to achieve. The manifestation of Putin's attempt to reshape his sphere of influence and indeed possibly reinstate an element of a greater Russian empire, or at least an extension of the bounds of the federation, must be rendered by us in the west as a last throw of the dice for Putin. Given that he launched this aggression on his terms, we must ensure that it is concluded on the terms of the international rules-based system.

Let me now highlight a couple of elements on the ground that justify the actions taken by the United Kingdom Government, together with allies in the west. Ukraine has achieved hard-fought but limited gains in different sectors, including a great deal of kinetic engagement with the Wagner Group. We have heard a fair amount today about what a deplorable organisation the Wagner Group is. The fact that many of its combatants have been released from prison demonstrates keenly the depth of the moral malaise in Russia when it comes to continued support for this campaign. The Kremlin has once again replaced its top commander in Ukraine. It believed that its "special operation" would be a victory in a matter of days, but here we are in month 11, with Gerasimov now in the hotseat—but for how long?

On Saturday, in the United Kingdom, it was leaked that the UK was going to supply a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks, and the Secretary of State confirmed it on Monday. That will facilitate a step change in capability for retaking territory with the combined use of tanks, heavy armour and infantry, but only in a very limited way, with one squadron of tanks. It must be accepted that the UK is seeking to open a door through which the other 14 European allies will step through with, say, a squadron each of Leopard 2s to add to the mix, providing 15 squadrons for the Ukrainians. We should be in no doubt that they would put them to outstanding use, as they have with everything else that has been donated to them.

Of course, the Russian operation deliberately violates international law. That is the point Putin is making: these are our rules, to which he has no intention of adhering. Russia's action contravenes the United Nations Charter, the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter and the Budapest accord, all by design. The illegal, unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine has shattered the post-war European order—also by design. The war in Ukraine should give us all pause for thought, in a range of ways.

Mr Francois: I could not resist the hon. Gentleman's tempting offer earlier. We are great friends on the Defence Committee, as the whole House knows. He mentioned the Budapest accord. Why on earth, having seen what happened to the Ukrainians when they gave up their nuclear weapons, does the Scottish National party want us to give up ours?

Dave Doogan: Is that it? I thought it was going to be a hard one. As he and I agree, nuclear weapons are an appalling weapons system that we hope will never be used. They are a deeply troublesome weapons system, but they do exist. In so far as they do, I am not certain that the 150-odd warheads—sorry, weapons packages—that the United Kingdom will invest in will make much difference to the polar threat of nuclear armageddon that is presented by the 3,000 warheads that Russia has and the 5,000 warheads that the United States has. These are the polar dimensions. The United Kingdom spending billions and billions of pounds in the middle is not going to change anything.

Alec Shelbrooke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dave Doogan: No, I will not let the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Gentleman intervene. They have had their answer, they can deal with that wisdom whether they want it or not.

There is no symbolic great power Russia unless Ukraine is brought—as Putin would see it—home, within the bounds of Russia. There is a risk that the war will continue at varying levels of intensity for long periods of time, so the continued support of the United Kingdom and other western allies is all the more important. The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked about the Ukrainians' fear that we might forget them or become fatigued with this activity. You could forgive society in the west, due to the price of fuel, the price of gas, the price of food and the price of doing business, for becoming a little weary, but we as legislators must all ensure that we do not allow that to creep in because the cost of not allying ourselves with the people fighting to liberate Ukraine is far higher than the cost that we bear now by supporting them.

Vicky Ford: If the hon. Gentleman agrees that we must not forget Ukraine, and that we must recognise that we are in an incredibly challenging geopolitical situation—possibly the most challenging of the past 50 years, and my life—why on earth is the SNP spending all its time worrying about independence and not worrying about big issues on which we need to stand together?

Dave Doogan: There's your thanks for making a conciliatory point in a debate on a matter on which we agree almost entirely. I will not answer that remark other than to say that, far from an obsession, worrying about independence is literally a noble pursuit.

Sir Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to intervene?

Dave Doogan: No. I am going to make progress.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex touched on why we are sending only 12 tanks. The reason is that we have scarcely three times that amount that are serviceable to send. He wants to send 124. That would be great, and I hope that, by sending the 12, the Leopard 2s will come forth from other NATO allies within Europe.

I do not know how accurate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) knows he was when he said that the United Kingdom was missing a real trick by trying to replace Challenger 2 with Challenger 3. We should be replacing them with Leopards and getting them built on these islands, which would be a perfectly realistic opportunity and far preferable industrial strategy.

We need to have a long look at the intelligence—and more specifically, the analysis of that intelligence—gathered by the UK and the west before the conflict became a hot war. Our ally Germany steadfastly refused to see what was plainly under its nose until it became a kinetic affair, and the UK and the west made significant miscalculations about the strength of Russia's conventional forces, instead favouring an obsession with their high-end capability without realising that they are very thin in mass and scale—they have not contributed a great deal to the outcomes of the conflict so far.

In his summing up, I hope the Minister might address the Russian military studies centre at Shrivenham, which, putting it diplomatically, has not benefited from the most robust investment over the years and should probably benefit from more.

Although we have proved Putin wrong in his analysis of the western allies' ability to cohere and to resolve to put up with the privations of this situation, our support for Ukraine, while being the right thing to do, has to endure with all available pace to bring this conflict and its consequences, both in Ukraine and throughout the world, to an end as soon as possible.

4.30 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their thoughtful and considered contributions to today's debate. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing the debate, and I agree with the vast majority of what he said.

It is very clear from today's debate that, despite some differences, Members on both sides of the House are absolutely committed not only to affirming and deepening our support for Ukraine but to confronting Russia and President Putin's imperialist ambitions, which threaten the peace and security of Europe and risk a very dangerous and bleak future for the entire world. We need to be absolutely clear that this is not only a barbarous war against the people of Ukraine but a war against the very principles of humanity, liberty and democracy. If we fail to understand what is at stake, if we fail to ensure that we have clear and sustainable strategies of defence, deterrence and denial, and if we fail to have clarity and unity on the ends we seek and on the ways and means of achieving them, we risk a bleak and brutal future.

The war in Ukraine may have been the watershed moment when much of the world sat up and finally recognised the extent of Putin's ambitions, his warped world view and the cruelty of his regime but, sadly, that alarm has been sounding for well over a decade, and some would say longer. We have seen Putin's record in Chechnya and his systematic crushing, over many years, of democratic opposition and dissent in Russia. Many of us have been sounding those risks in this Chamber for a long time, yet we were ignored as Russian money and influence flooded into London and as disinformation flooded our politics and society both here in the UK and across the west. Frankly, an atmosphere of gross naivety and expedient complicity prevailed.

Whether we look from Chechnya to Syria, from the Caucasus to the western Balkans, or from Georgia to the annexation of Crimea, let alone his effective absorption of Belarus, we see that international acquiescence has given Putin the pretext for his next violations each time he has breached the boundaries of international law or fractured the global rules-based order. There has now been an unmistakable shift that we cannot allow to be reversed, because his illegal war against the people of Ukraine has garnered unity, solidarity and material opposition across the west to the Kremlin's actions, which is the exact opposite of what he expected.

Russia's strategy has met its most formidable defence in the courage and defiance of the people of Ukraine. As we approach the one-year anniversary, it is worth reflecting on the more than 7,000 Ukrainian civilians

[Stephen Doughty]

who have been reported killed since last February—the actual figure is projected to be much higher. Their blood is on Putin's hands.

We have seen great tragedy this week. I have just come back from a Ukraine forum at Davos with an Ukrainian MP and other friends—I draw attention to my upcoming declaration of that visit. We stood in mutual sorrow, mourning the tragic losses in the terrible helicopter crash. Time and time again, we heard first-hand testimonies of the impact of Russia's barbarous strategy on civilians, not least the terrible scenes we saw in Dnipro this week.

Many of us have visited Ukraine, and just a few months ago I saw with my own eyes the situation in Bucha, Irpin and Kyiv. I pay tribute to Members on both sides of the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), for talking about what they saw. It is right that we recognise the remarkable tenacity of the Ukrainian people in the face of such brutality. Despite that fantastic counter-offensive in the autumn, winter has brought a bloody stalemate to much of the frontline, and spring—or, indeed, even earlier—is likely to see renewed offences. That is why it is exactly right that the UK and our NATO allies provide additional military assistance to Ukraine now. We on the Labour Benches fully welcome the Government's decision to send those Challenger 2 tanks.

Across this House, we stand unshakeably with our NATO and international allies in providing comprehensive, military, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian assistance. This is not just in relation to Ukraine, but in terms of reinforcement and realignment across NATO, particularly with our Baltic and eastern European allies. Throughout the conflict, we have stood united in this House, and that is evident again today. That said, we believe that the Government should set aside individual piecemeal announcements and instead set out a clear strategy, in concert with our allies and Ukraine, of long-term military, economic and diplomatic support, so that we can make sure that Putin's invasion really does end in failure.

There was an early focus on Russia using energy as a key part of its strategy, but we have heard again and again today that at the heart of Russia's strategy is also terror. It is vital that the Ukrainian prosecutor general and the International Criminal Court have the resources they need to document and prosecute the growing body of evidence of Russian war crimes. We have been calling since March—indeed, it was called for by the Leader of the Opposition—for the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression. I have heard that again and again over the past few days. This is something that is gaining real momentum, and I would like to hear from the Minister the Government's official position.

We also support the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) and many others to re-purpose frozen Russian assets to help rebuild critical Ukrainian infrastructure and provide much-needed humanitarian aid to the country. We need to get on with that. Other countries, including Canada, are moving forward. What is the Government's position? Why are we dragging our heels? I appreciate that it is complex, but we have been calling for this for months and months

and months. I did have some warm words from Ministers in Committees a few months ago, and yet I have heard nothing since.

Let me turn now to Russia's wider strategy. Dominating Europe is an integral component of Putin's strategy and his view of its ultimate success or failure. The Russian world strategy that was unveiled in September made it very clear that Russia wanted to increase its position in the Slavic nations, the Baltic states, central Asia, the Caucasus and elsewhere. Putin dubbed the collapse of the USSR the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" and considered it a "tragedy" that millions no longer lived behind those former Soviet borders since the dissolution. There should be no doubt about his world view and his ambitions for our continent.

The situation in the western Balkans has been rightly raised a number of times. I take a keen interest in the area and I have travelled out to Kosovo and North Macedonia. My colleague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, has been in Kosovo in recent weeks. The region is in its most precarious state since the 1990s, with tensions rife, and figures such as Milorad Dodik and others aligning themselves very clearly with the Kremlin. We know how this works: Putin and his cronies heighten tensions, exploit and enable secessionist movements and political outriders, sow discord, spread misinformation and capitalise on the ensuing turmoil. We cannot allow Russia's interference in the region to destabilise the carefully calibrated peace brought about by Dayton and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

We have heard about Russia's ambitions beyond Europe. Putin was sure to formalise his ties with President Xi as a pretext to his invasion of Ukraine, culminating in the declaration of alignment between China and Russia. That relationship and its ramifications will be immensely consequential in the coming years.

We have also heard about the relationship with Iran. Characteristically, Putin is waging his war in Ukraine with its drones, but it is also a geopolitical relationship that could continue to define the entire middle east.

We have heard again and again today of the activities of the infamous Wagner Group, which is engaged in a number of conflicts in Africa, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo, across the Sahel, in Burkina Faso and in the Central African Republic, which has effectively come to depend on that paramilitary outfit. There is also central and South America, which did not get much attention today. Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela remain aligned with Russia. Each of their relationships with the Kremlin is characterised by military co-operation, the weaponisation of information, the repression of the press and democratic freedoms, and the undermining confidence in democratic institutions across the region. What we are seeing is an attempt to extend Russia's geopolitical reach and to strengthen authoritarianism and dissent worldwide.

Despite the strong vote in the United Nations, we know many countries have refused to condemn Russia's actions. I would like to hear much more clearly from the Minister our strategy in relation to the global south and for dealing with those countries—some of which we would consider very close allies—that have failed to stand with us and with Ukraine.

Vicky Ford: I was extremely concerned when it was drawn to my attention recently that some trade union leaders in the UK have not exactly condemned Putin's

actions in Ukraine and may have been slightly on the other side. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is very concerning if that is the case, and that in condemning Russia's actions we want unity not just among politicians but among the leaders of organisations across the country?

Stephen Doughty: I do not know which union leaders the right hon. Lady is referring to, but I can tell her that the leader of my own union—I include my membership of the GMB in my declaration of interests—gave one of the most powerful speeches at the Labour party conference. He made it very clear what he thought, and I think that is also the view across the trade union movement in the UK: condemning Russia's actions and standing with the people of Ukraine. I am not sure what the right hon. Lady is referring to.

I come now to some clear conclusions. We need to remain crystal clear in our commitment to NATO, but we must also end the bluster and brinkmanship that have characterised our relationship with the EU in recent years. The fact is that we all face common threats and we need to use new forums, such as the European Political Community, that bring together EU and non-EU, NATO and non-NATO countries. We all experience threats and we need to co-operate and work together. It is good that the UK was part of that, and we should seek to continue.

We must end the decade of decline for Britain's defence, with millions of pounds of waste and mismanagement, the number of tanks cut by one third and the Army cut to its smallest size in 300 years. There has been much criticism of that across the House in this debate and I hope the Government listen carefully to that. We are in a new and dangerous world.

It is shameful that it took the invasion of Ukraine for the Government to finally get to grips with the UK's role in illicit finance, particularly London's role in facilitating the lifestyles and interests of Putin's enablers and allies. That cannot go on; we must continue to close the loopholes, and I know there is cross-party support from many in this Chamber for doing that.

We must fully utilise and cherish all our alliances and partnerships worldwide in this fight—again, I hope the Minister can say what our strategy is with the global south. We must tighten our sanctions regime to ensure it is properly resourced and airtight, including in crucial areas, such as cryptocurrencies and others, where there are gaps, something I have repeatedly raised with Ministers.

We must ensure that we are investing in clean, secure and independent energy and ending our vulnerability and exposure to fossil fuels. We must do much more to take on the Kremlin in cyber-space and, of course, its systemic pollution and corruption of the information environment. We must also watch and defend the flanks; I have spoken about what our strategy needs to be with NATO, but we must also watch those areas that Russia is trying to destabilise, such as the western Balkans.

In conclusion, this illegal war of aggression has brought about a sense of unity and common purpose not seen since the onset of Putin's rule. The incredible progress we have seen, with Ukraine at the fore, is an indication that his grand strategy might be unravelling. With our steadfast and enduring support, I know that the values we share with Ukraine will prevail, but they require a comprehensive strategy, with the resources and political will to see it to the end and Putin's defeat.

Philip Dunne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the shadow Minister's declaration of his interest with the GMB union prompts me that I should have declared my interests when speaking, and I apologise to you, Sir, for not having done so. Until the end of last month, I was deputy chairman of the Defence Growth Partnership and I remain a non-executive director of an engineering company with defence interests, as declared in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The right hon. Gentleman is aware that that is not a matter for the Chair, but he has placed his interests on the record. I now call the Minister of State; if he would be good enough, as a courtesy, to allow Sir Bernard a couple of minutes at the end to wind up the debate, that would be helpful.

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this important debate. I am also grateful for the other knowledgeable contributions from hon. and right hon. Members, and I will try to cover as many of their points as I can.

I would like to start, however, by offering my deepest condolences to the families of Ukraine's Interior Minister, Denys Monastyrsky, and his team of civilians who were killed in the tragic helicopter crash in Ukraine yesterday. He was a true friend of the United Kingdom and a true patriot of Ukraine, and we are ready to support Ukraine in whatever way we can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex put forward a strident case in outlining Putin's grand strategy and, in his view, the lack of one on the UK's side. He posed some interesting questions with regard to the integrated review refresh. He questioned the Indo-Pacific tilt and the validity of the AUKUS agreement, and he called for strong land forces, which is something I certainly agree with. He pointed out that we need to increase the tempo of our support to Ukraine; of course, we support that. He also pointed out that Putin's calculation is one of time—his belief is that his ability to suffer will outlast the patience of western allies. I agree; that is, indeed, Putin's calculation. My hon. Friend suggested that we were being too timid and too slow in our support. I refute that, because I think our actions over the last year, especially on the provision of lethal aid, have shown that we have led the way, and others have followed.

In terms of my hon. Friend's central point, I acknowledge the fact that, while Putin has had a grand strategy, the last year has shown that it is, in simple terms, failing. Our response has shown that, when we put our mind to it, we can succeed. Our strategy over the last year is one of success. If we measure the success of strategy as whether or not we can deliver our policy, Putin's failure to deliver his own policy in Ukraine has shown the failure of his strategy, and our success in supporting our Ukrainian friends has shown the success of our collective strategy.

Our response is built on four pillars. The first is a recognition that it is about hard power, and that is why we led the way in delivering the NLAW, which was a

[*Leo Docherty*]

tactical weapon that took on strategic consequence. Just over a year later, that has led to us providing the Challenger 2 tanks, which hopefully will open the door for others. We recognise that it is about the provision of hard power.

We also recognise that alliance is hugely important in this. Russia has a very long border but is very short of friends. If we look at the collection of nations that are supporting our heroic Ukrainian friends, we see a determined, resolute and hugely capable group of countries that are providing an awesome amount of support. Collectively, in terms of their military power, GDP and so on, they represent a very important and powerful alliance.

The third pillar is resolve. I have mentioned that Putin will be testing our patience this year and thereafter, and we must be confident that our capacity to remain committed to our Ukrainian friends can outlast Putin's judgment about his ability to force his people to suffer.

Fourthly, our strategy takes us into other domains. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex did not mention energy, but our collective response in the west and globally in fighting back against Putin's weaponisation of energy supply has been immensely effective. No one would have thought several years ago that the Germans would have weaned themselves off Russian supply within a short space of months, at huge cost and inconvenience. It has been remarkable. The pan-European and global response to the weaponisation by Putin of his energy supply has been heartening and terrific. Of course, we must keep that effort up, but we should be very proud of our response, and that is because of the leadership of western nations. I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's remarks.

I turn to the comments of other Members. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) posed some good questions about our reconstruction effort. He will know that we are hosting a conference in June this year to focus nations on that and hopefully bring a flow of capital to Ukraine, to help its reconstruction. He asked some good questions about reparations. Of course, we are exploring all options. There is an army of lawyers looking at all this. We are seeking to be creative. He posed some interesting technical questions. All of this is under consideration, and we will update the House as and when we can.

Sir Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way?

Leo Docherty: If the hon. Gentleman is very snappy.

Sir Chris Bryant: I prefer an army of troops, rather than an army of lawyers.

Leo Docherty: We will keep the hon. Gentleman up to date.

The Chairman of the Defence Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), put this matter in a cogent, historical context, for which I was most grateful, but we should be confident that our resolve will outlast Putin's determination to make his own people suffer. He pointed out that there is a global contest between authoritarian regimes, and those who value democracy and open economies, and that is particularly important in terms of the role of

China. He made a powerful call for resolve. I think we are showing that but of course we must be ever vigilant. We can take nothing for granted.

The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) made a powerful reflection on her visit to Kharkiv at the end of last year. She mentioned Putin's desperation as illustrated by his barbaric assault on the critical national infrastructure of that country, and I was grateful for her remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) referred to his important work in the Council of Europe. We continue to be grateful for his work in that forum. He said we must keep our eyes open, and we certainly agree, because the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. We will keep our eyes open and I commend his remarks.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) made an interesting reference to Palmerston's approach in the 1850s. They knew a lot about UK-Russian relations in the 1850s. He also referred to Churchill's famous reference to Russia, but there is no actual riddle these days: we know exactly what Putin is. He is a bloodstained tyrant bent on imperial conquest, so there is no mystery.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), the chair of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly delegation, urged us to guard against hubris, which I thought was an eloquent way of calling for ongoing resolve. He pointed out the importance of NATO's cohesion and continued determination, for which I was grateful. He reflected interestingly on his meeting, while a Minister, with the Ukrainian forces. That ongoing training had its genesis in Operation Orbital. It has been running since 2015 and is something of which we are immensely proud. I am grateful to him for bringing that to the House's attention.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) referred to his visit to Ukraine and the admirable work of Siobhan's Trust and the magnificent David Fox-Pitt clad in his Ukrainian kilt. I hope to see my right hon. Friend modelling that at some stage. He used that example to give us a powerful insight into the horrendous civilian cost of Putin's barbaric war. That is why we are proud to have given some £220 million-plus purely in humanitarian support and we will continue to do all that we can in the humanitarian sector. He said that the plea from those he met was, "Please don't forget us." I can assure him that the UK Government absolutely will not forget them. We will continue to do all we can, not just in the humanitarian sector but in long-term reconstruction. That is the point of June's conference.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) pointed out Putin's fading support globally, and the fact that some of the nations that have been aligned with him now question the validity or utility of being partnered with a failing nation and someone who is losing. I thought that was useful. She talked about his outrageous weaponisation of global food supply, which we are seeking to counter through the Black sea grain initiative. She also made an important reference to the malign role of the Wagner Group, which concerns us all. I am grateful for her comments.

Vicky Ford: I know that the Minister cannot comment publicly, but will he undertake to look globally at what the Wagner Group is doing and at proscribing it?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend will know from her time as a Minister that we never speculate or comment on possible future proscriptions from the Dispatch Box, but I am grateful for her intervention.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pointed out that he made some of these insights more than a year ago. He pointed out that Russia is a pariah state. Frankly, the fact that Russia is now a pariah state shows that this war is a failure of Putin's strategy.

Mr Ellwood: I just want to reiterate the point that has just been made. This entire debate is because of the absence of a strategy in handling Russia, of which listing the Wagner Group would be one aspect. The Minister dismisses that idea by saying that we do not speculate. Perhaps he could humour those here who are calling for it by saying that he will at least take it away and put it to No. 10 as part of a wider package of measures that have been put forward today to say, "Yes, we need to lean into this. We need to construct a strategy that will allow us to stand up to Russia in advance of the completion of defeating Russia in Ukraine."

Leo Docherty: I did acknowledge the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. I did not dismiss them. I acknowledged them and said clearly that we do not speculate or comment on possible future proscriptions from the Dispatch Box, which is the settled position of this Government.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford made some good comments about the need to reflect the new security reality in the IR refresh and the procurement obligations that that will bring about. That was a valuable comment. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), who has longstanding expertise and interest in this area, pointed out rightly that the UK Government and the British people have no argument with the Russian people, but they have with Putin because of his outrageous use of warfare.

My right hon. Friend also alluded to the importance of Operation Orbital. That has had an important legacy of success that is allowing us to train thousands of Ukrainian soldiers, who will go and do their duty heroically. He referred to Vladimir Kara-Murza. I was pleased to meet Evgenia Kara-Murza this week in London. We will continue to do all we can through our ambassador in Moscow and our consular officials to support him and his family. He referred to the lack of media freedom. He also asked about frozen assets. As I said, we look at all options for using Russian frozen assets to support the reconstruction of Ukraine.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) pointed out the importance of Putin's weaponisation of energy and sought reassurance about the IR refresh. I reassure him that we will seek to use that as an opportunity to reflect the new security reality. The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), talked of Putin's enemy abroad tactic, which was interesting. He talked about UK tanks; we are very proud of those and hope that other nations will follow our example. I do not think that his justification for the SNP's approach to nuclear was compelling, but we do not want to get stuck on that. I can reassure him that institutionally, we are doing everything we can to embed deep expertise on Russia in the Foreign Office and beyond.

I come now to the questions from the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I thank him for his continued support in this policy area. We look at all options with regards to frozen Russian assets and their possible use to support Ukrainian reconstruction. He made a series of good points about Russia's malign influence in the western Balkans. We will continue to call that out when we see it. He put the issue in the global context with reference to China. This war is consequential in terms of China's role globally. We are very aware of that. That is part of our integrated review.

The hon. Gentleman talked about what we are doing with the global south. The bottom line is that we will always partner with nations that value democracy, open economy and freedom, because in the long term that is much more enduring, powerful and stronger than tyranny and autocracy. That is why, ultimately, we should all be collectively very optimistic and upbeat about the capacity of the alliance supporting Ukraine to expel Russian troops from its border and liberate its country. We look forward to supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes.

4.57 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank everyone who has taken part ably in this debate, and my hon. Friend the Minister for his response. I would point out to the Scottish nationalists that I do not think that President Putin would have attacked Ukraine if Ukraine still had nuclear weapons. But the main point that I wish to make—for all the positive things that my hon. Friend said—is that it is complacent to say that Putin's strategy is failing and our strategy is succeeding. Setbacks, yes, but two words keep coming up in military literature in Russia at the moment: Stalingrad and Finland. Stalingrad because its doctrine is victory at any cost and Finland because that is where it expects the west to compromise to cede territory in order to gain peace, which is what Finland did in 1938.

Russia is tooling up its entire economy for war. It is reported in *Vedomosti*, the business daily in Russia, that Putin when visiting a factory called the work of the Russian military-industrial complex one of the factors of victory in the Ukraine war. We have yet to hear that the UK Government are doing enough to support Ukraine—I regret that—although we are leading many other European nations from the front. Russian grand strategy has been clear for at least a decade, yet the west has been continually blindsided because we do not have a strategy of our own. We do not have the capacity for analysis and assessment that would keep us alert to these threats. This is a topic to which I will return, I can assure this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of Russia's grand strategy.

Business Without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Northern Ireland Budget Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Steve Double.*)

Tackling Misogyny in Schools

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

5 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I am pleased to see my good friend the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and the Minister of State, Department for Education, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), in their places. I thank the Minister for being here to respond to a cross-cutting issue that many hon. Members feel passionately about. I also place on record my thanks to the range of organisations that have supported me and my team in preparing for the debate, including Welsh Women's Aid, Girlguiding, HOPE not hate, the Sex Education Forum and my brilliant colleagues in the Welsh Government.

This is only my second Adjournment debate and, remarkably, the previous one also focused on misogyny, albeit in the context of sport. They say that persistence is key to making progress, so I am grateful for the opportunity to again raise some broad concerns about the damaging impact that misogyny can have on all our lives, and the work that must be done to reduce that impact for future generations. It is a frustrating reality that the debate feels more timely than ever. The impact that so-called social media influencers are having on perpetuating vile misogyny online and offline is undoubtedly enormous. Misogyny is developing at a rapid rate in our classrooms, so it is a growing concern that I regularly hear about when speaking with teachers in my constituency.

At this point, I must thank the team at Pontypridd High School. Despite the name, it is just across the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), but it is a key school for many people living in Pontypridd. Led by the brilliant deputy headteacher, Kayleigh Oliver, the school has taken it upon itself to make tackling violence against women and girls a core feature of the education that pupils receive there. It was great to welcome a group of pupils to Westminster just before Christmas to discuss these issues in person. The school is doing some fantastic work, but it should not have to be that way.

Since being appointed a shadow Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Minister, a key priority for me has been carefully considering the Government's approach to tackling online safety. Of course, that is another topic that we have discussed repeatedly, and that we can discuss again on a different day, but we cannot and should not underestimate the influence that key figures in the online space are having on young people. Indeed, I am not the only one to have raised these concerns: just a few weeks ago, *The Times* led with a feature entitled, "How teachers are re-educating boys brainwashed by Andrew Tate".

For those lucky enough to still be unaware of Andrew Tate, I am happy to provide a brief education—pun somewhat intended. He is a classic social media influencer. He has amassed millions of followers on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, and is often reported to be—and proudly boasts of being—the king of misogyny. He is well known for his ultra-macho lifestyle. He has claimed in videos that women are a man's property, that they

cannot do jobs as well as men, and that ultimately, they belong at home. He may market himself as a businessman or a social media personality, but really, he is a sad, pathetic individual with a platform who clearly enjoys spreading hate.

Having spoken to teachers in my constituency, it is clear that it would be wrong to underestimate the hold that so-called influencers have on young people. Indeed, I recently spoke to a GCSE-level teacher, who spoke about the issues in their classrooms. She said:

"It is impossible for teachers to constantly keep up with the latest trends or fads on social media, but the hold that Andrew Tate specifically has over boys in my school is unlike anything I have seen before. This isn't happening overnight. We have slowly seen a change in what were well-behaved boys, often around the age of 11-16, who have now begun to adopt and exhibit his alpha-male attitudes and behaviours themselves. This can range from seemingly harmless remarks about women belonging in the kitchen, to direct and very public comments on female pupils' appearance and sexual behaviours."

This first-hand account points to the heart of the issue: many schools want to tackle misogyny and teach their pupils about the harm it can cause, but they lack direction and consistency.

Although the issue has received some recent press coverage, the concerns and experiences of teachers are certainly not new. Last year, a survey by NASUWT found that most female staff faced misogyny in the classroom. Incidents included harassment, sexist comments and assault, but teachers also specifically highlighted the growing incel movement as a cause for concern. For colleagues who are unaware, "incel" is commonly known as short for involuntary celibate. An incel is often defined as someone who has defined themselves as unable to meet a romantic or sexual partner, despite desiring one. Incels often feel that they have the right to be desired by women, and that women are to blame when this is not the case. I am sure I speak on behalf of us all when I say that it is absolutely shocking that rising interest and support for incel culture is an issue that we are facing in modern day Britain. It is an even more damning indictment that female pupils across the country are reporting growing harassment, sexist comments, assaults, and an overarching culture of misogyny and disrespect from their male counterparts. Let us be clear: what can begin as seemingly harmless so-called classroom banter can often develop into dangerous attitudes and ultimately behaviour that can all too often put people in genuine harm.

More broadly, it is clear that schools play an important role in educating young people in social issues that go far beyond the standard curriculum, and we pay tribute to all the teachers up and down the country doing just that day in and day out. Indeed, teaching young people about the concept of masculinity without confusing it with so-called macho swagger is, as I am sure we can all agree, a really vital but difficult challenge. However, there is some really positive work taking place across the UK, notably in Wales, which I am keen to draw attention to and which I hope the Minister will address in his responding remarks.

In December 2021, Estyn, which is the education and training inspectorate for Wales, published a report about the experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales. In response to that, the Welsh Labour Government have taken decisive action, and are currently developing an action plan that will

outline the actions they will take with their partners to prevent and respond to the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment in education settings. Importantly, this action plan will also link to and complement sister plans—including the national action plan on preventing child abuse, the digital resilience in education action plan, and the violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence strategy—all in order to aid understanding of the work and support available to empower children and young people.

The Welsh Labour Government are committed to ensuring that education settings are safe, supportive, inclusive and engaging environments for children to speak out and share what matters to them, because we all have a responsibility to ensure that respect and tolerance form part of our school communities and cultures. Ultimately, this is key to creating an inclusive and engaging environment where everyone's wellbeing is considered and everyone feels accepted, safe and ready to learn. Indeed, the Welsh Government have developed a dedicated online hub, with a range of classroom resources to support discussions with pupils about the issue of toxic masculinity and the role this plays in driving misogyny more widely. There are also a number of resources that explore harmful online behaviours and issues that are often connected, such as extremist views, inciting hate, grooming and misinformation.

It is these kinds of tools that teachers across the UK are crying out for as they seek to prevent misogynistic attitudes from developing or being widely shared within school settings. I want to see parity for children and teachers across the UK, because of course misogyny knows no boundaries. While we can all understand how local authorities and schools across the country are stretched, given the significant financial pressures they are under, it is vital that future generations are safeguarded against these dangerous attitudes, which can cause damage to both themselves and others. I would therefore very much welcome the Minister's comments on what the UK Government are doing to support schools across England in tackling these widespread harms. We know that his Government have some work to do in this area and on media literacy and digital resilience, because provisions in the Department for Education's general curriculum are, sadly, seriously lacking.

Yet the Welsh Government have designed a specific programme that provides safeguarding leads with training to identify, prevent and respond to incidents of online sexual harassment. They have also committed to publishing a new online training module to support all school staff in tackling this issue. In Wales, we are fortunate to have a Government who really understand and care about the damage that misogyny can do to communities, big and small, if it is allowed to perpetuate. They have made it a priority to get this right and to support teachers wherever possible, so I want to press the Minister: why cannot the same be said for England?

I have a huge amount of respect for the Minister, who is obviously passionate about his brief and comes to this afternoon's debate with a huge amount of knowledge and experience. He, too, must know that misogyny does not exist in a vacuum, and that it can often be tied to far-right ideology and the worldview of the so-called manosphere. This often exists online as a loose collection of forums, blogs, vlogs and organisations concerned with men's issues and masculinity that are oriented around opposition to feminism.

It is thanks to HOPE not hate, which does some incredibly important work in this area, that we know for certain that parts of this manosphere are highly misogynistic and have, in recent years, grown increasingly extreme and close to the far right, utilising racist conspiracy theories to explain perceived societal issues.

It is a frustrating reality that charities including HOPE not hate and Women's Aid have had to step in in the absence of any real leadership or Government action. HOPE not hate first began speaking to teachers about the manosphere back in 2018 and misogyny in the classroom has been a constant topic in its work and the work of teachers ever since. Ultimately teachers do not have the training to deal with the problem, and I have genuine concerns that some might instead treat it as general behaviour and are likely to ignore the situation for fear of saying the wrong thing.

It is important to stress that misogyny is not a school-specific problem; it is a societal one being played out in the education system. We must do more to promote our positive male role models and the brilliant organisations doing transformative work in this space, including Mentivity, Beyond Equality, Progressive Masculinity, and the ManKind Project. All of them are stepping in to take vital action in this area.

In the last year alone HOPE not hate has delivered training to more than 2,000 teachers across England and Wales as part of its mission to challenge hate and discrimination. Welsh Women's Aid offers a bystander training programme which aims to empower communities to intervene proactively to stop violence and abuse wherever and whenever possible. I am proud that this training has been delivered in all Welsh universities and has also been delivered in many schools at sixth-form level.

Teachers should not be left to try and tackle this endemic situation alone. They need the support and tools to tackle the issue at its root. Teachers are already being given a huge amount of training on a vast range of topics, but this problem is not going away without clear attention and interventions.

I am conscious of time so the final points I shall highlight are findings from the Sex Education Forum's recent poll around relationships and sex education in schools in England. It surveyed 1,000 young people aged 16 and 17 and, shockingly, 37% reported learning nothing about power imbalances in relationships as part of their education at school, more than a quarter had learnt nothing about the attitudes and behaviour of men and boys towards women and girls, and 28% of young people had not learnt about how to tell if a relationship is healthy, including online. That is truly shocking. These numbers are simply too high, and I look forward to the Minister's remarks, which I hope will give me some confidence that he is aware of, and prepared to act on, this incredibly important issue.

5.12 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) on securing this important, albeit brief, debate and on her excellent speech. It is with dismay that I share her view that we have all seen the growing prominence of a social media influencer who has gained status and attention through the use of

[Nick Gibb]

inflammatory and hateful comments. While we recognise that schools should not bear all the burden of responding to misogyny and other forms of prejudice—as she said, this is a societal issue—education is our key tool in creating the respectful society we all want to see and inhabit. Teachers might therefore need additional support in addressing these issues with pupils and in holding all pupils to the highest standards of behaviour. Schools must be places in which inappropriate language or behaviour is always challenged, never normalised, and never treated as merely banter or harmless fun.

In September 2020, we made relationships and sex education compulsory for the first time in all schools in England, and we published guidance which states that schools should be aware of issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes, and that schools should take steps to build a culture where these are not tolerated.

Following the shocking murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021, thousands of testimonies of abuse and harassment suffered by pupils in schools were posted on the Everyone’s Invited website. The Government asked Ofsted to carry out a review, and in 2021 Ofsted published a review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges which made clear recommendations for Government.

The response from this Government has been concerted and comprehensive. The tackling violence against women and girls strategy sets out further actions we are taking and the progress we have made so far, including the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the “Enough” communications campaign, and changes to the law to introduce new criminal offences including upskirting and revenge porn.

The Department for Education provided additional support for RSHE, opening an additional round of the RSHE “train the trainer” programme in 2021 and hosting webinars on hard-to-teach subjects. We will also be publishing non-statutory guidance specifically focused on teaching about sexual harassment and sexual violence. We have updated our behaviour guidance, which now includes advice on handling sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools. We have updated our safeguarding guidance, which is now clear about schools’ duties in relation to equality, harassment and victimisation as well as prejudice.

Relationships education equips young people with the knowledge and values they need to combat the prejudiced views expressed by some social media influencers. Since relationships education became a compulsory subject in 2020, all primary schools should learn to identify stereotypes and understand why stereotypes can be unfair and destructive. Primary pupils should be taught about the importance of respect and how to build healthy friendships and relationships, which the hon. Member specifically referred to. All secondary school pupils should learn about consent and about what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence, and why that type of behaviour is wrong.

We invested £3 million to support teachers to deliver the new curriculum, and about 5,000 teachers have received training in a cascade model in which teachers pass on their training to others. We have strongly encouraged schools to dedicate time from inset days for relationships, sex and health education training, especially in the light of Ofsted’s review.

Ofsted’s review gave us a sense of the scale of sexual harassment and violence in schools, which is predominantly directed against girls. In its survey, 92% of 13-year-old girls said that sexist name-calling happened a lot or sometimes between people their age, and 79% of girls said that sexual assault happened a lot or sometimes between people their age. Those statistics are deeply concerning, and the prejudiced and often violent language that can be found on social media clearly fosters a culture of disrespect and abuse. Schools have a challenging task in addressing the root causes of prejudice, including misogyny, starting in primary. I express my gratitude to the many teachers who are working hard to teach about equality, stereotypes and respect.

In the past year, we have produced webinars to support teachers to address key topics related to violence against women and girls, including pornography, child sexual exploitation and domestic abuse. We will be publishing new non-statutory guidance later this year providing practical advice to teachers and teaching about sexual harassment, sexual violence, and violence against women and girls. That will support schools to take a whole-school approach to combating prejudice and building a culture of respect. A whole-school approach includes not only preventive education but a zero-tolerance approach to abusive behaviour in schools and a robust approach to safeguarding.

Good behaviour in schools is absolutely essential to a good education. Our recently updated “Behaviour in schools” guidance advises schools on how to develop calm, safe and supportive environments where pupils and staff feel safe and respected. Schools should be clear in every aspect of their culture that sexual violence and sexual harassment are never acceptable and will not be tolerated. Pupils should be taught how to behave appropriately and to meet the high standards expected of them, and staff should respond assertively and challenge all sexually inappropriate language and behaviour between pupils. Those interventions are necessary to prevent abusive or violent behaviour in the future and to make clear that sexually abusive language or behaviour is never acceptable.

It is particularly important that headteachers lead the creation and reinforcement of a respectful school culture, ensuring that it permeates through every aspect of school life. Pupils who fall short of those expectations should and can be sanctioned appropriately, in accordance with their school’s behaviour policy.

We have strengthened the “Keeping children safe in education” guidance. On the back of Ofsted’s review, it now includes specific advice on sexual violence and sexual harassment, and puts it on a statutory footing, recognising the importance of supporting schools and colleges in what is an extremely difficult role. We are clear that safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility. However, the role of schools and colleges is critical. We remain committed to ensuring that they have the tools and support to carry out their responsibilities.

Although education is a key tool in combating prejudice and creating a culture of respect, we recognise that, as the hon. Member for Pontypridd said, misogyny is a societal problem that arises partly from the harmful content that pupils might access online. The online world should not be a refuge for violent misogyny, and the Government are committed to ensuring that there are sufficient protections for women and girls online.

The Online Safety Bill contains strong protections for women and girls, who face disproportionate abuse online. The strongest protections in the Bill, of course, are for children. The Bill will make the UK the safest place to be a child online. As well as protecting children from illegal material, all services likely to be accessed by children will need to provide additional protection for those children. Those safety measures will need to protect children from harmful content and behaviours such as bullying, abuse and harassment, as well as content depicting or promoting violence.

Finally, I reiterate our commitment to supporting schools in their work to educate young people about prejudice of all forms and to protect them from harmful

behaviour. We know that this work can be challenging and that many schools are doing it to a very high standard. Some schools are struggling, but all pupils in our schools deserve to grow up in a culture of respect and kindness. This Government are committed to ensuring that they do.

Question put and agreed to.

5.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 19 January 2023

[SIR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme: Pathway 3

1.30 pm

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Because, to borrow a phrase from the Minister, this is a small but perfectly formed Westminster Hall gathering, we will start the Back-Bench wind-ups at 2.28 pm. Jim will do no more than 20 minutes and Debbie will do no more than five. The Minister has said—I think he will want to give a full answer—that if there is any chance we can squeeze out an extra two minutes for him, that would be good. I will manage the other three contributions, but just try to give the Minister a little extra time. I hope that is all right with the Labour Front Bench.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Only if I get my full 10 minutes.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): You will get your full 10 minutes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Pathway 3 of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir Charles. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to raise this essential issue. I am pleased to see many right hon. and hon. Members here to make contributions today, and we know why: because this is a critical issue. In the main Chamber today the Minister made a reference to it in an urgent question. I look across at the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). He kept his eyes down, so I could not catch whether he was happy or not, but perhaps today we will get some positivity. We will wait to see what happens.

There has been massive parliamentary attention on Afghan relocation schemes in recent weeks, both here and in the other place. That is important, because nearly 18 months after the fall of Kabul, the Afghan citizens relocation scheme still has thousands of available places. With respect to hon. Members present, it is important for those who are spending their lives hiding in Afghanistan, waiting and hoping for a decision on their expression of interest in claiming asylum in the UK.

For 18 years, tens of thousands of people in Afghanistan worked alongside British citizens to strengthen democracy and create a country where it was possible for women to work or obtain an education. It grieves me how the Afghanistan authorities treat women and others. It is disgraceful. They cannot get an education and cannot build a future. Afghan religious minorities are not allowed to operate or worship their God as they would like to.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): A case that I have raised in this House many times has been with my office from August last year when troops were withdrawn, and still there is no end in sight. My constituent's young wife, the daughter of an allied forces translator, was not deemed to be eligible for any pathway scheme and is now waiting for approval on a spousal visa. Does the hon. Member agree that still, a year and a half on, the policy for Afghan citizens remains too opaque and difficult to navigate?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. I am sure that when the Minister responds, such questions will be fully answered. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue.

We all know what happened when the rapid Taliban advance in 2021 culminated in the fall of Kabul and Operation Pitting. We also know that as these events unfolded, the UK Government implemented the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and, exactly one year ago, the Afghan citizens relocation scheme. This debate serves as a moment to look back on the last year and assess, as the hon. Lady said, how far we have moved on that; many of us feel that we have not moved.

The ACRS has three pathways. The first is for people who have already been airlifted out of Afghanistan—there were some of those—and now need help settling in the UK. The second is for those who have already escaped to a third country, such as Pakistan, and are in the hands of the UNHCR. The third is the one that probably reflects our British values the most. It is no secret that I am very proud to be British. I look upon this great nation as a nation that delivers on its compassion and understanding, and therefore I want this scheme to be implemented in its totality. The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay, who will follow me, will confirm that as well. We have a real problem. For those who have been identified as belonging to a particularly vulnerable group, two issues emerge in relation to pathway 3 time and time again. The first is a lack of clarity, and the second is a lack of urgency. Where is it? I cannot see it at all.

When the scheme was launched, a core component of pathway 3 was the focus on providing safe asylum routes to help members of minorities who were specifically identified as being at the most risk under Taliban rule, and I give the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay lots of credit for consistently speaking in defence of the scheme. The three groups identified were religious minorities, members of the LGBT community and pro-democracy activists. All three groups were deemed to be under a high risk of a violent attack but had been excluded from the ARAP scheme.

Even at the outset of ACRS, there was confusion about when people could expect to start receiving help. The scheme launched with the intended aim of resettling 20,000 people in five years. However, Afghans were only allowed to register an expression of interest seven months after the scheme formally opened. In the short time that that window was open, over 11,400 expressions of interest were submitted under pathway 3. The vast majority of those who expressed an interest had to wait, even though their lives were in danger. I have the utmost respect for the Minister, but that is why we are so frustrated about where we are.

The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay is likely to go into greater depth on this issue, and I want to give him lots of time to put forward his understanding of

[*Jim Shannon*]

where the scheme is and where it is going. Last Wednesday, he led a Westminster Hall debate on British Council contractors who are eligible for pathway 3. Indeed, at the opening of the scheme, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) stated that, alongside GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni, they would be the priority group for 2022. Some 200 teachers, security guards and frontline staff were to be offered a safe haven in the UK alongside family members. These people represented those who worked on the frontline, who were recruited to teach British values across Afghanistan. They were people who we—this country and the United Kingdom Government—left behind, and it is clear that we owe a duty to them. As such, I was delighted to hear the Minister confirm during last week's debate that half the contractors have had their applications granted. Maybe I will leave that point to the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. What appals me is the fact that we sought assurances in that debate, we received them, and we seemed to be finally making progress—I will go into that in a bit more detail later. The debate was on the Wednesday afternoon, and then I was phoned on the Thursday evening and informed by a *Guardian* journalist that the Government were retracting those assurances. We now have a mish-mash of assurances, some of which are in *Hansard* and some of which are not. That is one of the things we need to sort out in this debate—clarity—and I am looking forward to my right hon. Friend the Minister providing it.

Jim Shannon: In a couple of sentences, the hon. Gentleman has succinctly summarised where we were last Wednesday and where we are today. Unfortunately, we have not seen the clarity that is necessary.

There are questions to ask. How many people have been accepted under the ACRS? How many people fit into each category? How many of those accepted are still in Afghanistan, living under the threat of violence from the Taliban? Will the scheme continue in 2023, and when will the scheme finally open to at-risk minority groups, such as religious minorities, the Hazaras and LGBT people? Will the estimate of 20,000 still be reached? The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay covered the issues surrounding British contractors so well last week.

On 30 September 2022, a suicide bomb exploded at the Kaaj Educational Centre in Kabul. The school is in the Hazara district and was packed with hundreds of girls preparing for exams to enter university—young girls just wanting to have a life and to plan a way forward. They were brutally attacked, and some of them were killed. Some 54 students were killed, and over 100 were injured.

There has been a long history of the Taliban targeting the Hazara Muslims. Recent years have seen an increase in attacks, and at least 700 Hazaras have been killed by the Taliban or Islamic State Khorasan since August 2021. There appears to be a deliberate targeting of young Hazara girls—not just in violent attacks, but in an attempt to rob the community of ladies and young girls. I have three granddaughters, and I want them to have opportunities. If they were living in Afghanistan, they would not have any opportunities—that is a fact.

Taliban fighters have sought to remove girls from their communities through forced marriages, rape and forced engagements. I was shocked to find out that in some cases, those girls have been as young—it is hard to even say it—as three years old. What is going on in this world when we hear things like that? In Afghanistan, we see a clear attempt to destroy the Hazara community using violence and killings, but also through the forcible transfer of children out of the group; both acts can be indicators of genocide. The Hazaras are far from the only group at risk, but we need them to feature in this process.

Other religious minorities have also been devastated under the Taliban. The number of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan fell from 400 to 150 in three years, with attacks by IS-K against both communities having been reported. There used to be 15,000 Christians in Afghanistan, but 13,000 of those have relocated to the United States of America, Albania or Brazil. The US scheme was set up after the ACRS, using in part the model that the UK promoted in our resettlement scheme—they liked our model so much that they made it their model for bringing people in. I speak up for the Hazaras, the Muslims, the Christians and others, because Christian minorities have to be protected if they are not going to get protection in Afghanistan. Since 2004, Afghanistan had enshrined freedom of religion within its constitution. Today, however, religious diversity in the country has been all but extinguished, with those who remain facing the risk of attacks, atrocity crimes or charges under sharia.

As well as religious minorities, thousands of pro-democracy activists have been left at risk. Some are journalists and some are activists, but many were excluded from the list, and I, like others, want them to be included on it. Members of these groups cannot sit around for five years waiting for a decision; they cannot wait. There is an urgency about this, and an ache among those of us who are speaking for a response from the Minister about where we are. In the year that the ACRS opened, not a single British Council contractor, GardaWorld contractor, Chevening alumnus or member of an at-risk minority was brought out of Afghanistan under pathway 3. What? Why have a scheme if it does not work? It is so frustrating. I am not being critical and nasty—you know that is not in my nature, Sir Charles—but I feel an absolute frustration with where we are.

The Scottish Refugee Council—believe it or not, I genuinely look to Scotland to see what it does, because many times it is far ahead of us—has reported that between January and June 2022, more than 2,000 Afghans sought safety in the UK by making a small boat crossing across the channel. These are desperate asylum seekers, not economic migrants; they are people who just want to live and to have a future. That report also notes that 97% of asylum claims from Afghans who have made those crossings have been successful.

The delay in opening safe migration routes for Afghanistan has directly contributed to some of the most vulnerable groups in the world risking their lives by paying criminal gangs to cross the English channel in a small boat. At best, a lack of clarity and urgency in the scheme is causing more fear, uncertainty and suffering for some of the most at-risk groups in Afghanistan. At worst, the delay and the lack of access are directly putting lives at risk. What is happening in Afghanistan is a humanitarian disaster on an immense level—a level of intensity that cannot be imagined, in my mind at

least. A rapid response to disasters is key to saving lives, and we need that urgency. We need to see that rapid response, with our Government and our Minister working hard to make that happen.

However, Afghanistan is not the only humanitarian disaster that the UK Government are responding to. Two months after the opening of the ACRS, Russia invaded Ukraine. That invasion triggered the largest mass migration in Europe since the second world war as refugees fled Ukraine. I commend the Government's quick action in that case, setting up the Ukrainian resettlement pathway, and I am proud of the response of my community, with many in Strangford supporting and hosting Ukrainians. We have a missionary society, Faith in Action, led by Donald and Jacqui Fleming and a fella called Tinsley. Those people are part of that response, and we have brought many Ukrainian asylum seekers—they are not here forever, but only for a certain period of time—to my town of Newtownards and across Northern Ireland, supported by church groups.

There is a marked difference in how the Government have responded through the two schemes. It has been reported by the BBC that fewer than 10 staff in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are working on ACRS. In contrast, there is a team of 50 staff working on behalf of Ukrainians. To clarify, I am not saying that there should not be such a large team working on the Ukrainian scheme—I am glad that there is—but why is there not such a large team working for Afghans as well?

I understand that the Government's role is to set priorities, and that many priorities have been re-evaluated in the light of Russia's aggression. I still believe passionately that we are a generous country and, as far as I am aware, no statement has been made to the House on changes to the ACRS. However, one year on, the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is clearly not working. That is the situation and why I have secured the debate to request change on behalf of those people.

Last week, the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay highlighted the failure to support British Council contractors who were being prioritised in 2022. The scheme fails to support minorities, leaving many with an uncertain future, forced to live in hiding, suffering regular attacks and worrying for their lives, not knowing what tomorrow brings, which concerns me. They are even faced with potential genocidal activities, as there has been against the Hazaras, Christians and others.

Looking to the next year of the scheme, it is vital that more information is made available and guidance for pathway 3 needs to be publicised. We need to fulfil the promises we made to British Council contractors and others employed to help further democracy in Afghanistan. I pray for Afghanistan and many other countries across the world every day, because I believe in prayer and that God gives us a job to do. While prayer is important, it is not the only thing that matters. Physical endeavours from our Government are also important.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion as I made a commitment to you, Sir Charles, to keep to 20 minutes. More needs to be done to protect the three vulnerable groups that pathway 3 was built around. A stronger intervention is needed in light of the credible risk of genocide against the Hazaras. The all-party parliamentary group on Hazaras does fantastic work and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) has also raised the issue of Hazaras in the House.

I will pose some challenging questions for the Minister, but I do not wish to be judgmental. First, given the resourcing allocated to the FCDO and the impact of the crisis in Ukraine, is the ACRS still a priority for the Government? Secondly, does the Minister agree that we have a moral duty to help those who supported the British effort in Afghanistan and those at greatest risk because of their identity? Thirdly, with the evidence highlighted by the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, the Hazara inquiry and others, is there enough evidence for the Minister to recognise the potential risk of genocide in Afghanistan in the near future? Fourthly, will the ACRS continue in 2023 and will it finally include at-risk minority groups, such as the Hazaras, the Christians and members of the LGBT community, as well as journalists who endeavoured to make Afghanistan a better country when Britain and other western nations tried to introduce democracy to Afghanistan?

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate and giving me the chance to promote the case I have outlined. I look forward to the contributions from other hon. Members, including the shadow spokespeople. We are all here with the same message, Sir Charles: we need urgency, let us help those people and let us do it right now.

1.49 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As always, it is lovely to see you in the Chair, Sir Charles. I congratulate my dear friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. He is always the last person to intervene in debates in the House, but on this occasion he was the first speaker. He has spent his life challenging and trying to make right injustice, not just in our constituencies and our country but across the world. He is an emblem of what being an MP should be about.

I should refer to the register of interests, as I am the vice chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghanistan. But my interest stems from the fact that one of my caseworkers is originally from Afghanistan. She was a judge and had to leave; there were two attempts to assassinate her because she had the audacity to set up education centres for women and girls. My passion for the subject is driven by her and I want to commend her for that.

Since the evacuation, Operation Pitting, in August 2021, Afghanistan has faced the worst political, economic and social conditions in 30 years. The brunt of that has been felt by women—it is absolutely appalling. There are 60 oral and written decrees restricting women's lives: removing their participation in secondary and higher education and their employment in Afghan institutions; preventing travel without a male relative; limiting social lives and activities, including the right to protest and freedom of speech; and dictating what women wear. Can we imagine that? I know there are few women in the Chamber, but could the men in the Chamber imagine if that happened to them? It is absolutely horrendous.

Many of us will have seen on social media the public floggings meted out to women who dare to contravene any of those diktats. We have seen the results of the torture of women who have deemed to have stepped even further. Earlier this week, we learned about the murder of Mursal Nabizada, a human rights advocate, somebody who Marzia knew and a former member of

[*Debbie Abrahams*]

the Afghan Parliament—the cowardice of the men who gunned her and her bodyguard down! I wanted to speak in the debate because unless we do something about the resettlement scheme that our Government committed to back in 2021, we will see more and more women killed—a femicide, if you like. I do not use that phrase lightly.

There are 70 women, former Afghan judges, who had that job taken from them in 2021 and are in hiding in Afghanistan. They sent many of the current Taliban gunmen to prison for a variety of abuses and offences. Those judges are on the Taliban’s hitlist, and if we do not do anything they will surely be targeted and gunned down. I urge the Minister to act. We promised in 2021 to resettle 20,000 people, and those women should be high on that list. We have settled just over 6,000, all under the first pathway apart from four. It is not good enough.

I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford that the Minister has a history of being an excellent advocate in this regard. Will he please indicate how many staff will be dedicated to this? I endorse the questions that have been asked by the hon. Member. We should not compare different schemes, but one cannot help but notice the difference between the attention that Ukraine has received and this.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Thank you for being absolutely on five minutes. I will give the three Back-Bench colleagues 10 minutes each, but I will stop them at 10.

1.54 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on calling the debate.

This is a very unfortunate situation. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister is an honourable man, and he has a good reputation when it comes to compassion and international aid, but I am afraid that he is overseeing, or is at least in part responsible for, a scheme that is simply not working. As was well pointed out earlier, the scheme was introduced with great fanfare a year ago, and to our knowledge it has not helped one person. Worse, there seems to be a lack of clarity about where we are with it.

Last Wednesday’s debate has been referred to a few times. We debated the ACRS scheme pathway 3 as it related to 200 British Council contractors who were stuck in Afghanistan. They are moving from safe house to safe house, and many of them are in fear of their lives, as they are being hunted. We have all had some harrowing stories and emails about how, for example, professors could not go to a hospital with their daughters, and a daughter subsequently dying because the Taliban had ringed the hospital. I opposed the mission of nation building in Afghanistan, but whatever one thinks of the mission, these people were brave enough to put their head above the parapet and say, “We will help to promote western/British values”—whether by teaching English, dealing with women’s equal rights or by other means. To many of them, if not all, it feels that we have turned our back on them.

I sought four assurances from the Minister last Wednesday. Have 100 of the 200 contractors been given the go-ahead to go to the border? Will the lack of paperwork not impede their entry into a third country? Will the ball now get rolling for the second 100, who had not heard anything after their initial application? They are quite literally in the dark. Finally, can we please ensure that talk of quotas—particularly the quota of 1,500 not just for the British Council but for the GardaWorld workforce and Chevening scholars, whom I also want to include, because we are thinking of them as well—will not impede people’s leaving if they have a right to do so under the scheme? I fully appreciate that there are sensitivities in relation to the issue of paperwork, so I will not dwell on or put the Government in a difficult situation on that. Sometimes things are best understood rather than relayed in detail in a debate like this, because there are local sensitivities with one or two third-party countries.

We received those assurances. It was on the record; it was quite categorical. Those who participated in the debate went away thinking, “Finally, we are making progress.” That was Wednesday afternoon.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr Baron: No. If the hon. Lady does not mind, I will crack on, because I want to ensure that I stay within my 10 minutes—for everybody’s sake. I apologise, and I am sure that she will make her point in due course.

The debate was on Wednesday afternoon. On Thursday evening, I was phoned by a journalist, who told me that the Government were now retracting all those points and would be correcting *Hansard*. I did not get confirmation of that from the Government until Friday afternoon. I have the transcript. *Hansard* has allowed some corrections but not others, so we now have a mishmash of assurances given, some retracted through *Hansard* and some not. This is where I seek clarity from the Minister. This is causing great distress, not just for people here who are passionate about the issue, but most importantly for the people in the country who are trying to get out.

At the moment, marrying up the Government’s corrections—those that have been accepted by *Hansard*, but also those that were not, and therefore referring back to Wednesday’s debate—we seem to have the following situation. It is not 100 who have been given the go-ahead. I seek clarification on this, and I look to my right hon. Friend the Minister’s team to pass whatever notes that they can by way of clarification. This is the situation: on the first assurance, the number was not 100; instead, 47 have been told to head for the border. That is the latest figure. We do not know precisely what state that is in, in the sense of how many have reached a third country or whatever, but we know that 47—according to the correction—have been granted and told, “Right, off you go.”

I have mentioned the paperwork, which we will not talk about. My understanding, however, without going into any further detail, is that a lack of paperwork will not impede entry—exit from Afghanistan is one thing, and entry to a third country another one, but it will not impede entry here. That is how the situation stands, I believe.

The third assurance was about the second 100 of the 200 British Council contractors, who have not heard anything at all since applying, which was a year or so ago. They are still in the dark, according to the correction.

In other words, they have not been contacted, despite us being told that some of them had been. I wait for clarification.

The final point was about quotas. In *Hansard*, last Wednesday the Minister made the point—this stands, because it has not been corrected; *Hansard* is not allowed to be corrected—that the quotas talk of 1,500 for the ACRS pathway 3, for those three groups that we have mentioned, still stands. Personally, I find that distasteful. It is almost shameful, because there was no mention of quotas when we asked people in Afghanistan to volunteer and no mention of quotas when it came to the extent of their courage in actually supporting the mission in the country. Yet here we are, talking about 1,500 as a quota, when we cannot really put a quota or figure on anything like that

I ask the Minister to address that point specifically. I know it is a little further down the line, because we have to start getting people out first, but I really do not want to hear any news about quotas, or the Government saying that people will have to wait in danger further, because last week the Minister was talking about a second iteration of the scheme. I seek that clarification from the Minister. I will finish early, but I hope he will allow time so that we can make the intervention if we do not think that we have it.

In summary, I say to the Minister: we need clarity and we need to ensure that we set the record straight, so that people not just here but, most importantly, in Afghanistan know where they stand. Above all else, if it is still correct that 47 have been given the go-ahead, roughly 150 British Council contractors and their families—also, GardaWorld workers and Chevening scholars—remain in the dark and have not been told anything. We need to get this sorted now. They need to be contacted and told that they can head for the border, paperwork or not. I seek those assurances from the Minister when he makes his contribution.

2.3 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), on securing the debate, which is incredibly important. We have debated the issue again and again, because unfortunately we have not so far had a satisfactory outcome.

The Taliban's control of Afghanistan is devastating for millions of people. That is especially true for women and girls, who fear for their lives. Once again, their liberties and rights are being extinguished. Since the Taliban returned to power, women have been removed from nearly all areas of public life. Girls are banned from going to high school, women are largely restricted from working outside the home and a male chaperone must accompany women when they travel long distances. The draconian rules put in place by the Taliban constrain women's ability to earn a living, to access healthcare and education, to escape violence and to exercise their rights. I was outraged to hear about the killing of former Afghan MP Mursal Nabizada earlier this week. In Afghanistan, no woman is safe.

A country's morality is defined by how it treats those in need. When leaving Afghanistan, the Government promised to do everything it could to support those who helped the UK's mission. That included setting up bespoke Afghan resettlement schemes focusing on the most vulnerable, in particular women and children. Afghans put their lives at risk for our country.

Margaret Ferrier: The second pathway of the scheme is the only one that offers refugee status to those who are resettled in the UK. Pathway 3 is specifically for individuals seen to be particularly at risk in the region, but it does not offer refugee status. Does the hon. Member agree that that downplays the severity of harm faced by those eligible for pathway 3, and it could be used to excuse the low numbers resettled under what is a crucial aspect of the scheme?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I will come on to the three different pathways, but I agree. The Government underestimate the danger that absolutely everybody in Afghanistan still lives under, and we need to do more.

Pathway 1 is for those who have effectively already been settled in the UK. Pathway 2 is for those who have been referred by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Pathway 3 is for those who worked for or were affiliated with the British Government. None of those promises were exactly generous—pitiful, even—but the Government did not even fulfil them. We talk a lot about broken promises in this place. These are broken promises that risk lives.

The Government say that over 20,000 Afghan refugees have been resettled in the UK. However, many of those places have been granted to people who were already here. Women and girls in Afghanistan were meant to be a priority, yet they have been left without a specific route to apply to the scheme. In July last year, Foreign Office officials admitted that many of those who helped our country would not have the opportunity to resettle in the UK. How good is that?

Thousands of those who have arrived remain stuck in hotels up and down the country. Most of them have been there for well over a year now. One refugee compared living in one of those hotels to living in a prison. Not a single person has been accepted and evacuated from Afghanistan under pathway 3. Although pathway 3 makes provision for particularly vulnerable minority groups, those groups were excluded from the 1,500 places offered in 2022, and there has been no clarification on when places will be offered to them.

The Home Office has published some vague intention to work with international partners and non-governmental organisations to welcome wider groups of people who are at risk in Afghanistan, but no details have yet been released. It is a thin veil trying to disguise that the Government intend to do very little, or nothing. Only about eight members of staff are working on the Afghan resettlement scheme in the Foreign Office. In sharp contrast, the Government were recently able to find 400 new processing staff for the scheme to target Albanians, and £140 million to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I think it would be helpful to clarify that there are 30 members of staff working on this.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for that clarification. It is important to put it right on the record, but it is still in sharp contrast to the numbers that are targeting the Albanians. We need to do more, and I am sure the Minister recognises that.

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

As a country, we must recognise the positive contributions of refugees. I have recently taken on an Afghan refugee in my office. He fled Afghanistan in 2021 under harrowing circumstances, and he is a wonderful asset to my team. Even in his case, although he was working for the British Council, the parliamentary authorities have been curiously unhelpful in supporting me to give him full employment access.

My Bath constituency has welcomed Afghan refugees with open arms. I am grateful to the generosity of the University of Bath in providing warm welcome scholarships and sanctuary scholarships to Afghan students at a time when Afghan refugees were suffering, struggling and hoping for a better future. The university has generously provided financial assistance to Afghan scholars and students who wish to further their academic and professional development skills. I am also grateful for the way Afghan refugees have been welcomed and supported by authorities such as Bath Welcomes Refugees and Julian House, and by local constituents in Bath.

It is unforgivable that the Government are not offering the support and help that many in Afghanistan need. Many are highly qualified professionals who simply wish to come here, find a job and make a positive contribution. Many of my constituents continue to ask for assistance in relocating their relatives and friends from Afghanistan. For more than 17 months, British Council contractors have feared for their lives in Afghanistan, or Iran or Pakistan where they have fled to, waiting for their eligibility offers to relocate to the UK. I would be thankful if the Minister could explain why British Council contractors on the Connecting Classrooms project have not been contacted regarding their resettlement applications and how the UK Government will support Afghan refugees trapped in Iran and Pakistan who are being threatened by the Taliban while they wait.

The Government must restore the international development budget to provide much-needed help to Afghan people. I know the Minister has been a very vocal supporter of that, and I am very grateful. I hope that within Government now he pushes for that again. Our Government must stand by their word and open safe and legal routes to those at risk in Afghanistan so that they can come here to the UK. By taking those steps, we can finally uphold our obligations to the people of Afghanistan. That means working constructively with local authorities so that Afghans in this country can finally start their new lives properly here in a home rather than a hotel room.

The invasion of Afghanistan was controversial at the time, but the Conservatives and the Opposition supported the invasion. Either way, the UK now has a duty to help those left behind, especially those who have risked their lives to help the UK. Washing our hands of what is happening now in Afghanistan would be the most cynical abdication of our country's duty.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Olivia Blake, for 10 minutes.

2.11 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles. Before I begin, I would like to point Members to my entry in the

Register of Members' Financial Interests. I receive support from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project for my work on these issues and am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the time for this debate and for talking with such heartfelt and genuine concern about this issue at a time when it has truly slipped down the agenda. I thank him for allowing us to voice our concerns to Ministers.

Just this week, community members and organisations supporting Afghans in the UK handed in a letter to Downing Street addressed to the Prime Minister to highlight the continued plight of those who fled Afghanistan nearly 18 months ago. As pathway 3 opens, it is right to anticipate some of the potential issues, as has been said, with the system, and reflect on the record of pathway 1 in order to avoid those issues. Since August 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has estimated that over 1.2 million Afghans have arrived in neighbouring countries, out of which 258,000 have approached those countries with protection needs. Put in this context, our commitment to help 20,000 people seems very small.

Nowhere is that more obvious than when comparing the numbers of people resettled through safe and legal routes to the numbers of Afghans crossing the channel in small boats and making claims for refugee status. Since the fall of Kabul, the number of Afghans arriving in small boats has increased dramatically. According to the Home Office's latest data, between January 2022 and September 2022 Afghans made up a staggering 15% of all nationalities that came via small boat. Harrowingly, in total there were 4,781 arrivals—almost as many as the 6,000 people who have settled through pathway 1. That underlines the argument that the real crisis is the lack of safe and legal routes for people fleeing conflict and persecution.

The numbers we are accepting do not match our moral obligation to help. We are already seeing this reflected in the pathway 3 process. I agree with the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) that the first pathway 3 target to resettle 1,500 people is just so disrespectful and irresponsible. We are talking about people who have been contractors for the British Council and GardaWorld, and Chevening scholarship alumni too. During the eight-week window in which people were able to declare their interest in this pathway, 11,400 people applied. The number of people applying to the scheme vastly outweighs the number of people the Government aim to accept.

They say that later on the scheme will open to more vulnerable minority groups and women and girls, but how much longer can those groups afford to wait? The Taliban has now banned women and girls from education. Every month that they remain in Afghanistan, their vulnerability and the restrictions on them increase, so the Government must increase the scale of the pathway and the pace at which it is implemented.

To ensure that pathway 3 runs as smoothly as possible, we must learn the lessons from pathway 1. So far, just over 6,000 Afghans have settled in the UK through that strand of the resettlement scheme. Those who have made it to the UK under pathway 1 are yet to be able to bring their family members here, despite the Government's promises that that would be possible.

Since Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated even further. Members of the Afghan community in the UK will be

worried about their loved ones who are still there. I understand that Afghans on pathway 1 have been granted indefinite leave to remain without refugee status, which means that they cannot access refugee family reunion. They rely on the Government to keep the promises about family reunion that were made in the context of the resettlement scheme. I hope the Minister will confirm that they will honour that commitment and urgently ensure that family reunion can happen for those already here under pathway 1.

Currently, there are no concessions for Afghans with family members who are resident in the UK for regular family reunion visas. Regular family reunion visas come with bureaucratic hurdles and huge costs. The Ukraine family scheme shows a different way forward, and the Home Office can learn from that. It must act now and develop a proper family reunion mechanism for Afghan families. I ask the Minister to think again and look at the lessons learned from the Ukrainian scheme to see whether something else can be offered to Afghans who have made their lives here and are worried about their families.

It is clear to me that the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme's criteria for relocation are far too narrow. Its pace and scale are insufficient and leave vulnerable people at significant risk. They either stay in Afghanistan, where they will be unsafe, or they are left with no option other than to attempt dangerous journeys across the channel or be in places where they are not safe if they have protected characteristics, such as LGBT people and religious minorities.

We must urgently open safe routes so that people can relocate, and we must immediately prioritise family reunion so that Afghans already in the UK can be reunited with their loved ones. Those people must not have to make perilous journeys and be persecuted by other Government policies if they choose to do so.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank Back-Bench colleagues for their succinct and informative speeches. I ask the Opposition Front Benchers to stick to 10 minutes, as the Minister wants to be generous in answering and wants to take interventions. Thank you for your forbearance.

2.17 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Charles. That is no problem at all.

I thank all hon. Members for their powerful contributions. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has done us a great service by securing this debate. In normal times, we would debate Afghanistan and the situation we have left it in much more frequently than we do. Obviously, other things have come to overshadow that, but he and other hon. Members have not let it slip, so I am very grateful to all of them for continuing to make the case.

The report by the Foreign Affairs Committee on the retreat from Afghanistan gives useful context. It described the withdrawal as

“a disaster and a betrayal of our allies that will damage the UK's interests for years to come.”

It contains a section that succinctly describes what we are talking about. It says:

“Most damning for the Foreign Office is the total absence of a plan for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government, despite knowing 18 months before the collapse of Afghanistan that an evacuation might be necessary. The hasty effort to select those eligible for evacuation was poorly devised, managed, and staffed; and the department failed to perform the most basic crisis-management functions. The lack of clarity led to confusion and false hope among our Afghan partners who were desperate for rescue. They, and the many civil servants and soldiers working hard on the evacuation, were utterly let down by deep failures of leadership in Government.”

Many of those described as having been utterly let down by the FCDO are now caught up in attempting to leave Afghanistan by using pathway 3 of the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme. As Members set out, they face huge peril, and it is right that we scrutinise very closely indeed how the Government are responding to their needs, given that stinging critique.

We welcome the fact that there is a bespoke scheme, but given what happened, it would have been totally unacceptable had there not been one. There are some positive features—for example, those who benefit from the scheme get indefinite leave to remain—but even here the absence of the full rights of refugee status for those on pathways 1 and 3 is regrettable. That point was made by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier).

Overall, I am afraid our analysis is that the Afghan scheme has been totally inadequate. It has been too restrictive in criteria, too limited in ambition and too slow in implementation, and the consequence is that it will damage the reputation of the UK, as pointed out by Members in the debate last week. It will see a continued high number of Afghans resorting to irregular routes to the United Kingdom; there, they will meet the full force of the horrendous asylum reforms that the Government are implementing. I will make a few short points on those three criticisms: restrictive criteria, limited ambition and slow implementation.

First, there is the way that the three pathways are set up and their relationship with ARAP. The set-up is not entirely without logic, but I believe that there is a heavy stink of categories being tweaked for the Government's convenience, rather than because it is fair or just. Given that he is here, I will take the liberty of quoting from the speech made last week by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), in which he pointed out that

“People who got out under Operation Pitting have been retrospectively shoehorned into various schemes.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 287WH.]

That has allowed the Government to inflate the number of people who have been resettled—if we can call it “resettled”—under the citizens resettlement scheme. In addition, the criteria for ARAP were tightened so that those who would have got status under that scheme have now been counted towards the ACRS. The Government can say that they have made great strides towards their vague—and, I think, unambitious—target of 20,000 in the years ahead when, in reality, little progress has been made at all since August 2021.

If we take a step back, the reality is that we are called on to deal with two types of cases. First, there are cases where people have been put at a degree of risk because they contributed to our mission in Afghanistan. To my mind, there should be no question about our obligation

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

to provide a safe home to all those individuals, but the Government have, in essence, defined that group much more narrowly by reference to military objectives and a direct employment relationship, rather than the broader objectives of the UK's presence there. Surely the uncapped ARAP schemes should also apply for the British Council staff, the GardaWorld contractors, the Chevening alumni and so on.

Our obligation to these people is such that there should be no question of there being a vague ambition of 20,000 people or, worse, what seems to be a 1,500 cap per year for those on pathway 3. Our obligation to those people should be diluted or restricted in absolutely no way at all, and that is precisely the point made by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay in his speech.

The second group of people are those in danger of persecution if they remain in or return to Afghanistan, not because of involvement in or support of the UK mission in Afghanistan but because of the general situation there, which has been described in detail by hon. Members. That is clearly a huge segment of the population and it is not an obligation that can lie solely on the United Kingdom, but we must play a role alongside our international allies. So far, our efforts in that regard have been absolutely inadequate. Pathway 2, for those outside Afghanistan and referred by the UNHCR, was supposed to reach 2,000 people in one year, but by September only four had arrived, if I am correct; I do not know if there is an update on that.

Meanwhile, pathway 3 supposedly prioritises vulnerable people from within Afghanistan, but it does not really do that at all. Someone gets such priority only if they have already established that they meet other eligibility criteria, such as being a British Council staff member or a contractor. It seems wrong that there is no more general pathway for vulnerable groups such as the LGBT community, religious minorities, political activists or women, in particular those who have taken up jobs such as acting as a judge.

Alongside that, there is the powerful point made by the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and for Sheffield, Hallam that there are no additional pathways for those with obvious links to the United Kingdom, such as having family here, perhaps being former residents or other such ties. Surely it makes sense for people who live here—with parents, siblings or others, perhaps, still in Afghanistan—to much more easily be able to sponsor them to come here. I commend the many organisations that wrote to the Prime Minister earlier this week to explain that family separation not only has a terrible impact on the individuals in Afghanistan, but puts a colossal strain on family members here in the UK. Those families need to be reunited.

The failure to provide routes for such people who have clear links to the UK—whether under pathway 3, a family reunion or anything else—brings me to my final point, which I just touched on. There is clearly a significant possibility that many of these people will therefore seek to make it here irregularly and, as has been said, that is borne out by the number of Afghans arriving in small boats. Members will have heard me speak at length in the Chamber about my opposition, and my party's opposition, to the approach being taken by the Government to people arriving in small boats.

I will leave that broad debate for another day, but surely even those who support the Government must be given pause for thought about the implications for Afghans who arrive in the small boats.

Given what has happened there, how can it possibly be right to criminalise and detain, and then pack off to Rwanda, people who were so badly let down by the Foreign Office in Afghanistan? Among them will be those who would qualify for some of the pathways but gave up waiting, as well as those who do not qualify for any of the pathways but, for utterly understandable reasons, have sought to have their claim heard in the United Kingdom. What is wrong with simply treating these people with dignity, hearing their asylum claim and granting it quickly in the overwhelming number of cases?

Finally, I mentioned those who qualified but gave up waiting. That brings me to the “too slow” criticism. It is painfully slow, as we explored in last week's debate, and as has been expressed this afternoon. I was going to ask the Minister also about the number of staff who are operating here. He has given us an answer, but I thought that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made a very good point about the number of staff who are working on other schemes.

The Home Office actually seems to enjoy creating extra work for itself, even though it struggles to get through what it has already been tasked with. For example, asylum claims now have to be reviewed every three years, and people are having to make a decision on admissibility six months before they will even look at the asylum claim. We have 2 million EU citizens with pre-settled status who will now be asked to apply again for full settled status. Why not ask the Home Office to stop giving itself so much additional unnecessary work and move those people to work on the Afghan scheme? It would be a simple solution.

It also seems that a lot of the infrastructure that the UK built up during the Syrian resettlement scheme has been allowed to rot away because, for years, the Government failed to explain their long-term resettlement strategy or numbers. That is something that they are still a bit guilty of. There is also another debate to be had about the deficiencies in how those who make it here from Afghanistan have been supported, but at least they are here, so I will leave that for another day, given the clock.

In summary, we owe the people of Afghanistan. Setting up the schemes was essential, but, in practice, they have been too restrictive, too unambitious, and too slow. We are not coming close to living up to our obligations, and there must be a significant ramping up of resources and of effort.

2.27 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am genuinely grateful to you, Mr Walker. It is an absolute pleasure to serve—

Mr Mitchell: Sir Charles.

Ms Lyn Brown: Sorry?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): No need to worry, just some friendly heckling.

Ms Lyn Brown: Oh, really? I will remember that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing about this debate and allowing us all to discuss it today.

Hon. Members have rightly raised some horrifying cases. Last week, the BBC highlighted the case of Zuhra, who talked of her pride at having worked for the British Council in a massively high-profile role as a teacher who starred in promotional videos about her work. Now, because the Government have failed to offer her a way out, Zuhra lives in fear, constantly moving with her family to avoid being identified and targeted, while stifled by ever-increasing restrictions on women's freedoms.

Despite the lack of any news about her application to pathway 3, Zuhra still has hope. Tragically, she blames herself for the danger her family is in thanks to her work for the British Council, but she still believes the Government will come through for her and her family. Will they? All I can say, after all that has happened, is that I pray that Zuhra is right to have hope, still, in this Government.

Let us face it: the abandonment of the people of Afghanistan during and following the withdrawal of international partners continues to be a source of absolute shame for this country. I personally advocated, as many colleagues did, for a Chevening alumnus who had reportedly been placed on the Taliban kill list. In total, I wrote to the Government about almost 900 cases of people in dire need in Afghanistan, following heart-wrenching cries for help from family and friends living in West Ham.

The bitter truth is that the Government utterly failed to match the urgency of those desperate pleas for help. Our Government did not prove capable of the same openness that our communities demonstrated when offering a welcome to those in dire need. In the months that have followed, the Government have time and again reduced the offer of sanctuary. We now know that, as of last month, just four people had been resettled under pathway 2 of the ACRS since the withdrawal from Kabul. I fully appreciate that this is not an FCDO responsibility, but that figure is appalling, and it weighs heavily on our international reputation.

Today, we are discussing the Government's failure to deliver on the promise of pathway 3 of the Afghan resettlement scheme, which covers British Council contractors, GardaWorld security contractors and Chevening alumni. What links those three groups of people is that they all worked closely with the Foreign Office as an institution. They helped the UK to have a positive and secure place in Afghanistan and supportive relationships with its wonderful people over many years. Their vulnerability to reprisals today is the direct result of that work for us, and therefore the FCDO, along with the Government as a whole, owes them a debt of protection. Labour strongly supports protection for the more than 200 people who helped the FCDO in Afghanistan, and for their families.

Scott McDonald, chief executive officer of the British Council, is calling for urgent action to ensure that all those invited to provide biometrics are granted safe passage to countries neighbouring Afghanistan. He is surely right, because, as we know, an offer of protection from the Government is just the first step; many people will not have the right travel documents and will have to risk their lives trying to get them. It is concerning that

we have not had clarity about what the Government are doing, despite constant calls from Members across the House. My colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), the shadow Minister for peace and disarmament, has raised that point repeatedly since January last year. I also want to highlight the work of the chair of the British Council all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), as well as that of all the other hon. Members present in the Chamber today.

Despite those cross-party campaigns, rather than clarity, we have had corrections to the record. Last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), told the House that half of the 190 former British Council contractors and their family members had been given the green light to come to the UK, but the *Daily Mail* has reported that just 47 have been invited to provide biometrics, and even those few will face extra security checks before they have any chance of coming here.

Then there was another correction. Last week, the Under-Secretary told the House that the figure of 1,500 was not "an upper limit" and that

"another cohort will be established from June".—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 290WH.]

It now appears that 1,500 has been set as a maximum for pathway 3, and that any additional pathways that are opened will not be designed to help the same group of Afghans in need of protection.

If the Minister of State has any further details about future schemes that could be opened, and when, I am sure all of us would be very glad to hear about them today. However, if he cannot give us that, surely he can answer a very simple question: how many former British Council contractors are still stuck in Afghanistan, and when can we expect them to reach safety here? Will he also say whether he has had engagement with regional partners such as Pakistan to facilitate safe passage for British Council staff who are attempting to leave?

The Government need to face up to the consequences of their failure and recognise the true urgency of the situation. Former contractors continue to face daily beatings and intimidation from the Taliban because of their past work with the UK. Many say that they have heard nothing back from the Government about their applications for resettlement. The time this is taking, as a result of administrative barriers, is utterly unacceptable.

Meanwhile, the circumstances of life in Afghanistan have become even more desperate. As we know, the Taliban have implemented more and more of their brutal ideology, particularly on women and girls, and on religious and ethnic minorities such as the Hazara people, who continue to face targeted attacks. Frequently, it is former officials or workers who are targeted, regardless of the Taliban's official statements that personnel from the former Afghan Government would not be persecuted.

Many of those promised an opportunity for protection in the UK following the Government's disastrous withdrawal have been failed. What does that failure say to the many foreign nationals around the world who work closely with our embassies and programmes? What does it say about how we value the non-UK staff and contractors who are utterly essential to our diplomatic, consular and development services?

[Ms Lyn Brown]

In responding to the urgent question last month, the Minister said repeatedly that this process is moving from the FCDO to the Home Office as the initial stage is complete. Frankly, that news will fill many with dread. I hope he will recognise that the fundamental responsibility for offering these vulnerable people protection remains with the FCDO. If—or perhaps when—the Home Office fails yet again to do its part, I hope that FCDO Ministers will keep a close eye and perhaps step in to unblock things.

This debate is about a duty that we, as a country, owe to the people in danger because of their work with us. It is about making good just a tiny part of the damage wreaked by the Government's failures in Afghanistan. I hope that the Minister will provide concrete assurances today that the shameful abandonment of so many good people and their families will be remedied soon.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank all colleagues for providing the Minister with additional time to answer their questions and take interventions.

2.37 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): May I express my delight, privilege, personal pleasure and honour at serving under your chairmanship, Sir Charles? I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose energy, knowledge and omnipresence we all admire and envy, and I congratulate him on securing the debate.

It is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. As the duty Minister, I am a poor substitute for the Minister responsible, but I will do my best. Let me make it clear that if I fail to answer any questions, I will write to hon. Members. A diligent team of Foreign Office officials will have noted every question and will ensure that I live up to that promise.

I want first to apologise to hon. Members—and, in particular, to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue—for the confusion around recent statements on pathway 3 of the resettlement scheme. I completely acknowledge the strength of feeling about what has happened, which he expressed today. It is right that the Government are held to account, not least since, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) made clear, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have helped our country. I am grateful for the opportunity today to correct the misinformation that arose from earlier comments and provide clarity on the issue.

I am grateful for the contributions from all hon. Members. As I said, I will respond as best I can. Many of their questions are not susceptible to a yes or no answer, and I will try to explain why that is the case.

Since April 2021, the UK Government have brought almost 23,000 people to safety from Afghanistan. I completely agree with right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken about the importance of the UK's meeting its commitments to resettle the remaining eligible Afghans in the UK. That includes hon. Members who spoke during the recent Westminster Hall debate on British Council contractors secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay.

On pathway 3, our commitment remains to resettle up to 20,000 people under the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. The scheme provides a safe and legal route for eligible people to come to the UK and rebuild their lives. Under the first year of ACRS pathway 3, as has been said, we will resettle up to 1,500 eligible Afghans and their eligible family members from three specific groups: British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni.

I understand the desire to resettle all those eligible as quickly as possible, and it is not merely lip service to say that we are working towards that. However, there are challenges and limits to what the Government can do. That means that, regretfully, we have not yet been able to relocate anyone to the UK under pathway 3. There has been progress, including for increasing numbers who are now safely in a third country, in accommodation, receiving support and being processed prior to onward movement to the UK.

Following last week's Westminster Hall debate, I wish to set out four points in relation to the first year of pathway 3. First, I will deal with the numbers to be resettled. As I set out to the House on 12 December in response to an urgent question, the total number of British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni already informed that they are eligible in principle for resettlement, subject to passing security checks, stands at nearly 200. Including their dependants, that accounts for more than 750 of the 1,500 places available under the first year of pathway 3. Of the more than 750 individuals confirmed as eligible in principle, a sizeable number have now passed initial security checks and are being advised on next steps, including on travel to a visa application centre.

It is worth highlighting that individual cases progress at different speeds, for different reasons. Hon. Members may have seen *Hansard* corrections to last week's Westminster Hall debate on British Council contractors, which make it clear that a considerable number of principals have been processed, informed and granted forward processing. None are yet in a position to travel to the UK.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Mitchell: I will in a moment.

Since then, we have heard accounts that some of those eligible in principle under pathway 3 are feeling more at risk as a result of specific figures being quoted. We are therefore ensuring that we do not provide a running commentary on how many individuals are at each stage of the resettlement process, which could draw unnecessary attention to those preparing to leave.

Mr Baron: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Before my hon. Friend intervenes, I remind the Minister to sit down at 2.58 pm to allow Mr Shannon two minutes at the end to wind up.

Mr Baron: Clarity is required here. Will the Minister answer some straightforward questions about the 200 British Council contractors who have initially been told that

they are eligible under ACRS pathway 3? How many have been told that they can now proceed out of the country—if they can get out—into a third country? How many are yet to hear anything from the Government after making their initial application? Our understanding is that roughly 47 have been told to go, with another 150 still in the dark.

Mr Mitchell: If my hon. Friend will bear with me until I have finished making sure that I get these points correctly on the record, I will clarify most of the points that he raises.

Wera Hobhouse: As I said, I have been employing an Afghan refugee since 2021, and I talk to him a lot. May I suggest that some of the criteria that the British Government require for security checks are simply not realistic? For example, the provision of a secure address is often not possible. These people are moving around and hiding.

Mr Mitchell: That point is well understood by the Foreign Office.

Members will be pleased to hear that since last week, even more eligible individuals from the cohorts, and their families, are now being supported in a third country.

Secondly, on those awaiting the outcome of their expression of interest, I assure Members that we continue to work at pace to allocate remaining places. We will notify individuals of the outcomes as quickly as we can.

Thirdly, on the point raised about quotas, the Government notified Parliament in June last year that up to 1,500 eligible people would be referred for resettlement in the first year of pathway 3. That includes dependants.

Finally, on future cohorts, the ACRS, on which the Home Office leads as a whole, will welcome up to 20,000 people to the UK. After the first year of pathway 3, the Government will work with international partners and non-governmental organisations to welcome other groups of Afghans who are at risk. The Government have not yet announced the composition or timings of additional cohorts but will keep Parliament fully informed.

Olivia Blake: Will the Minister clarify whether 1,500 is the number of people, and their dependants are in addition, or whether that figure is inclusive of their dependants?

Mr Mitchell: The answer is that it is inclusive.

Olivia Blake: I think that will concern Members.

Mr Mitchell: I come now to the Foreign Office's role in the pathway 3 expressions of interest process. The Foreign Office is responsible for administering referrals in the first year of ACRS pathway 3.

Mr Baron: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Mitchell: I am not going to give way for a moment, but I will of course give way to my hon. Friend in due course.

For eight weeks last summer, we invited British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni to express interest in resettlement under pathway 3. The Foreign Office received more than 11,400 expressions

of interest when the online window was open between June and August last year. We are assessing them carefully against the relevant published eligibility criteria and working hard to ensure that everyone who expressed interest is provided with a decision as soon as practicable. It remains a priority for the Government to honour the commitments we made to eligible at-risk people. We continue to work in close co-operation with British Council, GardaWorld and Chevening colleagues to support and resettle eligible individuals.

On Home Office security checks, Members will appreciate that the Government have a duty to protect the security of the UK and ensure the safety of its citizens. It would be wrong to make a blanket offer of sanctuary to those who may have committed offences that would be crimes in the UK or who pose a threat to our national security. That is why everyone who comes to the UK from Afghanistan is subject to rigorous security checks.

Mr Baron: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Mitchell: It is also why any offer of a place on the ACRS is contingent on an individual satisfying those security checks. We are pleased that for many the initial security checks have now been completed, which allows us to notify them of the outcome and provide advice on next steps. If my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay will allow me to proceed just a little further, I will give way soon.

Let me turn to the next steps for those who have passed the initial security checks. A number, having passed initial security checks, have been able to secure passports and visas to travel to third countries outside Afghanistan. Some are waiting for visas or passports to be issued and some have not yet applied for them. Members will appreciate that travelling from Afghanistan is challenging and takes time, particularly for those who are currently undocumented. Travelling throughout Afghanistan and across borders involves crossing multiple Taliban checkpoints, and people are often asked to provide documents to verify their identity. Those who attempt travel without them may put themselves at risk. The Taliban and countries surrounding Afghanistan require valid documents for travel across their borders.

We are committed to working in step with the international community, including by co-ordinating with like-minded partners and countries that neighbour Afghanistan on resettlement issues to support safe passage for eligible people and allow them to cross their borders from Afghanistan on humanitarian grounds. The House will understand that I am unable to go into detail about the resettlement journey, for obvious reasons; however, the Government remain grateful to partner Governments in the region for their continued support for our resettlement operations.

Once in a third country, those eligible are offered accommodation and support, paid for by the UK Government through our development budget, while they continue to be processed for resettlement and undergo biometric visa checks. A number have been referred to the International Organisation for Migration, which provides the majority of third-country support, including medical care, food and accommodation. I recently met the head of the International Organisation for Migration and I am very grateful for their ongoing support.

Jim Shannon: I recognise that the Minister would probably need an hour and a half just to explain where we are, but I have a quick question. Surely those people who were British contractors and applied through the scheme already have clearance. They must have had that clearance whenever they were working as British contractors in Afghanistan, or they would never have got the job. Is that not right?

Mr Mitchell: People arrive by different streams, so that is true of some of them but not all of them.

The Government have also put in place support for eligible Afghans once they have arrived in the UK. As the House is aware, the Government have engaged extensively with local authorities and other partners to source suitable accommodation as soon as possible. We are committed to supporting people to settle, find jobs and rebuild their lives in the UK. Anyone resettled through the ACRS will receive indefinite leave to remain under existing rules. They will be able to apply for British citizenship after five years in the UK.

Mr Baron: I applaud my right hon. Friend for trying to clarify the situation, but may I bring us back to basics? I asked the Government about how *Hansard* stands at the moment. Forty-seven have been given the green light to leave the country; we are therefore still talking about 150—security checks or not—of the 200 British Council contractors who have not been contacted at all. That is how the position stands in *Hansard*, and I have not heard the Minister correct it. May we have clarity on that, please?

Also, when it comes to the quota, is the 1,500 an upper limit on the three groups that we have been discussing, or is the Minister saying that in time there will be a further iteration so that there is in effect no limit for the three groups? That is the sort of clarity we lack.

Mr Mitchell: On my hon. Friend's second point, I am unable to say. Currently, the position is clear: 1,500 is the limit, and that includes dependents. I am very clear about that.

My hon. Friend asked whether anyone has been given the green light to come to the UK under this scheme, and about the 47 contractors referenced by the Minister last week. It might be best for me to be clear about the answer to that question: the total number of British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni informed that they are eligible in principle for resettlement, subject to passing security checks, stands at nearly 200. Including their dependents, that accounts for more than 750 of the 1,500 available places on pathway 3. Of those, a sizeable number have passed initial security checks and are being advised on next steps, including travel to visa application centres, as I said earlier.

Mr Baron: May I press the Minister on that? We have heard that figure previously.

Mr Mitchell: May I complete the point, because I am coming on to the precise number he asked about? I know there is a desire for specific numbers, and details of each cohort and their position throughout the process of settlement, but this is a dynamic picture that changes

daily. Individual cases can progress at different speeds for a number of different reasons. Given the sensitivity of the security checks element of the process, I am sure that Members will understand why we have declined to give precise numbers of individuals. Importantly, we do not think it is helpful to those in-country for us to give a running commentary on numbers, which might draw attention to the ones preparing to cross the border. I ask my hon. Friend to reflect carefully on that point.

Mr Baron: I will reflect carefully on that point, but I am not even getting any assurances privately about the numbers. It is all very well to quote big numbers, but—I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the British Council, so I apologise but I will focus on that—we know that 200 eligible contractors, the majority of whom we have heard nothing about, are deemed to be at very high risk or high risk of their lives. The figure on the record—the Minister was not reticent about giving out figures last Wednesday—is that 47 have been given the green light. That suggests that 150—security checks or not—have not been told to proceed. They are in the dark still. If not now, when can we get some clarification on the British Council contractors?

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. We are marching towards 2.58 pm.

Mr Mitchell: I ask my hon. Friend to allow us to consider whether we can provide any further information, but I want to be absolutely clear and concise in what I say today. Those are the reasons why we are not giving out further figures.

I was going to say something about broader support for Afghanistan from His Majesty's Government, but I will not. I think I will conclude—

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister was clear on the 1,500 cap, but he did not offer a defence of it. We are talking about people who in essence are now at risk because they assisted the UK mission. Why should we be saying to people, "Sorry, not this year—we're full up"? Why should there be a cap?

Mr Mitchell: There will always be arguments for and against figures. That is the settled position of the Government and I am not in a position today to comment any further on it.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) asked me about refugee status; all those arriving in the UK under the ARAP and ACRS have the right to work and access education, healthcare, and public funds. I hope that is helpful to her.

In conclusion, the UK Government remain committed to offering a safe and legal route to the UK for eligible British Council, GardaWorld and Chevening alumni affected by the appalling events in Afghanistan in August 2021. I acknowledge and understand the strength of feeling in the House about the speed of progress. The Government remain acutely aware of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and are working with partners to try to influence the Taliban. We are also working at pace to deliver on our commitment to relocate eligible Afghans who supported the UK mission and our wider

values and are at risk as a result. I look forward to the day we can confirm to the House that we have succeeded in repaying that debt of honour.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Shannon, I will give you a maximum of two minutes, because that is what is allowed.

Jim Shannon: I thank all Members for their contributions. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has left the Chamber, but she very clearly underlined the issues for women—what they can and cannot do and how they are flogged. It was a reminder of just how brutal the Taliban are. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) referred to the urgency of the matter. The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) speaks with knowledge; there have been lots of moral questions coming from us all, but they came from the hon. Gentleman today in particular.

I understand that the Government are trying to be careful with what they respond to, but we need to see urgency. I commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for employing an Afghan refugee in her office; that is really positive and I thank her. She referred to the fact that the Foreign Office is committed to helping those who worked with the British authorities, yet they are not getting into the UK.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) brings a wealth of knowledge to this subject, for which I thank her. She referred to the fact that women and girls

are banned from education, and underlined the urgency to process their applications. She said that what has been done for Ukrainians can be done for Afghans.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) brings knowledge to all these debates. He referred to how inadequate the scheme is and how more contributions are needed. He also referred to how we must work alongside our NATO and USA allies.

There was a real passion from the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown)—a nice ferocity, as I called it earlier. She mentioned the 900 people she had helped. I say well done to her: we all stand in awe of her contributions. We all summed up very clearly that life in Afghanistan is now critical and we need to make good our duty of care.

I thank the Minister for his response. I he was trying to be careful with what he said, but he has grasped that we all feel the urgency. What we are all looking for today—what the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay and all of us want—is a scheme that works, and works urgently. We sit here in frustration, watching people in a far-off land who have given their all for us. We ask ourselves, “Why are we not doing more for them?”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Pathway 3 of the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

2.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 19 January 2023

HOME DEPARTMENT

Counter-terrorism Disruptive Powers Report 2021

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): I have today laid before both Houses the “Counter-Terrorism Disruptive Powers Report 2021” (CP 779). Copies of the report will be made available in the Vote Office and online at gov.uk.

It is important that there is transparency in the use of our national security tools. Publishing this report ensures that the public are able to access a guide to the range of powers used to combat terrorist threats to the United Kingdom, the extent of their use, and the safeguards and oversight in place to ensure that they are used properly.

[HCWS504]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Levelling-up Fund Round 2 Outcome

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): One of the Prime Minister’s top priorities is growing the economy, to create better-paid jobs and spread opportunity right across the country. This provides the foundations upon which to build stronger communities and safer streets. Levelling up remains central to these missions.

Today, I am delighted to announce the next stage of our levelling-up programme. This Government are committed to delivering three key priorities across the UK: supporting pride in place by funding culture projects in local communities; delivering economic growth with transport projects; empowering local leaders to regenerate their town centres. We are therefore allocating £2.1 billion of funding from round two of the levelling-up fund to drive growth and enhance communities. The successful bids were allocated following a rigorous official process, which took account of the geographic spread of need across the UK, ensuring the levelling-up fund reaches as many areas as possible across rounds 1 and 2.

The funding announced today builds on the £1.7 billion awarded to 105 bids in the first round, driving growth and regeneration across the UK. We received a tremendous response to this second round of the fund, with over 500 bids received, and a total value of £8.8 billion, a significant increase on the just over 300 applications in round 1. All bids for round 2 were assessed by officials according to clear criteria, and Ministers approved the funding selection without adding or removing bids. Further details of the process applied by the Government are published in our explanatory note on the assessment and decision-making process.

The levelling-up fund will play a key role in helping to reduce geographical disparities across the United Kingdom. To this end, the second round of the fund will see £456 million awarded in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, building on the £342 million awarded in round 1. This Government are committed to protecting and promoting the combined strengths of the UK. I strongly believe that, working as one United Kingdom, we are better able to tackle the individual challenges every region and nation across the country face.

We will have a further round of the levelling-up fund, alongside other complementary interventions which together will help protect community assets and level up areas of the country. We will outline more information on this in due course.

[HCWW503]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 19 January 2023

EDUCATION

Fair Taxation of Schools and Education Standards Committee

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on Fair Taxation of Schools and Education Standards Committee on 11 January 2023.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) cited the partnership that Reach Academy Feltham has with two prominent local private schools. That is, of course, one of 7,000 such partnerships with 936 primary schools.

[Official Report, 11 January 2023, Vol. 725, c. 612.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Education, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on Fair Taxation of Schools and Education Standards Committee.

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) cited the partnership that Reach Academy Feltham has with two prominent local private schools. That is, of course, one of **nearly** 7,000 such partnerships with 936 **independent** schools.

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