

**Wednesday**  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 22 February 2023**

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# House of Commons

Wednesday 22 February 2023

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### SCOTLAND

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill

1. **Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill on Scotland. [903683]

11. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill on Scotland. [903693]

14. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill on Scotland. [903696]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** I realise that many colleagues on the Benches diagonally opposite are somewhat preoccupied with the contest to become the leader of the Scottish National party and Scotland's First Minister. In my view, this is a real opportunity for a new First Minister to reset the relationship with the United Kingdom Government, to work constructively with us and to make life better for the people of Scotland. We need a First Minister who puts Scotland's interests above the nationalists' interests. My offer to all those running in the contest is this: the United Kingdom Government stand ready to work with you, and that will be the real win for improving the lives of people in Scotland.

My assessment is that retained EU law reform will have a positive impact on Scotland by boosting the competitiveness of the economy while respecting devolution and maintaining high standards. Reform will ensure that regulations meet the needs of the United Kingdom, and will provide the opportunity for us to become the best regulated economy in the world, encouraging prosperity, business innovation and—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. May I just say to the Secretary of State that Scottish questions are short enough without his taking up all the time?

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I thank the governor-general for that long-winded response.

According to a report by the Economics for the Environment Consultancy, lower standards just in chemical regulation, water pollution, air quality and the protection

of habitats will cost the British Government £83 billion over the next three decades. Does the Secretary of State believe it is right for Scotland to face yet another billion-pound price tag for a Brexit that it did not vote for?

**Mr Jack:** I do not recognise that analysis. We are respecting and raising environmental standards. Where matters are devolved we respect that, and the Scottish Government are able to deal with those matters under retained EU law as they see fit. Where there is overlap, we have frameworks and we will work together.

**Gavin Newlands:** “What utter drivel” is, I think, the parliamentary terminology.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has warned not only that the Bill threatens economic harm, but that weakened safety standards on construction and other work sites risk the loss of life and limb. It states that that we might as well adopt the motto, “Saving time and costing lives”, for the Bill. How many Scottish workers' lives does the Secretary of State believe are a worthwhile price to pay for the Brexit race to the bottom?

**Mr Jack:** When it comes to utter drivel, it should not be a competition, but the hon. Member has taken it to a new height. What utter drivel that was! Workers' rights are entirely protected; in fact, they are being enhanced by this Government, and they are not dependent on EU membership.

**Joanna Cherry:** The negative impacts of Brexit are already visible, with food prices up 6% and a third of the companies that formerly exported to the EU giving up, owing to customs paperwork—and that includes companies in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that it is Brexit that is causing more red tape for businesses, and that diverging from EU standards further under this much-criticised Bill will further exacerbate trade friction between the UK and the continent?

**Mr Jack:** No, because I believe that we have a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU, and we are working out and ironing out the problems. We have been very successful in doing that, particularly for the fishing industry. We also have before us huge opportunities: not just the trade deals with Australia, New Zealand and others, but the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, which will cover almost half the world's trade and will provide a huge opportunity for Scotland's food and drink industry.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be ideal if the new First Minister put as much focus on the powers that the Scottish Government already have as on retained EU law? Was he as disappointed as I was to find that, once again, the Scottish Government were unable to take over the devolved powers on welfare that they were given in 2016, and that it now seems that those powers will not come into place until 2026—10 years after the Scotland Act 2016?

**Mr Jack:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know that he was in the Scotland Office when those powers were devolved in 2016. Some of them will

not come into operation until 2026. That is because, while we want to work with the Scottish Government—we are working with them—and we hope we will deliver those programmes at the Scottish Government's pace, the pace could be moved up if they spent more time focusing on the day job and less time on their obsession with separation.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs alone has identified more than 1,700 pieces of retained EU law, with the majority in devolved areas such as agriculture, forestry and fishing. What happens if the Scottish Government want to maintain some of the EU standards that the Secretary of State's party wants to ditch? Does he think it would be right for UK Ministers to change regulations in devolved matters without consent? How does that respect devolution?

**Mr Jack:** We are working constructively and collaboratively with the Scottish Government on those retained EU laws. Where we have agreement on a cross-UK piece of policy, we will legislate on behalf of the devolved Administrations. Where it is in a devolved area, we will respect that and allow the Scottish Government to do as they see fit. If they want to remain in line with EU regulations, they can. There is a retained EU law—REUL—working group for the Bill and their officials have been on that since March 2022. We are making good and steady progress.

**Dr Whitford:** Because of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2022, goods made in the rest of the UK cannot be kept out of Scotland, even if they do not meet future Scottish standards on quality, safety or environmental impact. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that the combined effect of both pieces of legislation will drastically increase the degree of direct rule by Westminster and drive a coach and horses through devolution?

**Mr Jack:** That is not true. We are respecting the devolved settlement. If we look at precision breeding and gene editing, for instance, the Scottish farming industry, the National Farmers Union of Scotland and all the other farming unions in the UK want to be part of the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, but we have respected the Scottish Government saying that they do not want to be part of it. Their dogma desires them to carry on with the EU rules and we respect that. As regards the UK internal market, it is absolutely right that trade can continue seamlessly across the United Kingdom, because 60% of Scotland's trade is with the rest of the United Kingdom.

### Allegations of Impropriety in Public Life

2. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's work on strengthening the Union of allegations of impropriety in public life. [903684]

3. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's work on strengthening the Union of allegations of impropriety in public life. [903685]

### The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):

The UK is one of the most successful political and economic unions in the world. Our collective strength means that we are better able to tackle big problems such as the cost of living, lead the international response against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, grow our economy and deliver freeports in Scotland.

**Mr Dhesi:** Last month, the then Tory party chairman was sacked when it was revealed that he had allegedly attempted to hide his multi-million pound tax settlement with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs after failing to properly declare income. That is not to mention partygate and various other scandals. Does the Secretary of State think that a Tory Government in Westminster who are mired in sleaze will strengthen or weaken our Union of the United Kingdom?

**Mr Jack:** The Prime Minister put integrity at every level in this Government when he came in, and he acted decisively in appointing an independent ethics adviser. When he received the report on the incident the hon. Gentleman refers to, he acted immediately.

**Cat Smith:** In Scotland and across the UK, Parliament is being dragged down by Tory and SNP sleaze and impropriety. In Holyrood, Committees have been ignored, processes have been run over roughshod, and the responsibility to be truly accountable to both Parliaments, the press and the public has been ignored by Ministers of both Governments. Does the Secretary of State not agree that we need a reformed and renewed constitution across the country that is fit for a democratised United Kingdom?

**Mr Jack:** I did not catch all of that, but I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier. There is a ministerial code that sets standards of behaviour for Ministers, and Ministers are personally responsible for how they conduct themselves. Ultimately, the Prime Minister is the judge and I think he is a man of integrity. I trust him to make the right decisions.

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Controversial, expensive and barely afloat, the SNP Government in Scotland have wasted £500 million of taxpayers' money on two ferries that do not work. Does my right hon. Friend agree there should be an urgent inquiry so that Scottish voters can have faith in the way that Holyrood uses their money?

**Mr Jack:** Absolutely.

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

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on what they are doing to strengthen the Union, whether it is the £220,000 they are forking out to the former Prime Minister for his legal fees, the disgraceful financial arrangements around the chair of the BBC, the bullying allegations, the tax affairs or the Prime Minister's second fixed penalty notice. The Prime Minister said he would fix Tory sleaze once and for all. How does the Secretary of State think he is getting on with that?

**Mr Jack:** As I said, the Prime Minister appointed an ethics adviser, and he has acted decisively on everything brought forward to him to date. I have full confidence in the Prime Minister, in his integrity and in the decisions he will make.

### Levelling-up Fund

4. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the effectiveness of levelling-up funding in Scotland. [903686]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont):** The Government are tackling geographic inequalities across the UK through their ambitious levelling-up agenda. We are investing almost £2.3 billion in levelling up across all parts of Scotland. Without the leadership of the UK Government, there would be no long-term investment in the Scotland-wide city region and growth deals, which are putting investment in the hands of local leaders, nor would there be investment in transformational local projects, such as a new ferry for Fair Isle or the restoration of Kilmarnock's historic Palace Theatre, through the levelling-up fund.

**Dr Cameron:** The all-party parliamentary group on new towns, which I chair, has completed a report on the specific infrastructure needs of new towns such as my constituency of East Kilbride, which was built after the second world war. Many specific infrastructure and investment needs have been established, so will the Minister encourage new towns in Scotland, such as my constituency, to apply for levelling-up funding to address those important needs?

**John Lamont:** Yes, is the short answer. The Government's levelling-up agenda is benefiting communities right across the UK, including new towns. It allows communities to address local needs in order to create jobs and boost economic growth. For example, the new town of Cumbernauld in North Lanarkshire successfully secured over £9 million in the first round of the levelling-up fund recently, which will enable transformational developments of the town centre. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady's group to discuss how we might support new town investment.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It has been a momentous week in Scottish politics, and I am sure the whole House will want to wish Nicola Sturgeon all the best in whatever she does next in politics. I also pass our deepest sympathies on to everyone at Hibernian football club, who lost their owner, Ron Gordon, suddenly yesterday.

According to the Together Through This Crisis initiative, which is a coalition of charities, almost a quarter of people across the country regularly run out of money for essentials. At the same time, BP and Shell have made more than £1 billion a week in profits, while avoiding a proper windfall tax because of the loopholes the Prime Minister created in his scheme. Will the Minister listen to those charities, recognise the impact the cost of living crisis is having on working people and put in place a proper windfall tax to help them?

**John Lamont:** As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the cost of living support provided by the Government is worth over £26 billion in 2023-24. As a compassionate

Government, we have taken appropriate steps to support the most vulnerable households across the UK through additional cost of living payments, including £900 for households on means-tested benefits, £300 for pensioner households and £150 for disabled people. When it comes to taxing energy companies, the Government have raised the rate of tax on companies such as BP and Shell to 75%, which we consider fair, given the current circumstances.

**Ian Murray:** The Minister says he runs a compassionate Government. He should tell that to the parents who are going without food to feed their children. Scots are being hit hard by the cost of living crisis, which has been made worse by the state of Scottish public services. The NHS is on its knees while the Cabinet Secretary for Health is focusing on other things and Scottish local government is having its funding decimated again by the Finance Secretary, who is seemingly intent on offending every minority group in Scotland. Does the Minister agree that, in the midst of such a serious crisis, it is frankly absurd that failed Scottish Ministers are fighting among themselves for the top job, when too many Scots are worrying about how to pay their bills?

**John Lamont:** It does seem that the SNP has decided to provide the country with compelling drama now that "Happy Valley" has ended. However, there is a serious point here. While the SNP indulges in the most savage infighting since Labour's Blair-Brown civil war, Scotland is crying out for attention to be given to things that really matter: the economy, the health service and the education system. The people's priorities are the priorities of the United Kingdom Government. We can only hope that the new First Minister will move away from the SNP's obsession with independence and focus on the things that really matter to the people of Scotland.

### Cost of Living

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the impact of increases in the cost of living on people in Scotland. [903687]

12. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the impact of increases in the cost of living on people in Scotland. [903694]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont):** Like many countries around the world, the UK faces the challenge of high inflation, which is why the Prime Minister has made tackling inflation a key immediate priority. As was outlined in the Chancellor's autumn statement, the Government are committed to supporting the most vulnerable households across the UK with £12 billion-worth of direct support in 2023-24. Alongside that, the energy price guarantee is saving a typical household in Scotland about £900 this winter.

**David Linden:** The former viceroy made reference earlier to social security powers. The current deputy assistant junior viceroy will be aware that we have the best start grant in Scotland, whereas it was reported at the weekend that in England baby formula has been put behind the tills in Co-ops. Will the Minister outline what has gone wrong with the UK welfare state, when we have got to a stage where baby formula has to be put away because of fears of theft?

**John Lamont:** As the Chancellor set out in the autumn statement, we have taken the appropriate steps to help the most vulnerable households in Scotland and across the UK. I have set out already some of the payments being made to support households this winter. The Government continue to explore new ways of tackling poverty and helping to protect the most vulnerable, and we will continue to do so.

**Ronnie Cowan:** Scotland is a net energy exporter, but, as a consequence of being in the UK, people in energy-rich Scotland face electricity costs that are 30% higher than those in the Netherlands and Germany. Does the Secretary of State think it right that Scots face the highest bills in Europe while the UK Government allow energy companies to make billions in profit?

**John Lamont:** As I have set out during this session, the Government are putting in place tax arrangements to ensure that excessive profits made by BP, Shell and others are taxed at 75%. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's further analysis about the situation in Scotland; this Government have put in place measures to support households during this difficult winter period and we will continue to assess what other measures we can take to do so.

### Strengthening the Union

6. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to strengthen the Union. [903688]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** The Government's commitment to Scotland is best demonstrated by what we are doing on the ground. We are investing more than £2 billion to level up across Scotland and working with the Scottish Government to deliver growth deals and freeports in Scotland.

**Mark Menzies:** Scotland is a world leader in food and drink production, especially in higher-end products such as Scotch whisky and seafood—something I have been proud to promote in my role as one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys. As the UK Government continue to strike new trade agreements, what benefits will the removal of trade barriers have for Scotland?

**Mr Jack:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important matter and for his efforts in this area. The latest statistics on exports of Scotch whisky and salmon underline how much demand there is for these premium products. The UK Government have an ambitious programme of free trade negotiations that will include India and the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We will continue to build relationships with trading partners around the world.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Secretary of State has Bladnoch distillery in his constituency, and I have Glenmorangie, Clynelish and Old Pulteney in mine. Is it not crazy that the proposed ban on advertising is going to damage distilleries in our constituencies and, more importantly, could impair employment in rural parts of Scotland? These are vital local jobs.

**Mr Jack:** Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is just another example of how anti-business this Scottish Government are—the SNP and its coalition partners, the Greens. The deposit return scheme that is coming down the tracks is just another example of how anti-business they are.

### Scotland's Economy

7. **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the strength of the Scottish economy. [903689]

**The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack):** Like many countries around the world, the UK has been buffeted by global economic headwinds driving high inflation and slowing growth, but we have taken decisive action to protect households and businesses. The Government know there is more to do, which is why the Prime Minister has pledged to halve inflation this year, deliver sustainable growth and start reducing debt.

**Mary Glindon:** We know that a stronger economy begins in the heart of our communities, but local authorities across Scotland have been forced to cut back on essential services and consider up to 7,000 job losses or hikes in council tax because of the impossible situation in which the Scottish Government have put them. Does the Secretary of State think that Scottish people should have to pay more for poor-quality services?

**Mr Jack:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. The Scottish Government have received a block grant settlement this year of £41.6 billion—the highest in real terms since devolution began. Their behaviour towards local authorities completely contrasts with that of the UK Government. We are working with Scottish councils, delivering funding directly to them to help them with the projects that matter the most to their people. I would say that that is real devolution, not SNP centralisation.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): The Scottish Government's delayed and botched deposit return scheme has turned into total chaos: businesses want to redesign it to make it work; the public do not know about it; and MSPs want it delayed again. The scheme has been a shambles from day one, with a former SNP Minister describing it as “the Titanic heading for an iceberg”. Does the Minister agree that this process needs urgent reform, and will he encourage his Cabinet colleagues to make sure that any UK-wide scheme learns from the pitfalls of the Scottish Government process?

**Mr Jack:** Yes. I have had legitimate concerns raised with me by businesses across Scotland and by stakeholder groups and I have urged the Scottish Government to pause the scheme. There is no doubt in my mind that the scheme is not just bad for businesses, but bad for stakeholders and consumers. Anecdotally, Aldi will sell 12 bottles of Scottish water for £1.59. Under this scheme, that will become £3.99. If that is not inflationary, if that is not adding to people's cost of living, I do not know what is. Furthermore, we have not been asked for an exemption for this under the rules of the UK Internal Market Act 2020 by the Scottish Government—no

request for an exemption has come. The exemption bar is very high indeed, otherwise what is the point of the UKIM?

### Renewable Energy

8. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for renewable energy in Scotland. [903690]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont)**: The UK Government are fully committed to supporting Scotland to realise its significant renewable energy potential. Scotland has benefited greatly from the contracts for difference scheme, the Government's main mechanism for supporting new low-carbon electricity generation projects in Great Britain. Indeed, Scotland has received 27% of all contracted projects to date.

**Kerry McCarthy**: I thank the Minister for his response. Scotland has huge potential for green investment, but all that is being put at risk by an exodus of capital, given what Joe Biden is doing with the Inflation Reduction Act 2022 in the US. What is the UK Government's response to the Inflation Reduction Act so that we can secure investment in Scotland and in the rest of the UK?

**John Lamont**: I agree with the hon. Lady's comments about Scotland's potential in the renewable sector. I will allow my colleagues in the Treasury to respond to the point that she made about the US policy. In relation to other opportunities for Scotland, I am very keen to work in my role in the Scotland Office to develop that. If the hon. Lady wants to join me in doing that, I would be very happy to engage with her further.

### Scottish Fishing Industry

9. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of Government support for the Scottish fishing industry. [903691]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont)**: This Government provide wide-ranging support to Scotland's fishing industry. The processing and preserving of fish was recognised as an energy and trade intensive sector in the Government's energy bill discount scheme, and almost half the £20 million already awarded through the UK seafood fund for infrastructure projects will be spent in Scotland.

**David Duguid**: I welcome the response of my hon. Friend. I also welcome the UK Government's decision to include seafood processing in ongoing energy support beyond April. However, even before last year's increases in energy costs, brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there was already support for energy intensive industries to other food processors, such as pork, poultry and milled grain, but not fish. Will my hon. Friend agree to join me—ideally in my constituency of Banff and Buchan—to meet representatives of the seafood processing sector to discuss this shortfall?

**John Lamont**: May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in championing the seafood sector in Scotland? I look forward to visiting his constituency

next month to chair the Scottish Seafood Industry Action Group where I will meet industry representatives. The UK Government's energy intensive industries compensation scheme supports industries exposed to significant risk of carbon leakage and is targeted at the most electricity-intensive sectors that are competing in international markets. Any industries not included in this scheme can still benefit from the Government's energy bill relief scheme and the energy bill discount scheme.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To progress the structure for fisheries in Scotland, surely we have to move on from devolved Scotland to independent Scotland? I am sure the Minister can see that in Ireland there is independent Ireland in the Republic, and devolved Ireland in Northern Ireland. Which does he think is delivering better economically and for fisheries in Ireland: the devolved version or the independent version? Across Europe and across the world, everybody knows the answer—does the Minister?

**John Lamont**: I am very confident that for all fishing communities across the United Kingdom it is this Government who are delivering best. I am clear that none of the fishing communities in Scotland wishes to go back into the common fisheries policy, which the SNP advocates.

**Mr Speaker**: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation is available on parliamentlive.tv. I am also pleased to announce that, as part of our efforts to make our activities as accessible as possible, live subtitles are also now available on parliamentlive.tv for all proceedings in this Chamber.

I welcome some special guests who are observing our proceedings today, Madam President of the German Bundestag and the deputy Mayor of Kyiv and colleagues. You are most welcome.

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [903598] **Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 February.

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak)**: I am delighted that we are joined today by a delegation from Kyiv. This coming Friday there will be a national moment of reflection, which will give us the opportunity to pay tribute to the courage of the Ukrainian people and demonstrate our solidarity with Ukraine. This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Andrew Western**: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments about the bravery of the Ukrainian people. Labour has asked his Government on three occasions to commit to a police response to every domestic abuse call. To date, no answer has been forthcoming. Can the Prime Minister provide a response today?

**The Prime Minister:** Just this week we announced new measures to tackle violence against women and girls. This is the Government that introduced the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which is rolling out specialist advisers for those who suffer and putting in more funding to support victims. We will continue to do everything we can to make sure that women and girls are safe everywhere in our country.

Q2. [903599] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The warm welcome given to Ukrainian refugees by so many is extremely heartwarming. Does the Prime Minister understand, though, how upset my constituents are to have had bookings for weddings and other special family events cancelled when the Home Office took over a much-loved hotel, and will he redouble his efforts to put an end to that practice?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend's constituents and indeed the whole country can be proud of the welcome they have given to people from Ukraine over the last year. I can assure him we are committed to reducing the number of asylum seekers living in hotels at vast cost to taxpayers and considerable disruption to communities. I am grateful to the leadership of the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister in finding a sustainable solution; the Home Secretary will make a formal update in the coming weeks on progress in standing up alternative sites for accommodation.

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

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in his comments on Ukraine. I had the privilege last week of seeing first-hand the courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people. We must continue to stand united in this House in support of Ukraine. The thoughts of the whole House, and I am sure the whole country, will also be with the family of Nicola Bulley at this very difficult time. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) to her first PMQs.

The Labour party is proud to be the party of the Good Friday agreement and peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. We welcome attempts to make the protocol work more effectively. Does the Prime Minister agree that it has been poorly implemented, and that the basis for any deal must be removing unnecessary checks on goods?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me welcome the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) to her place, and associate myself with the remarks of the right hon. and learned Gentleman about Nicola Bulley's family. Our thoughts are, of course, with them.

As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, we are still in active discussions with the European Union, but he should know that I am a Conservative, a Brexiter and a Unionist, and any agreement that we reach needs to tick all three boxes. It needs to ensure sovereignty for Northern Ireland, it needs to safeguard Northern Ireland's place in our Union, and it needs to find practical solutions to the problems faced by people and businesses. I will be resolute in fighting for what is best for Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom.

**Keir Starmer:** We all agree that the protocol can be improved, but there are trade-offs and we need to face up to them. The Prime Minister's predecessor told businesses that there would be "no forms, no checks, no barriers of any kind".

That was absolute nonsense and it destroyed trust. In the interests of restoring that trust, will the Prime Minister confirm that to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, the deal he is negotiating is going to see Northern Ireland continue to follow some EU law?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman is jumping ahead. We are still in intensive discussions with the European Union to ensure that we can find an agreement that meets the tests that I set. Those are sovereignty for Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland's place in our precious Union; and to find practical solutions to the problems faced by people and businesses. I have spent time engaging and listening to those communities, businesses and political parties in Northern Ireland. I have a good understanding of what is required, and I will keep fighting until we get it.

**Keir Starmer:** The Prime Minister is biting his tongue, but at some point the irreconcilables on his Benches are going to twig, and they are going to come after him. The former trade Minister says there can be no role for the European Court of Justice in Northern Ireland. Will the Prime Minister be honest with them, and tell them that is not going to happen?

**The Prime Minister:** Again, we need to keep going to secure an acceptable agreement. But the right hon. and learned Gentleman is talking about a deal that he has not even seen, that we are still negotiating and that is not finalised. It is his usual position when it comes to the European Union—give the EU a blank cheque and agree to anything it offers. It is not a strategy; that is surrender.

**Keir Starmer:** It is not my questions he is avoiding; it is Conservative Members' questions he is avoiding. The Prime Minister's predecessors wasted months pushing the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. If implemented, it would tie us up in battles with the EU, the United States and others, at precisely the time we should be building common ground to boost our economy and show unity against Putin. The Prime Minister clearly wants a closer relationship with the EU, so can he confirm that if there is a deal he will pull the protocol Bill?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. and learned Gentleman wants to put the EU first; I want to put Northern Ireland first. On these questions, he said he would respect the result of the referendum, and then he promised to back a second one. All the while he was constantly voting to frustrate Brexit. I know what the British people know: on this question, he cannot be trusted to stick up for Britain—[*Interruption.*]

**Keir Starmer:** Mr Speaker, the sound you hear is Conservative Members cheering the Prime Minister pulling the wool over their eyes. It is the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement and the 30th anniversary of the Downing Street declaration. Tony Blair and John Major both recognised that politics in Northern Ireland is built on trust, not telling people what they want to hear, and on the need to take seriously the concerns of



both communities—nationalists and Unionists. It is vital their voices are heard. Can the Prime Minister confirm that whatever deal he brings back, this House will get a vote on it?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course Parliament will express its view, but what is crucial here is that this is not about the right hon. and learned Gentleman's desire to play political games with this situation in this House; it is about what is best for the people and communities of Northern Ireland, and that is what I will keep fighting for.

**Keir Starmer:** I take it from that that this House will get a vote, and I look forward to that vote in due course. Everyone knows that the basis of this deal has been agreed for weeks, but it is the same old story: the country has to wait while the Prime Minister plucks up the courage to take on the malcontents, the reckless and the wreckers on his own Benches. I am here to tell him that he does not need to worry about that, because we will put country before party and ensure that Labour votes to get it through. He should accept our offer and ignore the howls of indignation from those on his side who will never take yes for an answer. Why does he not just get on with it?

**The Prime Minister:** What I am doing is talking and listening to the people of Northern Ireland. That is the right thing to do—to make sure that we can respond to and resolve the concerns of the Unionist communities and businesses in Northern Ireland—and that is what I will keep doing.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about his plans, and we have heard that tomorrow he is going to announce five missions, but we already know what they are. They are uncontrolled immigration, reckless spending, higher debt, softer sentences; and the fifth pledge, as we all know, is that he reserves the right to change his mind on the other four.

Q4. [903601] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Last year, the coroner determined that content promoting self-harm and suicide which was promoted to Molly Russell contributed to her death, but they were able to make that determination only after years of campaigning by the Russell family and coroners to gain access to that information. Does the Prime Minister agree that other families should not have to suffer as the Russell family have suffered, and that data relevant to the death of a child should be more readily available both to families and to the coroner service?

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the Russell family for their tireless and dignified campaigning on behalf of all families who have been bereaved in such tragic circumstances. Coroners already have statutory powers to require evidence to be given or produced for the purposes of their investigation, but the Government are listening carefully to the concerns of parliamentary colleagues and to bereaved families. The Ministry of Justice and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology are leading those discussions to ensure that we have the right set of procedures in place.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the Scottish National party leader.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Wholesale gas prices have fallen by 75% since their peak, yet in just a matter of weeks the British Government—the Westminster Government—intend to increase energy bills by a further £500. What would motivate a Prime Minister to do such a thing?

**The Prime Minister:** What we are doing is providing tens of billions of pounds of support for people with their energy bills, particularly the most vulnerable. What we are also doing—opposed by the SNP—is investing in producing more home-grown gas here in the UK and the North sea. I notice that one of the hon. Gentleman's own Members of Parliament said this week that if the SNP were a pizza company, its products would be slow, wrong and costly. I say to him that it is time to focus on the issues that matter to the people of Scotland, and producing more energy is absolutely one of them.

**Stephen Flynn:** I am not sure that implying that energy bills do not matter to the people of Scotland is a winning strategy for this Prime Minister. Let us get real: the fact that wholesale gas prices have fallen by 75% means a windfall to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of around £15 billion, so what they are saying is that they intend to raid the pockets of ordinary Scots while lining the pockets of Westminster. It is time to set aside any notion of an energy price increase, but instead to protect households and perhaps to reduce bills by £500. Does the Prime Minister not agree?

**The Prime Minister:** We are saving households across the United Kingdom, including in Scotland, £900 on their energy bills as a result of our energy bills guarantee. In the coming years, we will spend £12 billion protecting particularly the most vulnerable families and pensioners across the United Kingdom. But the best way to reduce people's bills is to halve inflation, as we have promised to do, and to produce more home-grown energy here in the United Kingdom. That is something that this Government support; maybe the hon. Gentleman could confirm whether the SNP supports it.

Q5. [903602] **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): The Prime Minister will be well aware of the dogged campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) for a rebuild of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn. That hospital is constructed from failing aerated concrete, and its ceilings are now supported by more than 3,000 wooden and metal props. Is the Prime Minister also aware of the strength of feeling locally in support of the rebuild, not just in North West Norfolk, but in Broadland, North Norfolk, Norwich North, Mid Norfolk, South West Norfolk, Huntingdon, North West Cambridgeshire and South Holland and the Deepings, whose populations are all served by that hospital? Will he support our campaign?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild), because I know that they are great supporters of this project. I know that over the last year or so the Queen Elizabeth Hospital has been allocated over £50 million to address the most immediate issues at the site. I also know that they have expressed their interest in being part of the new hospital programme—the Department of Health and Social

Care is looking through all those bids. My hon. Friend will know that I cannot comment on specific bids, but the selected hospitals will be announced in due course.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his efforts in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol. It is unacceptable that Northern Ireland has been put in this place, with a protocol imposed upon us that harms our place in the United Kingdom. It must be replaced with arrangements that are acceptable and that restore our place in the United Kingdom and its internal market. Does he accept how important the constitutional and democratic issues are in relation to getting a solution? Does he agree that it is unacceptable that EU laws are imposed on Northern Ireland with no democratic scrutiny or consent? Will he assure me that he will address those fundamental constitutional issues, not just by tweaking the protocol but by rewriting the legally binding treaty text?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and for the role that he has played in recent months in articulating Unionists' concerns. I have heard him loud and clear when he says that he wants and needs those issues resolved so that he has a basis to work with others to restore power sharing, and I know that that is genuine. He raises the question of practical issues, and it is vital that those are addressed. But he also raises a vital question about the constitutional and legal framework in which those arrangements exist. I can assure him that I agree: addressing the democratic deficit is an essential part of the negotiations that remain ongoing with the European Union. Just as he has been consistent, so have I, and I can assure him that that is at the very heart of the issues that must be addressed.

Q8. [903608] **Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): The Prime Minister has made fixing illegal immigration across the channel one of his key top priorities. He has also said that legislation will be required to stop it, and I completely agree. So can he tell us when we can expect to see that legislation come forward—because time is of the essence—and can he explain why sorting out this issue did not feature in the Home Office permanent secretary's stated top three priorities for his Department?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. She is right: illegal crossings put people's lives at risk, divert resources away from those in genuine need, and are unfair on those who migrate here legally. That is why one of our five pledges to the British people is to stop the boats. We are working at pace on the legislation—it is important that it works—and in the meantime, our deals with Albania and France are already yielding benefits. What I can tell her is that we want a system whereby if someone arrives in our country illegally, they will not be able to stay. Instead, they will be detained and removed to a country that they come from or to a safe third alternative. That is a system that the Home Secretary and I are working hard to put in place, and that is what our legislation will deliver.

Q3. [903600] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Thanks to the Prime Minister's policies, we are now afflicted with the highest tax burden and the biggest

drop in disposable income since the second world war. To make matters worse, tens of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money was wasted on a "world-beating" test and trace system and personal protective equipment that was not fit for purpose—not to mention the endless list of crony covid contracts that went to Tory chums who profiteered from other people's misery. When will he help us to recover some of that lost money, so that striking nurses, teachers and other public servants can be paid the decent wage that they so richly deserve?

**The Prime Minister:** I am pleased that the Government are in intensive talks with the Royal College of Nursing to find a way forward. As I have always said, we are keen to discuss the terms and conditions, and I am glad that those conversations are now happening. If the hon. Gentleman really cares about the impact on working people, perhaps he and his party should stand up to their union paymasters and back our minimum service laws.

Q11. [903611] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for supporting the launch of the new regulatory reform group. Will he commit to working with our group on two specific areas: first, to improve the accountability and responsiveness of our regulators to stakeholders and Parliament; and secondly, to improve the economic potential in key growing areas of the economy, such as financial services, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and he is right about the importance of getting our regulatory framework right in order to drive growth and prosperity. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set out an extensive review of retained EU law in five key growth areas, including life sciences, green industries and digital technology. The Government's chief scientific adviser is also leading work to consider how the UK can better regulate emerging technologies to enable their rapid and safe introduction.

Q6. [903603] **Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It was a pleasure to meet the delegation from Kyiv before Question Time and to confirm that hon. Members across the House are united in our support for Ukraine and its brave heroes.

The Conservative manifesto promised 40 new hospitals, but after three years most do not even have planning permission yet. Communities feel betrayed and taken for granted. As ITV showed yesterday, St Helier Hospital in south London is literally crumbling, but there is still no plan to save it, and Hinchingsbrooke Hospital in Cambridgeshire has sewage leaking into its wards and a roof that could collapse at any moment. Does the Prime Minister agree that no patients, doctors or nurses should have to put up with those conditions? Can he tell the House—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Please do not take advantage of the Order Paper.

**The Prime Minister:** I am proud that we are investing record sums into the NHS under this Government, including record sums into NHS capital, which are going on not only upgrading almost 100 hospitals and developing 40 large-scale developments, as the right

hon. Gentleman knows, but investing in more scanners and more ambulances across the board so that we can deliver vital care to people. I am very pleased that the most recent statistics on urgent emergency care show considerable improvement from the challenges we faced in December, and we are now on a clear path to getting people the treatment they need in the time they need it.

**Theo Clarke** (Stafford) (Con): I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling illegal migration, particularly the issue of small boats. Will my right hon. Friend reconsider the Government's proposal to relocate approximately 500 single male asylum seekers to Beaconside in Stafford? Will he meet me urgently to discuss it, given the huge number of objections that I have received from constituents on the issue?

**The Prime Minister:** First, I welcome my hon. Friend back to her place. I know that this issue concerns her and her constituents, which is why we must absolutely stop the boats and stem the tide of illegal migrants to relieve this pressure on our local communities. I will ensure that she meets the Home Secretary as soon as possible to discuss her concerns—hopefully we can arrange that meeting in the coming days.

Q7. [903604] **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): This month, the Scottish child payment marks its two-year anniversary. In a cost of living crisis, that policy has been a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland. Will the Prime Minister therefore follow the leadership of the Scottish Government by introducing an equivalent child payment?

**The Prime Minister:** The best way to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty is to make sure that they do not grow up in a workless household. That is why I am proud that, under the record of the Conservative Government, there are almost 1 million fewer children growing up in workless households and hundreds of thousands fewer children in poverty. That is because this Government are on the side of parents and will make sure that they have the jobs they need, because ultimately the best poverty strategy is to have everybody in work.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Mr Speaker, I have previously called out in this House the appalling level of service that my constituents and yours receive from train operator TransPennine. Last month, TransPennine had the largest number of cancellations of any service provider in the UK, but it turns out that even that figure was fiddled, because TransPennine had cancelled over 1,000 trains before 10.30 the night before so that they would not show up in the statistics. Does the Prime Minister agree that this practice is totally unacceptable, as is TransPennine's level of service?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with my right hon. Friend: the current service levels are unacceptable. The Rail North partnership, which is managing the contract, is working with the company on an improvement plan. The Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), is having weekly meetings with the Rail North partnership to monitor its progress, and although the TransPennine contract expires

in May and we are working on a new contract, if Ministers conclude that the operator cannot be turned around, other decisions may have to be made.

Q9. [903609] **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Of the 40 promised new hospitals referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), 11 are in the south-west of England. Three of them—in Barnstaple, Dorchester and Taunton—surround my constituency, but none has planning permission. It has been reported that staff at Eastbourne District General Hospital were told that their town would not get a new hospital, and that it was a “barefaced lie”. Given that the Prime Minister claims his mandate rests on a manifesto that promised 40 new hospitals, when will we see them?

**The Prime Minister:** The Government are committed to building 40 new hospitals as part of the new hospital programme. In the south-west, eight out of the 11 schemes do have full outline planning permission approved, and the remaining three schemes would not be expected to have planning permission at this stage, due to when they are due to be delivered. We are working with the trust to go through that process, so everything is on track, and we will bring those hospitals to the people in the south-west.

**Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I am grateful for the £3 million that the Government have sent to Wolverhampton to trial the new Better Health app, which will support Wulfrunians to make better choices about their diet and fitness. Will the Prime Minister welcome this, and also celebrate our grassroots sports clubs in Wolverhampton, especially Wednesfield Aces cycle speedway club, which celebrated its diamond jubilee last year?

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in commending all her local sporting organisations for the job they do. She is absolutely right that prevention is better than cure, and ensuring that we can support people to live healthy, fulfilling lives is absolutely part of our plan. That is why we are investing in football pitches, tennis courts and youth facilities right up and down the country, and I am glad that my hon. Friend's constituents are benefiting.

Q10. [903610] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Not only have the Government broken their promises on new hospitals; they have also broken their pledge to have 6,000 more doctors, with the number of qualified GPs having actually fallen. GPs in Shropshire are seeing 400 more patients each than they were in 2016, which is one of the biggest rises in the country. Places across the country—East Sussex, Devon, Cambridgeshire and Hampshire—have also seen their number of qualified GPs fall. When will the Prime Minister end his and the Government's neglect of local health services, and recruit and retain the GPs we need?

**The Prime Minister:** The facts are these: there are 2,200 more GPs in general practice today, there are 15,000 more doctors in the NHS, and there are 30,000 more nurses. That is because we are putting record funding in, backing the NHS and getting patients the care that they need.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for grasping the nettle and seeking to negotiate an agreement on the Northern Ireland protocol. Does he share my frustration with the expressed views of people who are commenting on a deal that has yet to be reached, and does he agree that the best way to reduce or even end the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union is through treaty change itself, not through domestic legislation in this Parliament?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that we need to keep going, but he is also right that we need to find enduring solutions to the challenges faced by the people of Northern Ireland. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) mentioned earlier, it is absolutely right that we address the constitutional and legal framework of our arrangements and ensure that we can put in place new arrangements that secure Northern Ireland's place in the UK.

Q12. [903612] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Prime Minister is no stranger to paying fines. The £2.3 billion he paid last week to the EU after the UK Government allowed Chinese fraudsters to flood Europe with cheap goods is the worst waste of public money. My question is simple: if he can find £2.3 billion to pay a fine, why can he not pay NHS workers and others the pay increases they deserve?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman may not have seen that the Royal College of Nursing is now in talks with the Government about resolving the disputes, and I am grateful to it for entering those talks with a constructive attitude, and for calling off its strikes next week. I urge him and his colleagues to be on the side of working people—that is, to back our laws to introduce minimum safety levels across the NHS and transport, because that is the best way to demonstrate you are on the side of hard-working families.

**Sir Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): I wholeheartedly support my Prime Minister's priority of stopping the boats, so can he please bring in the small boats Bill next week?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his support. I share the same desire to stop the boats, for all the reasons we have discussed. He should rest assured that the Home Secretary and I are working intensely and as quickly as possible to bring forward that legislation, because I want what he wants: to ensure that those people who come here illegally will simply not be allowed to stay.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): During recess, my community in Warrington was rocked by the murder of 16-year-old schoolgirl Brianna Ghey. What support will the Prime Minister offer to our community, and to our local schools, so that they can support Brianna's classmates and her family as we try to heal from this appalling tragedy?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue, and express my sympathies to Brianna's family and friends for what has happened. I know the hon. Lady will be playing her part in her local community in supporting them at this difficult time. I know that the Home Secretary is shortly due to visit the area, and she will be able to discuss with the hon. Lady what support can be provided for the community at this time, and she should know that she will have what she needs from the Government.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): I cannot ask the Prime Minister to stop time or tide, but I might ask him to offset their effects, because in south Devon, the Slapton line is being eroded away, and I need him to help me lobby the Department for Transport and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to see that we get the repairs done. Natural England is standing in the way and stopping us from doing what we need to do for this vital link. Will he support me?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic campaigner and advocate for his constituents. I know that this particular issue is causing frustration and concern in his community. He is absolutely right to raise it, and I will ensure that he gets the appropriate meetings he needs with the Ministers in question, so that we can work with him to try to find a resolution.

## Point of Order

12.33 pm

**Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask whether it is still the convention, and the courtesy one might expect from a fellow parliamentarian, for them to contact a Member in advance if they are minded to mention their constituency in a question? I refer to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who is no longer in his place; he talked about Eastbourne District General Hospital, and in fact repeated gossip and hearsay from social media that has already been successfully challenged by the hospital trust. The trust has powered from being in special measures and requiring improvement to being outstanding and good. It is working incredibly hard to deliver what has been described as once-in-a-generation funding. *[Interruption.]* His comments are most unfair.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. When I stand up, it is important that Members sit down. *[Interruption.]* Do not worry.

First, that is not a point of order. People can mention issues in other constituencies, such as those involving hospitals, because they usually cover a much greater geographical area than one constituency; they would not have to inform the Member. I do hope that the hon. Lady has informed the Member she named that she was about to raise this point of order. *[Interruption.]* No, there is nobody here. If we are going to play by the rules, we should all get the rules right before making a point of order. She has certainly put on record her concerns and views, but for the future, not telling the Member concerned is certainly not the way to do it.

## BILL PRESENTED

### TYRE MANUFACTURE (TOXIC CHEMICALS) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Barry Sheerman, supported by Rachael Maskell, Christine Jardine, Geraint Davies and Caroline Lucas, presented a Bill to set limits on the use of toxic chemicals in the manufacture of tyres; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 250).*

## Affordable Housing (Conversion of Commercial Property)

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

12.35 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to enable local authorities to establish planning obligations relating to affordable housing in respect of the conversion of commercial property to residential use; and for connected purposes.

In my Chelmsford constituency, there is a shortage of affordable housing. Around 360 families are currently housed in temporary accommodation, and this is an all-time high. Locally, many new homes have been built. In the Chelmsford City Council area, around 1,000 new homes have been built in each of the last five years. When a new development of over a threshold of 11 homes is built, our local authority applies an affordable housing obligation of 35% of the housing. As a result, many hundreds of new affordable homes have been built each year in the Chelmsford area. In fact, across the country since 2010, Government-backed schemes have helped over 829,000 households to purchase a home. This is a massive achievement by successive Conservative-led Governments. Despite that, however, in areas such as Chelmsford, the demand for affordable homes is outstripping the number of new affordable homes being built.

New homes are also created when an office block, shop or other commercial property is converted into residential homes, such as flats, but these conversions follow the permitted development route, and there is no ability for the local authority to apply an affordable housing obligation. Entire office blocks can be converted into luxury flats without providing any affordable homes at all. The purpose of this Bill is to enable local authorities to apply an affordable housing obligation to conversions of commercial property to residential use. That would not be a top-down, blanket rule set by Whitehall. It would be up to each local authority to decide whether it wished to apply an affordable housing obligation to conversions in its area, and what percentage to use.

Some developers may argue that requiring them to make a proportion of the housing affordable could make the conversion of a building financially unviable, or lead to delays, but decisions would be subject to bespoke local negotiations on each individual property—negotiations between the local authority and the developers on a case-by-case basis—which would allow concerns to be resolved locally.

Looking back over the past few years, it is clear that giving this power to local authorities could make a substantial difference to meeting affordable housing needs. In the area covered by Chelmsford City Council, between March 2013 and March 2022, commercial-to-residential conversions resulting in 1,419 residential units were approved; and 1,292 of those units were above the affordable housing threshold. If Chelmsford City Council had been able to apply the same affordable housing percentages to commercial-to-residential conversions that it applies to new-build homes, it could have released 453 new affordable homes in our area alone.

This is not just a local issue. The Local Government Association has informed me that it estimates that there are almost 95,000 households in temporary accommodation

[Vicky Ford]

across the country. It has repeatedly raised concerns about permitted development rights allowing developers to convert premises into houses without having to provide any affordable housing. It estimates that more than 20,000 affordable homes have been “lost” as a result of the inability to apply affordable housing obligations to office-to-residential conversions under permitted development since 2015. That is based on an assumption that councils could have applied a 25% affordable housing requirement on conversions in that time period.

Local councils are also concerned that pressures on affordable housing could continue to rise due to factors such as landlords moving out of private rental markets, and a rise in the cost of living. Furthermore, across the UK many households have warmly welcomed Ukrainian families into their homes. Many of those host-guest relationships remain extremely firm, but some of those families may need access to more affordable homes of their own. Looking forward, it is likely that we may see increases in conversions of commercial property, especially office blocks, to residential use. Since the pandemic, more people have been working from home, and commuter numbers have not risen back to pre-pandemic levels. Fewer commuters means fewer office workers, more empty offices, and more potential demand for office-to-residential conversions.

In advance of presenting this Bill, I spoke to the National Housing Federation. It told me that given the need for affordable housing, councils should be able to negotiate for affordable housing as part of office-to-residential conversions. It said:

“It is also vital that all homes delivered under permitted development rights are of decent quality, safe and connected to local amenities.”

In some parts of the country, there have been concerns that permitted development conversions have not always delivered decent-quality, safe homes. I agree that homes should be decent and safe, and those issues need to be addressed, but as a ten-minute rule Bill must be targeted in scope, this Bill will not specify qualitative standards. This targeted Bill will focus on enabling the local authority to apply a quantitative obligation. I recognise, however, that when a local authority is able to open up discussions on the quantity of social housing to be delivered, that is likely to enable it also to open up wider discussions with developers on other issues, such as quality.

There are debates about what constitutes “affordable housing”, and what the optimal mix is of homes for rent versus homes to buy. For example, if Chelmsford City Council had applied the same ratios that it applied to new-build properties to the 453 notional affordable homes, that could have resulted in 325 more rental properties and 128 more shared-equity and first homes for buyers. My view is that residents benefit from the stability of owning their own home, and I would like to see more effort made locally to help renters transition to becoming homeowners, but that is a bigger debate, and in this targeted Bill, I do not intend to address the question of what the ideal blend of affordable homes would be. There are also concerns about the permitted development regime, including about the contributions made to local infrastructure, but again, for simplicity’s sake, I do not intend to deal with that in this targeted Bill.

Under the planning system that is being legislated for in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, it is intended that councils will be able to ensure that affordable housing is provided from office-to-residential conversions. That is because the infrastructure levy, which replaces section 106 negotiations, will also apply to permitted development. The Government have therefore already signalled their intention to make that change in the long run, but the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill may take many years to implement. The need for more affordable housing is urgent; we cannot wait, and neither can households in our constituencies. The Bill would therefore introduce an ability to apply the affordable housing obligation immediately, rather than our waiting for the full new regime under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to roll out. I am happy to work with Ministers to put a drop-away or sunset clause into the Bill, so that the measures that it introduces fall away once the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is fully implemented.

To conclude, this targeted measure will enable local authorities to apply affordable housing obligations to conversions of commercial property to residential occupancy. Local authorities would be able to apply those obligations in the manner that best suits the needs in their area. The Bill has the potential to deliver many thousands of new affordable homes for people across the country in a quick and timely manner. I commend it to the House.

*Ordered,*

That Vicky Ford, Mr Mark Francois, Paul Holmes, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Andrew Jones, Wendy Morton, Angela Richardson, David Simmonds, Greg Smith, Kelly Tolhurst and Dan Carden present the Bill.

Vicky Ford accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 251).*

#### **NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)**

*Ordered,*

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill:

##### *Timetable*

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

##### *Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put*

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

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

(b) the Speaker shall put the Question forthwith on any Instruction relating to the procedure for regulations under section 3(9A) of the Human Tissue Act 2004 which may be

selected by the Speaker and moved by a Minister of the Crown, and the Speaker shall leave the Chair after any such Instruction has been disposed of.

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

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

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

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

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

#### *Consideration of Lords Amendments*

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

#### *Subsequent stages*

(10) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

#### *Reasons Committee*

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

#### *Miscellaneous*

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

(16) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

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

(17) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

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

(19) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

## Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

### *Second Reading*

12.46 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

More than a year has passed since the then First Minister of Northern Ireland resigned. Twelve months and one Assembly election later, people in Northern Ireland still do not have the strong devolved Government that they deserve. In the absence of those institutions, this Government have stepped in to protect the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. We have set a budget, delivered vital energy support funding and legislated to provide clarity on the decision-making powers of Northern Ireland civil servants to enable them to maintain public service provision. However, on each of those occasions, I have stood at this Despatch Box and expressed my deep disappointment that we still await the return of a functioning Assembly and Executive. I wish to restate that profound disappointment once again.

The restoration of the Executive, in line with the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, remains my top priority. I will continue to do everything I can to make that happen and to help the Northern Ireland parties to work together to do so equally. It was on that basis that we legislated last autumn to extend the Executive formation period through the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022. Since that period ended in January 2023, I have again been under a statutory duty to call an Assembly election, which would have to be held within 12 weeks—on or before 13 April.

I have spent time engaging with Northern Ireland political and community leaders, assessing the options available to me. I have also spoken to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), and I appreciate his advice and guidance. It remains my view that a further Assembly election at this time would be unwelcome and expensive and, crucially, it would bring us no closer to our objective of delivering fully functioning devolved institutions.

At this critical juncture, the best approach to facilitating the return of those institutions is built on flexibility, to allow time and space for negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol between the UK and EU to continue, and to promote collaboration by the parties in Northern Ireland to form a Government, not to compete in an unwelcome election. On that note, I will briefly summarise the overall intention of the Bill.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): In order to concentrate the minds of those who hold the future of devolution in their hands, could I invite my right hon. Friend to confirm that joint authority and direct rule are not on his direct agenda, but that making sure that devolution works is front and centre?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I can confirm those points 100%.

This is a short Bill, and I propose to time my remarks accordingly. I will merely outline the Bill at this stage and save my discussion of the mechanics of its two clauses for Committee, which I hope will commence shortly. Having said that, I hope the House will permit me to pause and express my gratitude to Opposition

Members and, indeed, everyone involved for their continued cross-party approach to delivering key legislation in Northern Ireland. I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Hove, for engaging thoughtfully with me on a number of occasions ahead of the Bill's introduction.

The Bill will provide for a one-year retrospective extension to the Executive formation period from 19 January 2023, which means that, if the parties are unable to form an Executive on or before 18 January 2024, I will again fall under a duty to call for an Assembly election to take place within 12 weeks. However, as I said earlier, I believe flexibility is the order of the day if we are to play our part in encouraging and facilitating the return of the institutions.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Chair of the Select Committee prompts me to reflect that I am one of the handful of people here who had an active part in the last period of direct rule, in about 2004 or 2005. It was just about the most inadequate procedure imaginable, which is a high bar to clear in this place. Ultimately, without a functioning Assembly, and without direct rule or joint authority, the people who lose out are not the politicians, but the people who rely on public services.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The right hon. Gentleman is completely right that the people of Northern Ireland end up suffering from not having functioning institutions working for them.

The Bill provides me, as Secretary of State, with the important ability to call an early election, provided that offices have not been filled. Taken together, these provisions represent a delicate balance. Eventually, if the political impasse in Northern Ireland continues, people in Northern Ireland will rightly expect to return to the polls to have their say. However, the prospect of forcing an election when it would be unwelcome or unhelpful runs contrary to our goal of providing the time and space we need for our negotiations with the European Union on the protocol to continue to develop, and for an Executive to form.

Members with a keen eye for detail will no doubt have noticed that, unless an early election is called, the extension provided for by the Bill will run past the date on which the decision-making provisions contained in the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022 lapse, namely, 5 June 2023. During the Act's passage late last year, we were clear that the current governance arrangements were not a sustainable long-term solution. I am therefore keeping those arrangements under review, in the continued absence of fully functioning devolved institutions, but I sincerely hope that an Executive are in place before those arrangements expire.

In the meantime, the provisions of the 2022 Act and its accompanying guidance provide Northern Ireland civil servants with the clarity they need on how and when they should be taking decisions. The decisions they have been taking under the 2022 Act are being published to ensure complete transparency. I am truly grateful for the work of Northern Ireland civil servants in making use of those provisions to maintain public services in Northern Ireland, but, as I have said many times, the right people to take those decisions are locally elected politicians, who should be doing their jobs in an Executive. The current arrangement is not and can never be a substitute for fully functioning devolved institutions.



I know everyone in this House has been deeply moved by the courage shown by a very young man, Dáithí Mac Gabhann. He and his whole family have fought for the implementation of organ donation changes. I recently met Dáithí and his family, and I met them again this morning. I am incredibly moved by his story and by his family's dedication to seeing this important change to the law on organ donations in Northern Ireland implemented as quickly as possible.

I am a bit of a stickler for how we do things in this place, and I would never want to go against "Erskine May," but Dáithí and his family are with us in the Gallery today. I am sure hon. Members will wish to join me in welcoming him and commending the whole family for their valiant efforts. They should not need to be here today to see this change, as the Assembly could and should have convened to take this across the finish line.

As I said in my letter to the Northern Ireland parties, they continue to have it within their power to recall the Assembly and deal with secondary legislation such as the regulations in this case. That would only require Members of the Legislative Assembly to work together to elect a Speaker—not necessarily to nominate a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister—but I was disappointed that the opportunity to do that was not taken during the Assembly recall last Tuesday. However, I recognise this issue is exceptional both in its sheer importance and in the cross-party support it commands, both in Northern Ireland and in this House. On that basis, the Government spent a lot of time with the lawyers. We have been able to table important amendments to this Bill to facilitate those changes, to be taken forward in the Assembly in the continued absence of a Speaker.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): It is commendable that Dáithí and his family are here, and it is wonderful that the Government are doing the right thing. This law will now be in place faster than if the Northern Ireland Assembly were sitting, which is one of the peculiarities of the politics in which we live. We should not make political points on this. It is right and proper that it has been done for children across the United Kingdom who need organ donations, for which I thank the Secretary of State.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He is right that this is not a matter of politics. I know it is the family's wish that the Bill is operational by the spring and that is what we will be able to achieve.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for introducing this Bill, and I thank Dáithí's family, who are in the Gallery. The Bill will make organ donation an opt-out law in Northern Ireland, just as it is on the UK mainland. That is what we want: equal laws across the whole United Kingdom. As a result of the good work and commitment of the Secretary of State and the Government, we will now have an equal law. We all support an opt out on organ transplants.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words.

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for taking this action. I commend him and all the politicians who got us here, but does he

agree that the real thanks and praise should go to Dáithí and his family for their fantastic campaign? It has been an extraordinary campaign, and they all deserve great praise.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Indeed. When I spoke to Dáithí earlier, I asked him whether he fancied his chances of being elected to this House and trying to put us all straight. A bit of common sense would probably go a long way in our dealings, and he and his family have displayed it in huge quantities.

Dáithí also met Mr Speaker and is now the proud owner of a Speaker teddy bear. I could make so many jokes, but I would never be called again if I went down that route. I know that he and his father Máirtín enjoyed meeting Mr Speaker. This change goes to show what can be done in politics when everybody comes together.

I will save my remarks on the technical details of the amendments for Committee, which I hope will commence shortly.

I have spoken a decent amount about the Bill's dates and timelines, so I will conclude my remarks by noting an anniversary of which hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House are keenly aware—the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. Members throughout the House will doubtless join me in celebrating the progress that Northern Ireland has made since that historic agreement, which has served as an example of peacebuilding across the world. Looking back on the signing of the agreement, and the great strides that Northern Ireland has made since then, gives me a great deal of optimism, but I am also struck by the huge importance of delivering the functioning devolved institutions that the people of Northern Ireland endorsed by voting for it.

This Government will always seek to implement, maintain and protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and, as I said in my opening remarks, the restoration of the Executive therefore remains my top priority. The Bill will help to bring that about by avoiding an unwelcome election and providing space for the parties to work together to end the current impasse, but, of course, the Bill alone will not be enough to achieve that. We now need all Northern Ireland's locally elected leaders to work together once again to make the most of the opportunity that it presents. I hope that they will take their cue from those who went before them and secured the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and display the co-operation, courage and leadership that are needed to deliver functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, of which I am a vice-chair, will meet for a session in Stormont in early March—led by the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who is not in the Chamber—bringing together people across the jurisdictions and across all parties, as happened before 1998. Those informal ties are very important, but it is also important that parliamentarians on all sides understand where we have come from and, crucially, look forward to where we are going. Will the Secretary of State endorse that aim, and encourage Members in all parts of the House to become more involved in cross-jurisdictional organisations so that we can understand each other and get ourselves out of the current impasse?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes, 100%. The fact that people have not been able to meet face to face and build those relationships over a period is probably one of the hangovers of covid. The hon. Lady is entirely correct, although there is a different group of people I would rather see sitting in Stormont at this time, and I very much hope that that will be the case in the not too distant future.

**Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP):** The Secretary of State is right to say that Northern Ireland will succeed when our local politicians work together. We have done so in the past, and we have overcome much greater difficulties than this in the past. However, this issue is not about us; it is about what has been imposed upon us. Does the Secretary of State recognise that while all of us in Northern Ireland, collectively, will serve our people, it has been the case for too long in London that the personalities may change but the playbook does not? Too many consider Northern Ireland politics to be but a game, although for us—for all of us, across communities—it is too important to be treated as a political game. I say that in the aspiration and hope that the Secretary of State recognises that what we have had for the past few years is not good enough, and that the determination to crack the protocol and the impositions that are plaguing all communities in Northern Ireland will resolve those issues.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I hope the hon. Gentleman does not mind if I gently push back. I have yet to meet anyone in Government who thinks that the politics of Northern Ireland, and the people of Northern Ireland, are anything to do with a game. This Government take their responsibilities for every part of the Union, including and especially Northern Ireland, unbelievably seriously, and I hope we will be able to demonstrate that, with the hon. Gentleman, in the coming days and weeks.

**Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con):** I can give, on a personal level, the assurance that those of us who have been involved with Northern Ireland politics take it seriously. Some of us actually resigned from the Northern Ireland Office and sacrificed our ministerial careers because we cared passionately about Northern Ireland, and it is certainly not a game from the viewpoint of many of the Ministers who have served there—and most certainly not a game from the viewpoint of this Minister who resigned on principle.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The former Secretary of State has, in his own words, described the seriousness with which everyone takes Northern Ireland and its politics, and especially its people—and those people in Northern Ireland want their locally elected representatives to go back to work. So do I, and so, I believe, does everyone in the House, notwithstanding the tiny bit of work that we have to do with our European Union partners. This Bill will lay the groundwork for that to happen, and I therefore commend it to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** May I add my own warm welcome to our very special guest Dáithí and his family?

I now call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.5 pm

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for setting out the measures in the Bill. We do not oppose it, because we support the implementation of Dáithí's law, and because it is still not clear what an election at this point would achieve other than hardening positions.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his kind words about the engagement that has taken place between us, and, as I have said in the past, I am grateful for that engagement. I hope we shall have opportunities in the future to thank each other also for working together in the interests of Northern Ireland. I am grateful, in particular, for the fact that ideas that have been suggested during the engagement between us are reflected in the Bill, and I hope that that will prove to people throughout Northern Ireland that consensus is possible across what are sometimes wide divides in politics.

It would, of course, be better if this legislation were not needed. Northern Ireland is a valued part of the United Kingdom, and restoring the Stormont Assembly and Executive should be a priority for the Government. This is the sixth Northern Ireland Bill in the current parliamentary Session, which means that the Northern Ireland Office has been responsible for one in eight of the Government's Bills introduced during this Session. Most of those Bills have been fast-tracked and have received one day of scrutiny. That does not serve Parliament well, and it certainly does not serve Northern Ireland well.

We are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement this April. The Labour party is proud of its part in the peace process, and power sharing is an essential and hard-won outcome of that agreement. When people voted for and chose an end to violence, the institutions that were set up promised normality and prosperity. The vacuum caused by the absence of Stormont is having a profound effect on Northern Ireland, which I do not think we would accept in any other part of our country. Public sector workers are striking, but have no Ministers with whom to negotiate; civil servants are being asked to make impossible decisions about education cuts behind closed doors; and the health service has the worst waiting lists in the UK, with no clear plan to improve them. The backdrop to these issues is the fact that families in Northern Ireland have the lowest disposable incomes in the United Kingdom, and 44% of families have no savings at all.

Despite those challenges, however, there is a massive potential waiting to be unleashed. Northern Ireland is at the forefront of countless innovations, such as hydrogen buses and next generation light anti-tank weapons. The Labour party sees it as having a huge role to play in our country's green transition, and on all my visits I am struck by the determination of people to get on with living life as it should be lived. However, the longer there is no functional devolved government, the harder it will be for these opportunities to be seized.

Dáithí's law, which we will celebrate and debate today, is an example of what Stormont can achieve when it is sitting. Devolved government was functioning when Dáithí's law was introduced in the Stormont Assembly in 2021, and the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 passed its

final stage in February last year. That should have led to opt-out organ donation being in place across Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to Dáithí's family, who I know are watching in the Gallery. I am pleased that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, made them so welcome, and I am also pleased that we as a House encourage the gurgling noises that we hear from a young family. Believe me, they are the nicest noises that intervene on us when we are speaking here, and we should not be offended by them in any way, because they are welcome today.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Peter Kyle:** On that note, talking of interventions and gurgling noises, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Stephen Farry:** I must say to the shadow Secretary of State that that is a very unfortunate choice of words, but I will take them in the spirit in which they were intended. I intervene simply to make sure it is recorded in *Hansard* that when you, Madam Deputy Speaker, kindly referred to the family in the Gallery, Dáithí waved at you.

**Peter Kyle:** I am grateful for those gurgling noises, and the hon. Gentleman is welcome to intervene any time he likes.

I pay tribute to everyone who worked on what was a positive campaign, which received support across the communities and parties. That is a real credit to Dáithí's family. Despite the current divisions in Northern Ireland, all party leaders worked together to ask the Secretary of State to intervene in this case so that the law Stormont passed could be implemented. It is right that he has done so, and the Labour party supports the amendments that he has put forward. I hope that in the future the Assembly can pass more laws that have widespread support and make a difference to people's lives across Northern Ireland. This is the reality of how high the stakes are for restoring Stormont.

There is a contradiction at the heart of this Bill and the Government's strategy for restoring the Executive. When the previous Act—the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022—was passed last year, I said that the timetable for a restored Executive was extremely short. I warned that it seemed unlikely that enough progress would have been made on the protocol negotiations for the Executive to be restored before the deadline. The Secretary of State told me that he was an optimist. We have the opposite situation with this Bill. It sets an extremely long deadline, which I support, of potentially a year for restoring the Executive as the protocol negotiations hopefully reach their end point. It is important that the Secretary of State is clear that he still has the power to call elections at any point during this period. I do not want to be pessimistic about this, but it is hard to see such a long extension as an endorsement.

Since the Prime Minister took office, the Government have followed a plan for restoring devolution by finding a negotiated solution to the protocol. That is correct. It is to be welcomed that the concerns of Unionists have been listened to and that the EU is showing more flexibility over what is possible. I cannot help but wish that the same respect had been shown to the Democratic

Unionist party when it was expressing protocol concerns from within the Executive and Assembly. Had that happened, I do not believe that we would be here today.

In these late stages, I urge both the UK and the EU to strain every sinew to find a compromise that will be acceptable to all communities. As the Secretary of State knows, Labour stands ready to support such a deal. However, despite all the recent front pages and 15-minute meetings, the shape of the deal is still largely unknown to Members of Parliament. There is even confusion about whether it will be voted on in this House. I know that the Secretary of State and his Ministers have been deeply involved in these talks, so I hope they can confirm that a deal will be put before the House for a vote so that Members who represent Northern Ireland can have their say on it.

The path that the Government have not chosen to follow is the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. Yesterday, the former Justice Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland)—who was in his place just a short while ago—wrote an article in which he said:

“The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill has outlived its political usefulness and no longer has any legal justification”.

The Labour party has always said that that Bill would take a wrecking ball to our international reputation as a country that follows the rule of law. The Government would benefit, too, by being open about the fact that their legal advice might well have changed in recent days and weeks. Ultimately, a negotiated solution will be the only lasting solution.

It would also help the negotiations if the Government were more consistent in their defence of the Good Friday agreement on other fronts. This very week, we have had the spectacle of the Justice Secretary claiming that the Government were considering leaving the European convention on human rights in the morning, and the Attorney General confirming in the afternoon that doing so would break the Good Friday agreement. I hope that the Minister, when he responds, will confirm that the Government remain committed to all parts of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Problems are piling up in Northern Ireland. This Bill does not solve all of them, but it stalls and buys more time. There are 39 key decisions that require Executive approval currently on hold. All of them are important in their own ways. People in Northern Ireland deserve such decisions to be taken locally. The Government will need to keep the next King's Speech very light and prepare for an even higher number of Bills concerning Northern Ireland in the next Parliament if we do not get this right.

1.14 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State. I agree with much of what he said, and I agree with everything that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said. Given the amount of Northern Irish legislation that we have had to deal with in recent months, it should come as no surprise that the Secretary of State sought the longest extension time he possibly could. I am not entirely sure whether he wanted that or whether the Leader of the House and the business managers said, “You can have one more go at this and don't bother coming back again.” I think there is probably quite a lot of truth in that.

[Simon Hoare]

The Secretary of State is right to have gone long, regrettable though that is. The stakes are incredibly high, as we know. We are all familiar with the phrase “last chance saloon”. It has been applied on so many occasions to so many issues, particularly with regard to the politics of Northern Ireland, but we should be cognisant that this feels like a very important time in the negotiations on the protocol, and we await the outcome with interest. The Government are right not to give a daily running commentary and five-minute bulletins. These are big issues that need to be resolved calmly and amicably, and in the new spirit of trust and mutual respect. Therefore, it is a question of getting it right rather than getting it done by a particular time.

This is important, because if we get it right and a situation is alighted upon that can command near-universal support—ideally universal support—in this place and elsewhere, that will lead on to addressing all those points that we hear about weekly in the Select Committee, where the shadow Secretary of State and the Secretary of State have set out the problems relating to health, education, housing, infrastructure and the post-covid rebuilding of the economy. Those issues require real-time intervention by local politicians representing their communities and making the changes that people want. This could take one, two or three weeks. It will take as long as it needs to take in order to get it right.

All of us, irrespective of what side of the debate we come from, have been seized this week of the importance and seriousness of the time in which we are operating, of the need to get this right and of the urgency required to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, for which there is a pent-up appetite in all parties. Nobody wants to be sitting metaphorically twiddling their thumbs; they want to be discharging the jobs to which they were elected. I think it was Dave Allen who used to say, “May your God go with you,” and now is the time, whichever God we believe in, if any, to pray that we are moving towards a solution that works across the piece and that can lead to an enduring settlement, in terms of wider UK-EU relations and how the protocol operates, and to ensure that a space can be carved out so that that deeper taproot of devolution, such as we see operating in Scotland and in Wales, can really take root and flourish in Northern Ireland.

**Colum Eastwood:** Does the Chairman of the Select Committee agree that in this sensitive period, when we are hopefully at the end of the negotiations, we all have a responsibility to be careful and to allow the negotiations to conclude, hopefully successfully? Does he also agree that in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, some people are waiting for eight years to see a consultant, and that that situation can no longer stand? We need a Government as soon as possible to deal with that crisis.

**Simon Hoare:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. That takes me neatly on to the proposal tabled by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, which broadly mirrors that tabled on a cross-party basis by the Northern Ireland parties represented in this place. The public are not really that interested in process.

I met Dáithí and his parents yesterday—I echo everything that has been said about him, because he is an inspirational and joyful young man—and through their quiet persistence

they have made a case that can unify all political parties and those of no political persuasion, and shown that the changes we are making are the right thing to do. That speaks to the point referenced by the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for Hove (Peter Kyle), among others: that most people in Northern Ireland just want a better life. They want better housing, a better economy, better health outcomes and better education. For many, the processes by which those things are delivered are a moot point; they just want to see that step change and that improvement in their lives.

Nobody who has met the family over the last few days will have come away without a bit of a lump in their throat, because the family’s story is compelling and moving. There is also a simplicity to it, because what we are doing is such an obvious thing to do, but the hurdles of politics got in the way and prevented it from happening. Something almost as natural as drawing breath has been put on hold because of processes that the vast majority of people do not fully comprehend and do not see as particularly relevant to them. As I say, people just want to see changes, and this family’s story, which has led to the Government’s proposal, shows what a power for good we can be when we all put our shoulders to the wheel and face in the same direction.

I do not know about anybody else, but when I go on school visits in my constituency, I am often asked, “What’s the difference between you all?”. We talk about philosophy, principle and world view, but the one thing that unites us—the Government’s proposal throws a sharp light on this—is that none of us entered this place, or a district council chamber, Stormont, the Senedd or Holyrood, to make our communities worse off, to make people less happy or to make them less prosperous. We are all motivated to try to make things a little better for our communities in the time—however long it happens to be—that we have the honour to represent them in whichever elected forum we happen to serve. I hope that that spirit of hope and optimism, which is writ large in the Government’s proposals, is not restricted to them and to the cross-party working on them, because this is also about recognising the good that can be achieved by this place and other forums for our people.

I conclude with a point that is relevant to us all. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, is currently taking evidence about the devastating impact of paramilitaries. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and other Members will have heard it all. It is a hangover that nobody can quite understand and that everybody involved in the Good Friday agreement rather expected to have disappeared. We are also starting an inquiry on the Good Friday agreement itself, and there is something that worries me. The Secretary of State talked about leadership, and it is not just about leadership in Northern Ireland—this place needs to see leadership as well. We need a clear direction to be set—a path, a clarion call—and then the troops will follow. If there is no route map and no direction, we will be left slightly rudderless, which will allow all sorts of competing corks to bob around in the water, crashing into each other and causing more harm than good.

We have heard evidence from those closely involved in the run-up to and the delivery of the Good Friday agreement, and my worry is whether it could have been delivered if social media had been around. Social media can occasionally curtail political bravery, courage and

leadership. People read those who follow them and those they follow, creating a self-perpetuating, self-endorsing echo chamber with a similarity of world view, where the more strident voice gets heard because, in that echo chamber, only stridency stands out. All of us will be being buffeted by social media over the protocol and other issues: “If you do this, you’re a traitor,” “If you do that, you’re a Lundy,” “If you do this, you’re not a Unionist,” “If you do that, you’re not a nationalist,” or, “If you do something else, you can’t be a Conservative.” It is all nonsense. We are all public servants, and the Bill is about trying to get that back up and running. I wish all the parties well, and the people of Northern Ireland wish them well, so let us make the progress we need.

1.25 pm

**Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): I think we all know why we are here yet again: the continued refusal of some to resume their seats in the Assembly and the continued impasse caused by Conservatives placing Brexit at a higher, more prized level than what they call their precious Union. It should go without saying that Northern Ireland is always governed better when it is governed locally and that the best place for MLAs is back at work in a fully functioning Assembly that is holding to account a fully functioning Executive that are getting on with tackling the many problems that exist in Northern Ireland today. The SNP will support an extension again, because at this point we do not see a great deal of point in driving voters in Northern Ireland to the polls until the politics have moved on somewhat.

It will come as an enormous relief to all concerned that I do not intend to speak in the later stages of the Bill’s proceedings, but I hope you will permit me, Madam Deputy Speaker, to make some remarks about Dáithí’s law, as others have done, and to pay my own tribute to his family for the thoroughly inspirational campaign they have conducted. Although the amendments to the Bill may be a less than perfect way of introducing that law, they at least get Northern Ireland where it needs to be. I agree wholeheartedly with the Secretary of State that this process should not become the norm in the absence of an Executive that can pass legislation, but on this occasion the ends very much justify the means, and we can very much justify looking the other way.

Dáithí’s law will bring renewed hope to many, and I very much hope he gets the outcome we all earnestly hope for, because so much hope and such positive outcomes can be brought to people in Northern Ireland. When Dáithí gets the outcome he deserves, as I am sure he will, it will allow him to lead a long and happy life, and I hope that that heart will be able to hold all the love that his mummy, his daddy and his family can possibly give him.

1.27 pm

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I echo all right hon. and hon. Members’ tributes to young Dáithí and his family, including his father, Máirtín, who is here with him. I had the pleasure of meeting them both at Lisburn in my constituency, and the case they brought was absolutely compelling. I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to bring forward the amendments to the Bill. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I, the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry) and

other colleagues—in fact, all the sitting Members of the House from Northern Ireland—signed a cross-party proposal similar to the one brought forward by the Government. However, we are more than willing to support the Government’s proposal to ensure that enabling legislation is put in place to allow the Secretary of State to lay regulations implementing the necessary provisions, including the definitions of prescribed organs that are covered by the deemed consent. We very much support moving forward in that way.

I note the Secretary of State’s comments about the Assembly and the Executive. I am clear that we want to get a functioning Executive and Assembly up and running as soon as possible. He will know that when I took the decision last February to withdraw the First Minister from the Executive, I felt it was a measured response to the inactivity and failure of the EU to engage with the Government meaningfully to bring forward proposals that would address the concerns of Unionists. That enabled Ministers to remain in their Departments right up until the end of October, when, under the legislation, they could no longer remain in office. I understand why the Secretary of State has brought forward this Bill to extend the period for holding an election. Let me be clear that Democratic Unionist party Members do not fear going to the people; if and when an election is called, we will take our case to them. I noted the Secretary of State’s comment that he wants to create the space within which progress can be made—in that spirit, so do we. We are engaging with the Government on the vital matters that now need to be resolved to enable an agreement to be reached with the EU, one that we expect will result in fundamental change.

We are talking about change that will, first and foremost, respect Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom. That is not just a requirement on the part of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland, but one of the fundamental principles at the heart of the Belfast agreement signed in 1998. Section 1 of that agreement deals specifically with respecting the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the principle of consent, and we need to see that fully restored. As I said to the Prime Minister earlier, it is important that we are dealing with not only the trading issues that are the consequence of the protocol and its imposition, but the democratic and constitutional issues that flow from the protocol—the democratic deficit and Northern Ireland’s place within the UK.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Let me ask about the space that, we hope, has been created to make progress. In the past, whatever the whys and wherefores, where a substantial segment of the community in Northern Ireland was prepared to resist, oppose and declare that they did not like the way politics worked in Northern Ireland, an accommodation had to be found to try to ensure that a new regime accommodated that view. Does my right hon. Friend agree that as we try to make progress in that space today, Unionists have to be afforded exactly the same position, whereby we reach an accommodation where both major blocs and everyone else buys into the process on which we build for the future?

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. He rightly says that at the heart of this is the need to take Northern Ireland forward on the basis of a cross-community consensus and that that

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

consensus was broken down by the protocol, because not a single Unionist Member of the Assembly supports it. Therefore, we did not have a basis for moving Northern Ireland forward. That is important because the Executive and Assembly have important roles to play in the implementation of the protocol. I had Ministers, members of my party, who were in Departments and being required by the protocol to implement key elements that they felt were harmful to Northern Ireland. That was simply not a sustainable position. I do not want to be in the place again where I have to appoint Ministers at Stormont to Departments where they are required to implement measures that harm Northern Ireland's ability to trade within the UK.

For us, the way to resolve the issues and move us forward lies in restoring Northern Ireland's place within the internal market of the UK. Let me be clear that, as we have said from the outset, we are not looking to erect a hard border on the island of Ireland. I am not looking to create barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; I do not want that for dairy farmers in Lagan Valley, beef farmers or whoever is wanting to continue with the arrangements that are there to facilitate cross-border trade. Coca-Cola is based in Lisburn in my constituency, and the Secretary of State visited recently. Some 80% of the products it produces in Lisburn are sold in the Republic of Ireland. I do not want Coca-Cola to have difficulty in trading both within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Equally, I do not want the businesses in my constituency that have been impacted by the protocol to be inhibited in their ability to trade with the rest of the UK. The protocol inhibits that and that is the difficulty it creates.

**Ian Paisley:** This is an important issue. On Monday, my right hon. Friend, along with a number of Members from across the House, was able to attend the "Taste of Northern Ireland" event held in the Jubilee Room. Producers and food providers from all across Northern Ireland represented their trade there. One message that came out clearly from that was that trade in agrifoods is our biggest industry and it is being undermined by the regulations coming through from the EU. Those regulations must be shifted, and I am sure he welcomed the Prime Minister's comments today that the regulations have to be part of this solution, if there is to be one.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He has many farmers and some of the largest agrifood businesses in his constituency, and I know that some of his local farmers have had problems. They cannot bring seed potatoes from Scotland and that is having an impact on the potato sector in Northern Ireland. Some of his local farmers will have experienced difficulties when taking cattle to Scotland for sale and having to bring some of them back because they have not been sold at market; they face six weeks' quarantine in part of the UK, in Scotland, before they can bring those cattle back to Northern Ireland. That is ridiculous, and those are the kinds of practical issues that we need to resolve.

**Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab):** These are indeed serious problems. I also went to that fantastic event on Monday. Many of the people I spoke to there had

started their businesses in the past three to five years, since Brexit. The demand for Irish produce in Northern Ireland, across the island and internationally—it is being sold into Fortnum & Mason, and Harrods—is inspirational, and it is thriving. It is important that we celebrate those successes and the opportunities that some of us believe can come from the arrangements on offer from the EU and the negotiations that we want the Prime Minister to conclude. There is huge opportunity here and many of us want to see that for the people and the industries in Northern Ireland.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and her continuous interest in Northern Ireland, which I know comes with family connections. She is right to say that we can walk into some of the largest stores in London and find butter from Dromara in my constituency and meat from Moira in my constituency. We are so proud that we make up 3% of the UK's population and yet we feed almost one in five of the UK through our agrifood produce, which is of the highest quality. Of course, we want to preserve and protect it. We do see the opportunity to expand and grow our business and economy, and we welcome new businesses that are starting up. However, we also need to resolve the difficulties in trade and the barriers that have been erected as a result of the protocol. We believe they are unnecessary, both in terms of protecting the single market of the EU and being harmful to protecting the internal market of the UK.

I welcome the Prime Minister's earlier comment that we are not talking here about tinkering around the edges. As I said in my party conference speech last year, this is about not just trade across the Irish sea but the application of EU law and how it inhibits our ability to trade within the UK. Fundamentally, that is what needs to be addressed. There is no need for EU law to apply on goods that are not leaving the internal market of the UK. We look to the Government now to bring forward a solution that addresses that issue, but it must go further than that.

On numerous occasions, I have referenced what we call the "democratic deficit", by which I mean the fact that in Northern Ireland laws apply over which we have no say and on which we have no input. That is simply not acceptable. The Belfast agreement talks about the political and economic rights of the people of Northern Ireland. I would argue strongly that the protocol undermines our political and economic rights—specifically, our rights to legislate for the people who elect us. Although I understand the frustration that the Secretary of State mentioned in his speech about the non-functioning of the Executive, I want to be clear that, if the Executive are to function again, it cannot be on the basis that we are law takers.

**Simon Hoare:** The right hon. Gentleman and I have had a very similar view on the democratic deficit point, because we are both democrats. When the Committee went to Brussels 24 months ago, or thereabouts, the EU was very alert to that issue as well and pointed us in the direction of Norway to see how it deals with these matters—I am not saying that we should overlay that template. Does he see any merit in the way that the EU and the Government of Norway deal with the issue, with the rules applying, although Norway is not a member of the European Union, as a way of ensuring

that Norwegian voices are heard? In the same way, the EU would want Northern Irish voices to be heard. Is there anything within that model that he thinks might work or help?

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for that point. Of course, Norway is a sovereign country; Northern Ireland is not. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and it is the Government of the United Kingdom who are the sovereign authority in these matters. We need to look at this not just at the level of our democratic institutions in Northern Ireland, but in relation to the mechanisms for the Government of the United Kingdom to intervene in circumstances where the UK's internal market, and Northern Ireland's place within it, is threatened by EU laws—whether they be changes to existing laws or new laws that are introduced. We cannot have a situation where, in respect of our trade across the Irish border, EU laws that apply to that trade impact on our ability to trade within the internal market of the United Kingdom. We certainly cannot have the situation that has arisen with the protocol, where article 6 of the Acts of Union, which govern the economic union of the United Kingdom and our place in it, is impliedly repealed by this House. That must be avoided in the future. In any arrangements, we need to have a safeguard that protects article 6 of the Acts of Union—our right to trade within the internal market of the United Kingdom without barriers being put in our way.

As I draw my remarks to a close, may I say that the reason we are here is that the protocol has undermined the cross-community consensus that is necessary, which my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referenced in his comments, to ensure that we have stable, functioning institutions in Northern Ireland. We are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, so let us not also lose sight of the successor agreements. We know that at St Andrew's, at Hillsborough and at Stormont we have had to make changes that improve the way that Northern Ireland is governed. I have heard in recent days clarion calls to look again at the way in which our institutions operate and the principles at the heart of the agreement.

Let me put down a very clear marker on behalf of my party and, I believe, on behalf of Unionism generally: if the road that some want to take on reform is exclusion; if the road that some want to take on reform is majority rule; if the road that some want to take abandons the principle of cross-community consensus in Northern Ireland, that will not be acceptable to my party now or at any stage in the future. It is those principles that are essential to ensure that there is cross-community support for our political institutions in Northern Ireland. I say to the Government that, while we will look at what change can be made to improve the governance of Northern Ireland, we will not countenance the abandonment of that cross-community consensus that is at the heart of our institutions. In that respect, I welcome the comments made by the shadow Secretary of State that that is also the position of the Labour party. I recognise, too, the contributions that Tony Blair and others made to bringing the agreement together and the very delicate balances at the heart of that agreement. They must be protected as we go forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope that, within the timeframe that this Bill creates between now and next January for an election, we will see an outcome on negotiations and legislation that will bring fundamental change that will respect and restore Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom and its internal market, that will ensure that we are not in a situation where we are rule takers from the EU and where EU law affects our ability to trade within the United Kingdom. That is not acceptable. Where we trade within our own country, the rules that apply should be those of the United Kingdom. Where we trade with the European Union, the rules that apply should be those of the European Union. That is clear. The protocol does not deliver that, and we need a solution that does.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** May I remind Members that if they intervene during a speech, they should stay for the entirety of that speech, in case something they have said is referred back to. Sadly, those who are guilty of this have probably left the Chamber, but we can remind them when they return.

1.45 pm

**Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP):** It is right, of course, that we are not having an election. The Secretary of State is correct to more comprehensively push that back, because it would be pointless to miss a series of little deadlines. Ultimately, an election without either a change in the context or a change in the rules would not put power in the hands of the people and would therefore be pointless.

This is a delicate time, a sensitive time, in relation to the negotiations. Hopefully, it is also a time of possibility—a possibility that we can find a deal and an outcome with which most reasonable people can live. We have all said many words in this Chamber and outside of it about the parameters of that, so I will not dwell on it this afternoon.

Clearly, the hope and the goal is to get back into Stormont as soon as possible to get on with the things that people desperately need us to progress on—in care, climate, housing and jobs. Without doubt, health is the most acute and burning issue, in terms of the need that is out there and the corrosive impact of stop-start government and what that has done to our health service over the past number of years. This has not been an overnight problem and there will not be an overnight solution. In the absence of an Assembly, we do not have health transformation; we are having ad hoc bits and pieces of collapse, which are not cost effective and not what clinicians would wish them to be, and they are not building confidence in communities about what is ahead for public health provision.

We can look at any number of examples of services in different geographical areas, but no more so than in the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, where services are falling over and having to be closed without any sense of the compensatory provision that people would wish to see. People are seeing loss of services without any gain and without the improvements in health provision and outcomes that are possible if we do this properly with a locally accountable Minister and an engaged Health Committee.

I do not want to labour this point, but it is very clear that the stalemate is eroding public services. It is eroding belief in politics and it is giving comfort to some of the

[Claire Hanna]

anti-democratic forces still skulking in the background who have not really come to terms with the agreement and with the will of most people in our society to move forward and to get on with solving our problems and creating our shared future.

This Bill, like a few that we have seen recently, is a bit of a sticking plaster on failure, but some real good is coming out of it today—thank goodness—in the progress of Dáithí's law. I want to speak to Dáithí:

“Tá tú i do chodladh anois. Maith thú. Cinnte, tá sibh tuirseach i ndiaidh an taisteal. Duit féin, do do mhamaí, do dhaidí agus, anois, do dheirfiúr bheag, ba chomhair daoibh a bheith an-bróidiúil as an bhfeachtas a throid sibh, as an misneach a léirigh sibh, agus as an mbua mór a bhain sibh amach le chéile. Agus a Dháithí, ár laoch, iarraim ar Dhia go mbeidh dea-scéal agus croí nua agat go luath.”

To Dáithí, to your family, to your mum and dad, and now to your wee brother: You should be so proud of all that you have achieved together—the huge progress that you have made. You have been a hero to so many people and we all just hope that you get good news and a new heart soon, and we are all with you.

It is important that we say well done to that lovely family for all that they have achieved, and to so many people who have progressed the issue over the years. I pay tribute to Jo-Anne Dobson, an Ulster Unionist MLA, who advanced the issue substantially in a previous Assembly, bringing the issue to public attention and making it a political reality. She loosened the lid.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady rightly refers to Jo-Anne Dobson, who has been through this situation—she had a young son, Mark, who had a transplant, without which he would not be here today. The hon. Lady looks to history, and the history is right, and she has expressed it in a very kind fashion.

**Claire Hanna:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. I pay tribute to others, including Fearghal McKinney, who is here from the British Heart Foundation and has worked on this issue for many years and with his colleagues has helped to get all the ducks in a row to allow the family to have the reach they need and the regulations in place. I also pay tribute to Joe Brolly and Shane Finnegan from my own parish of St Brigid's. Joe Brolly's act of decency and humanity a few years ago in giving his kidney to a relative stranger opened many people's eyes; it stopped us in our tracks and underlined how meaningful and how important for life organ donation is.

I hope all those people, particularly Dáithí and his family, who brought the issue to this point, take some pride in and encouragement from their achievement, and I hope it will encourage and remind all of us in elected life that we can do good things when we work together. There are many things we need to do, and hopefully these couple of weeks can see progress and allow us collectively to get on with making many other necessary and positive changes.

1.51 pm

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I will say at the outset that the Bill going through the House today is an illustration and example of the futility of trying to use

political blackmail to move my party from its principled opposition to legislation and to an agreement that is designed to take us out of the United Kingdom. I say to the Secretary of State that, to protect his own credibility in Northern Ireland, he had far better not listen to the anti-Unionist voices in the Northern Ireland Office, but use his political antennae to know what is the right thing to do.

This Bill illustrates that on four occasions the attempt to blackmail my party back into the Assembly by the threat of an election did not work, because the issues at stake are far too important simply to cave in to the threat of an election in which we might or might not have damage done to us, or to go back into an institution where, as Unionists, we would have been required to collaborate with an arrangement that was designed to, and will—as we have absolutely no doubt and as we have warned time and again—separate us from the country to which we belong. I hope the Secretary of State learns that lesson. We are not moving on an issue of principle.

The Secretary of State said in his remarks that he is disappointed that the Executive has not been re-formed. He should not be surprised. He and I campaigned to leave the European Union. We did so because we believed it was important that, as a country, we had the ability to make choices about the laws we had, the direction we took and the partnerships we made on trade, to do the best for the citizens of our own country. Yet, as a result of the protocol, Northern Ireland—and he knows it—has not gained the benefits that he and I campaigned for and that those who voted for Brexit wished to have. We are still left within the embrace of Brussels because of the imposition of EU law.

That fundamental problem is at the heart of the action we have taken. I have heard many hon. Members say today, as we will hear time and again, that this must be done to protect the Good Friday agreement. The fact of the matter, now clearly illustrated, is that the protocol and the Good Friday agreement cannot sit side by side. Indeed, one of the authors of the Good Friday agreement, the late Lord Trimble, made it quite clear that in order to keep the protocol intact, the Government would have to rip up the Good Friday agreement—and that, in effect, is what has happened. The leader of our party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), has made that quite clear.

The consent principle of the Good Friday agreement has been removed. Even the voting mechanisms that are allowed to make decisions about whether the protocol applies have had to be manipulated and changed, and the provision in the Good Friday agreement for cross-community support on that particular issue had to be removed. The Good Friday agreement and the protocol cannot sit in place side by side. One of the two goes. That is why, as a party, we have said there must be changes to the protocol.

Why is this Bill necessary? The Secretary of State made it clear that he did not believe that an election would change anything. Why would an election not change anything? It is because he knows in his heart, even if the officials who advise him do not know it, the suppressed anger within the Unionist community at being pushed out of a country that many Unionists died, during a terrorist campaign, to remain part of. Thousands of them refused to be intimidated by threat



of violence to vote in the way Sinn Féin and the IRA wanted. He knows that that anger and that determination have not changed.

All the talk about the impact of the Assembly's not working on the day-to-day lives of people has to be measured against whether the Assembly was functioning to deal with those issues anyway. No, it was not: we had a black hole in our budget during the time the Assembly was sitting. Some of the increases in waiting lists in the health service occurred while the Assembly was working, and many of the other problems have not emerged since February last year; they are long-term problems that were not dealt with even when the Assembly was working.

Even with some of the decisions that people would like to see made, the majority of the Unionist population now realise what is at stake, and they would not find it acceptable for their Unionist representatives to go back into an Assembly even under the threat of calling an election. We have had a lot of different threats. We were told that the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill could not progress in this House unless we got a Speaker. We were told the electricity payments could not happen unless Stormont did them. All those threats have been made in the past. I must tell the Secretary of State that this problem is not going away, and this party is not going to collaborate in an Assembly where we are expected to implement that very protocol until there are changes made.

What kind of changes could avoid legislation such as this having to be made again? I think that is very clear. Some people have presented this as some kind of trade problem, saying, "If only you could do away with the trade issues and have trade flowing freely, the issue would go away.", but it is much more fundamental than that. The trade issue only occurs because there is a different law applying and a different lawmaking body in Northern Ireland from those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We are not subject to British law anymore—we are not subject to laws made by institutions set up in the United Kingdom. We are subject to laws made in Brussels. Those laws are imposed on us; we have no say on them, and if they are detrimental to our country, we cannot change them. If we try to not implement them—if we try to ignore them—there is a foreign court that will drag us into the dock to make sure that we do.

**Ian Paisley:** Would my right hon. Friend agree that the issue is not only about the laws? A raft of regulations is coming upon Northern Ireland daily and impacting on our principles and the practical issue of how we do business. For example, at the end of this week, regulations that affect the organic seal on eggs will put our egg industry effectively out of business. Those regulations will cut off our market here in Great Britain. We will not be able to market those eggs in GB, because a regulation from Europe says our organic egg products must be produced in a particular way that appeals only to the European market, where we do not have any sales.

**Sammy Wilson:** There are lots of different examples of that happening.

**Claire Hanna:** Would the right hon. Gentleman mind saying what he thinks the specific impact will be on the dairy industry, and the many producers that sell about a

third of their milk to the Republic of Ireland? What would be the environmental impact of having to dispose of a third of the milk produced in Northern Ireland? Where would that be sold if we did not have our privileged access to the single market?

**Sammy Wilson:** The hon. Member should think about the issue the other way around. What would be the impact on the food industry in the Irish Republic if the EU and the Irish were so bold and so stupid as to cut off a third of the milk that they need to make cheese, butter and everything else in the factories there? There are always ways of working around these issues. There is an idea that, somehow or other, if we do not conform to EU law, we cannot trade with the EU. America does not conform to EU law; it does not have EU laws imposed on it. China does not have EU laws imposed on it, but it can trade freely, and its trade with the EU is worth billions. Of course there are ways of addressing the issue.

**Stephen Farry:** I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would recognise that the difference between Northern Ireland and China or the United States when it comes to access to the European Union is that Northern Ireland currently has unfettered access to the European Union market for goods, whereas neither China nor the United States does. They have access, of course, but not on the same trade terms.

**Sammy Wilson:** The cost of that is fettered access to trade with GB, our biggest trading partner. When I look at the balance, the choice I would make, as a representative of Northern Ireland's consumers and businesses, is to have unfettered access to, and supply of goods from, GB. I would rather have that than have to pay the cost of fettered trade with GB simply to have unfettered access to the Irish Republic, when we know that there are other ways around the issue of trading with the Irish Republic.

**Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** Does the right hon. Member recognise that of all the goods coming from other countries into the EU, an average of only about 1.3% are physically checked? How could it be right for there to be checks on a greater proportion of the goods moving within the United Kingdom? That cannot be right.

**Sammy Wilson:** The hon. Member is right, and that illustrates just how much trade with GB is fettered in order to get unfettered access for a small amount of produce in the Irish Republic. Nearly 50% of the border checks for the EU were done for goods coming through Northern Ireland, even though we account for 0.4% of trade with the EU. That is the price being paid. Leaving aside the political and constitutional issues, there are huge economic issues from that unfairness.

The Secretary of State cannot and should not be surprised or disappointed that, as a Unionist party, we refuse to take our part in an Executive who would require by law—the courts have ruled on this—that our Ministers administer and impose that kind of arrangement on the people of Northern Ireland. That is not to mention the unknown future: there is a whole raft of EU law that we cannot even see—it is over the horizon at moment—that will cause us to diverge further from GB. That will make us a colony of Brussels—that is

[Sammy Wilson]

how it has been described—and will damage our economic, political and constitutional relationships with the UK. The Secretary of State cannot expect that of us.

That brings me to the point that I want to make: how do we get out of this situation? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley has mentioned, we welcome any changes that have been made. We have not seen the detail of them—nobody has—so it is really hard to assess exactly the extent of the changes on trade, checks, VAT and state aid, and what exactly they mean. Until we see them in writing, we are certainly not going to take the word of those who brief us. Even if their intentions are honest, everyone will have their own interpretation of those things. We need to see the changes to measure them.

A central question needs to be addressed; if it is not, there cannot and will not be a positive response from my party. What do we do about the 300 areas of law—not 300 laws, but 300 areas of law—to which Northern Ireland is currently subject that are being determined in Brussels? Do they come back to the devolved Assembly? There are three parties represented in the Chamber today, and some of them have already said that we should go with the deal, even though they have not seen it. We have not turned the deal down because we have not seen it in its entirety; we have simply given guidelines on what we expect to see in it.

I say this to all the parties here who send representatives to the Northern Ireland Assembly: what kind of public representative wants to be, and would support being, part of an Assembly that has no say over a whole raft of the laws that impact on businesses and consumers in their constituency? What kind of representative would accept sitting and working in an Assembly, and perhaps acting as Minister, if it meant implementing laws that they did not initiate and cannot amend, but have to implement, even if those are detrimental to their constituents? That is the democratic deficit, and it affects not just Unionists, but every party and every public representative that sits in the Assembly. That issue has to be addressed.

The only way to address the issue is to ensure that when laws are made for Northern Ireland, they are made either in this place, if they are on retained issues, or in Stormont, if they are on devolved issues. That is the ultimate test. Once that happens, we will not need to worry about trade barriers and everything else, because we will have a seamless market within the United Kingdom. I hope we get that outcome, because I support devolution. In fact, I was a member of the Executive at a time when they worked at their best; I am not taking any credit for that. I can think of legislation that I took through the Assembly that has been copied in other legislatures across the United Kingdom. The Executive were innovative, and able to respond to local issues. I can see the value of devolution, but it can work only if it is based on the principle of consent from both sides of the community—especially in a divided society such as Northern Ireland.

I take issue with the shadow Secretary of State's questioning whether there is any need for the protocol Bill. I believe that in these negotiations, the EU has to understand that there is an alternative. Not to proceed with the protocol Bill would be wrong, because there must be a fall-back position if the negotiations do not succeed.

It seems that all the wrong choices have been made. For a couple of years now, the EU has wanted access to important commercial data, and before we have even made an agreement with the EU, we have surrendered and said that we will make that data available. The EU has been complaining about there being no physical border posts, and what have we done ahead of reaching any agreement? We have agreed that, since Stormont will not do it, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will take responsibility for building those border posts, which are quite extensive. When I look at the size of the post in my constituency, I wonder whether everything will go through the green lane, because we have a massive 10-acre site, which DEFRA intends to develop with a huge building that would do Dover proud, for dealing with east-west trade. Those kinds of signal do not help us to reach a solution and agreement with the EU.

We wish the Government well. We think that their approach to these negotiations, as I have tried to illustrate, will not make it easy for them to get the concessions required from the EU. They have an alternative, whether that is the dual regulation alternative in the Northern Ireland protocol, or the mutual enforcement proposals that my party has put forward. The one thing I would say is that this requires radical change, not tinkering. What we have seen so far appears to be tinkering.

2.11 pm

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): I rise to support the Bill, and to confirm to the Secretary of State that he is doing the right thing in moving the election timetable; as things stand, that is probably the Bill's sole purpose, even though the debate has ranged far and wide. That said, I welcome it as a potential vehicle, and appreciate that there are procedures to go through to enable Dáithí's law to come into full effect. I join colleagues in paying tribute to Dáithí and his family for their campaign, and thanking the British Heart Foundation for its kind support. I also place on the record our collective thanks to House officials, who have worked very creatively over the past few days to facilitate this provision, and of course to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for your engagement with this issue. I am sure the teddy bear will be greatly cherished for a long time.

I think it fair to say that an election will not achieve much in the short to medium term; if anything, it could be counterproductive, especially given that we are at a delicate stage in the negotiating process. Of course, there is a mandate from May last year, which is still unfulfilled, and there are a lot of restless MLAs who are unable to do their full job. We talk about how there is a democratic deficit around EU law, but I cannot avoid making the point that by far the biggest democratic deficit is the failure to have an Assembly in Northern Ireland that can take control of devolved issues. At the moment, we have issues that are stuck, and while civil servants are doing their best to fill the gap, it is not a tenable situation. If some quarters put as much effort into addressing that as is put into creating an artificial battle over EU law, we would be in a much better place.

I respect the fact that we are at a delicate stage in the process. The intention is that if we get a deal that has cross-party buy-in, we will see the restoration of the institutions in the very near future. If we do not see that

happening, we have to avoid a political vacuum being created. People will say that this Bill creates space, but space can be a positive or a negative thing, and it can also be a vacuum. If there is no restoration in the near future, we need to address reform of the institutions and, in particular, the situation whereby parties can veto power-sharing, never mind decisions that cut across communities and create difficulties. Power-sharing has been vetoed in the past and is being vetoed today, and that is not a tenable situation.

This is not about excluding any party; it is about a situation where, if a party is determined to exclude itself, that will not bring the whole show down or prevent other parties, which are willing to govern, from proceeding. However, my preference is for all parties that have a mandate to work together in Northern Ireland for the collective good of our society.

**Sammy Wilson:** Can the hon. Member explain why, in the three years when Sinn Féin excluded itself from the Executive and we had no Executive, the Alliance party not only did not propose, but refused to support any move that would have excluded Sinn Féin?

**Stephen Farry:** I am grateful to the right hon. Member for that intervention because it enables me to reinforce my point. My party has been seeking reform of the institutions since the passage of the Good Friday agreement. We have been consistent in highlighting that the particular form of coalition Government that applies is too rigid and has the potential for deadlock. I have to say that that is something the DUP also consistently pursued over those years, until fairly recently. With reference to the period in which Sinn Féin brought the institutions down, I encourage the right hon. Member to go on our website and look through the succession of conference speeches by our party leader, Naomi Long, in which she regularly called out the blockages in the system and called for reform of the institutions. My party has been extremely consistent on this point.

I do not want to spend too much time talking about the protocol, because that is not why we are here today, but obviously it is the backdrop or context for our discussion of the Bill and there are a few points it is important to reinforce. First, most people and businesses in Northern Ireland want to see an outcome, and they are pragmatic about the protocol; they understand why it exists and that it needs a measure of reform to work more effectively. In essence, they want to maximise the opportunities that come from it while addressing its deficiencies. That is where most people are in their headspace.

It is worth stressing, particularly in this Chamber and throughout Great Britain, that Unionism represented by the DUP is only one part of the equation of Northern Ireland society. Obviously, the DUP has an important view, which has to be taken into account, but it is far from being the majority viewpoint in Northern Ireland. It is important that commentators and others take a balanced view on what is being said in Northern Ireland and the interests being advanced by the people of Northern Ireland. For me and, I think, some others, the key test of the way forward is essentially that we preserve market access, both to the wider European Union market and to the UK economy as a whole. That is the key test for most pragmatic people and businesses.

**Ian Paisley:** I hate to come back to this point, but article 6 of the protocol states that there should be unfettered access to the UK internal market. Twice so far in this debate I have raised the matter of organic eggs produced in Northern Ireland. Our market is the United Kingdom, not the Republic of Ireland, yet as of Friday this week, because of EU regulations applying to Northern Ireland, our farmers cannot sell eggs to the rest of the United Kingdom. How is that helping the hon. Member's case?

**Stephen Farry:** My first response is that I did not advocate Brexit. The protocol will never be a clean solution to these issues. There is no perfect outcome when a single market is broken up in the way that has happened. This is about managing and mitigating the fallout.

The hon. Gentleman may well be pleased to know that I recognise his point about eggs. I have written to a Minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to advocate for ongoing flexibility on that. For some agricultural products, Great Britain is our main market, but for others—particularly milk and the wider dairy sector—the Republic of Ireland and beyond is the key market. There are a lot of subtleties there that we have to work through.

There is frustration at the moment about the fact that we are almost in danger of re-treading a lot of old arguments that I hoped had been put to bed, but which seem to be resurfacing. With reference to Brexit and Northern Ireland, there are essentially only three choices available to policy makers. The first is to go for a soft Brexit, minimising diversions between the European Union and the UK or Great Britain, and that would ease tensions particularly in relation to Northern Ireland. The second is to go for a hard border on the island of Ireland, which, for various reasons, is politically and economically unviable. The third is to have some form of special arrangement for Northern Ireland—we could call it a “protocol”, or we could call it something else. That involves Northern Ireland being treated differently in certain respects, which is not new; it has been part and parcel of the Northern Ireland's entire history from the early 1920s.

People get exercised about the Acts of Union being breached, but no such arguments were made in 1920, 1949 or even in 1998 with the Good Friday agreement. In practice, a single-party Unionist Government in Belfast were more than happy to diverge from the rest of the United Kingdom whenever that was viewed as in their interests. That is before we even get to the current iteration of devolution.

I will focus in particular on the democratic deficit. As I have already said, that was not an issue prior to Brexit, when the UK had full representation at all levels of the European Union. Our biggest democratic deficit by far is the failure to have an Assembly or an Executive alongside the other institutions of the Good Friday agreement. Looking ahead, we need to drill down and see what is most important in terms of addressing the democratic deficit. I recognise that there is an issue, as did the European Union in its October 2021 non-paper.

The key issue is ensuring that Northern Ireland officials, businesses, civic organisations and political voices are able to get in at ground zero whenever a new EU law that may become applicable to Northern Ireland is

[Stephen Farry]

being designed. As I am sure everyone in the Chamber will appreciate, the most important time to try to influence a law is before the final decision is taken, rather than while it is being ratified through the various structures, when it becomes much more difficult to change the course of action. The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), made reference to Norway. Places such as Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland and even Switzerland, which are outside the European Union but are part of the single market or within its orbit, direct most of their lobbying energy at Brussels. We do not at present have that route directly in Northern Ireland, and that is what I want to see addressed when we talk about a democratic deficit.

By contrast, the sign-off of EU law is a secondary issue. In practice, once those laws are developed, it is in our interests to go along with them to preserve dual market access. However, I have concerns about the tenor of the democratic deficit emerging from this deal. If we end up in a situation in which there is a lack of certainty about Northern Ireland's ongoing compliance with the aspects of EU law relevant to us gaining access to the single market, that will have a detrimental impact on the certainty of Northern Ireland's existing businesses that they can trade with the EU. That huge issue may well deter investors from coming to Northern Ireland. There is the danger of a big asterisk beside Northern Ireland, meaning that, although we have access to the single market, it will say between brackets that it is subject to whatever mechanism is used to try to cover up this non-existent issue. That very process creates uncertainty for businesses.

I do not want to see a situation whereby, in trying to fix one particular problem in the current stand-off, we end up perhaps inadvertently creating a wider problem that acts to the detriment of our current and future businesses and the future prosperity of Northern Ireland. People talk about the "sweet spot" of Northern Ireland's dual market access, but that will only come to fruition if we do several things. We need to promote it politically and through our investment agency, but we must not create any uncertainty in that regime beyond what we currently have.

That also applies to the European Court of Justice, for example. Whenever people talk about the European Court of Justice coming in and imposing things on Northern Ireland, I say the opposite: the Court is a means to an end. If we are abiding by a certain aspect of EU law, the Court comes as part of it. If we want to put various layers in between, that is fine—nobody will object to that particular point. But the converse is that there may well be a situation in which there is uncertainty about the access of Northern Ireland businesses to parts of the single market, and in which we are wrongly blocked from access in investment decisions, procurement opportunities or things along those lines. In that context, the European Court of Justice becomes our potential ally, opening up those doors that have been wrongly shut in the face of Northern Ireland businesses. Again, it is important that we do not inadvertently throw that out and miss the wider point of what is in the best economic interests of Northern Ireland.

I will conclude on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. It is appropriate that the protocol Bill is parked or drifts away—or however that may happen. I trust that the Secretary of State, who has been at the coalface, will appreciate this point more than most. Progress has been made over the past number of months because, under this Government, trust has been rebuilt with the European Union. We saw that with the breakthroughs on data sharing and, just before Christmas, on longer grace periods for veterinary medicines. But we cannot build trust and, at the same time, retain the tool to break that same trust. That is not going to close this deal.

I wish the Government well over the coming hours and days—but hopefully not weeks—in concluding a deal, but that deal has to be one that works in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, not just those from a Unionist background, and that works for the future economy and prosperity of our region.

2.26 pm

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I welcome the amendment to address organ donation. This moment would not have happened without the courage of a little boy, who has been mentioned so often in the debate. We really commend Dáithí, his parents Máirtín and Seph, and his little brother for their determination and tenacity in bringing about real change in Northern Ireland. It is wonderful.

We all have ideas and ideology and want to bring about change and make our mark on society, but that little boy of six really has done, and I think that is absolutely amazing. It should inspire us all to go that extra mile to stretch ourselves and do the right thing. I also pay tribute to Fearghal, who I know has played a key role in supporting the family and helping them on this journey. Navigating the legislation and being in the right place at the right time is not easy, and I commend him for it.

As a mum myself, I wish Dáithí all the best for his future medical support and care. When I looked at him yesterday, I could not help but be moved. I thought, "Here is a little boy who is fighting for everyone else, yet he needs us to fight for him." He has such an amazing mum and dad, who have done so much for him in his short life by pushing this issue. We wish him well as he goes for his surgery in the not-too-distant future. I assure him of our thoughts and prayers for that journey.

I also pay tribute to a constituent of mine, Jo-Anne Dobson, who has already been mentioned. She has been very much at the fore of this debate. She brought the matter to the Assembly a long number of years ago when she was an MLA. She brought it because it was personal to her as well. She, too, must be commended, because she gave the gift of life to her son, Mark, when she donated her kidney to help to save him. I commend Jo-Anne for her efforts; I know that she would be proud of Dáithí today and all that he has achieved.

My colleagues and I want to see devolution. We want devolution that delivers on issues such as health, education and public services—devolution that works. We are frustrated that we find ourselves debating this legislation in the House today. It should not be needed, but sadly it is necessary, because ultimately the Government have not acted or been able to resolve the long-running issue of the Northern Ireland protocol. That issue alone is the bar to the restoration of the devolved institutions.

Over recent days, there has been a great deal of speculation about progress and reaching a new agreement. Let me be clear: the DUP stands ready to restore the Executive, but that can happen only on the basis that the principle of cross-community consent for such a restoration is in place. Members who pour out affection and commitment to the Belfast agreement cannot escape the fact that Unionism consent for power sharing does not currently exist, and that is the test for any deal that may or may not emerge over the coming days.

My colleagues who were elected as MLAs in May stood on that platform and received a mandate for their stance, and we will not betray that trust—there will be no fudge. My party has set out its tests on which any agreement will be judged. The Government know those tests well, and it is this party and the Unionist community from which we hold a mandate that will assess any agreement against those tests. This place is known throughout the world as a beacon of democracy—as a nation, we stand with those whose democracy, even today, is undermined by threats from tyrants or dictators—but we the people of Northern Ireland, because of the Northern Ireland protocol, face the erosion of democracy at the behest of the EU.

It is pertinent to make the point that:

“My visceral objection is to unaccountable power...we ought not to live our lives under unaccountable power. Power has no legitimacy other than that given to it by the people by voting.”

Those are not my words or those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), but those of the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) when explaining his opposition to the EU. The democratic deficit foisted on Northern Ireland by the protocol comes through a power that is “unaccountable” to the people of Northern Ireland and that has “no legitimacy” in the terms described by the Minister, because not one person in Northern Ireland, to whom the rules would pertain, has voted for them.

I trust that that interview by *Church Times* reflects the Minister’s principles about an acceptable outcome to the negotiations and that he has not had a road to Damascus conversion from defender of democracy to someone who bows down to unaccountable EU power in the corner of the UK that I am honoured to call home. That point must be addressed, as must the totally unacceptable economic impact of the protocol.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): On the Damascus road experience, a number of people, parties and organisations in Northern Ireland seem to have been enlightened that the protocol, as it was presented, is definitely not working. Those are the same people who wanted it to be fully and rigorously implemented, but they have now had that Damascus road experience and say it needs major rework.

**Carla Lockhart:** I fully agree with my hon. Friend.

The protocol costs a significant amount annually. Some £350 million a year is spent on the trader support service, which is £18,000 an hour—let us think how that could be utilised to make things better in Northern Ireland. The protocol is damaging a wide range of small family businesses and larger industries in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for North

Antrim (Ian Paisley) eloquently highlighted the issue around organic eggs. Such issues have a daily impact on our business.

Again, there is an issue around seed potatoes that Wilson’s Country in my constituency has been at the fore of fighting, because it cannot bring seed potatoes from Scotland. That would be unacceptable anywhere else in the UK, so the Government should not accept it for the people of Northern Ireland. It beggars belief that the Government have stood by while trade has reorientated from within the UK. It serves no benefit to the UK; that diversion of trade must be addressed fully in any new agreement.

The Government know well what must be done, and they know the prize. The NIO prioritised a whopping £600,000 of taxpayers’ money to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Belfast agreement, yet the longer it takes to reach an agreement on the protocol that respects the fundamentals of the Belfast agreement, the more air is escaping from the party balloons. Although the Bill extends the period in which an Executive must be formed following an election by 52 weeks, my hope is that this new deadline is never met, and that we have our Executive back sooner rather than later. To do so, however, the EU will have to stretch itself. If it does, it will unlock the prize of devolution; if it does not, it will be responsible for the demise of our political process and the Belfast agreement. Time will tell.

2.36 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): First, I join other hon. Members in congratulating Dáithí on the law that will forever bear his name. It has been a remarkable campaign for an extremely good cause. Secondly, I say to the Secretary of State that I support the Bill, because it is a sensible response to a problem that has gone on for far too long. It is never desirable to postpone elections, but in this case I think it is necessary.

As the debate has unfolded, we have been reminded that if it were not for the row over the protocol, we would not be sitting here debating the Bill. The Bill is a symptom of the mess that we have got ourselves into—one in which rather too many people have said, “We are not moving.” We will solve this issue only if those people are prepared to move in the interests of finding a way forward.

We all know that leaving the European Union was always going to create a problem for the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and just about everyone I have ever spoken to has agreed that that could not be dealt with on the border—there could be no checks, infrastructure or anything else. Something therefore had to be done to address that, while recognising that the European Union needs to be able to ensure that goods coming into its jurisdiction meet its rules. That is perfectly reasonable and we would expect no less for the United Kingdom.

In fairness to the Government, they acknowledged that from the start, rather than saying, “Well, it’s the EU’s problem, not ours, and there’s nothing that we need to do.” As a result, they came up with the Northern Ireland protocol, as we must remember. I do not want to dwell on the ebbs and flows of the rather sorry tale of what has transpired since, which I do not think reflects particularly well on the Government or, in the interest of balance, on the EU Commission.

[Hilary Benn]

At the beginning, the EU Commission appeared to advance the argument that what happened in the Irish sea should be treated like any other third-country border of the European Union—that was where it started from. In other words, every single thing would have to be checked, and nothing that did not conform to the rules of the single market would be allowed to make it across the Irish sea into Northern Ireland.

Very early on, the EU came to realise that that was not going to work. The best example of that is medicines, where under full application of the rules, the EU would have said, “Unless your medicines for NHS patients in Northern Ireland have been approved by the European Medicines Agency, they are not getting on the ferry, or on the plane.” It did not take very long for the Commission to work out that that would be an absurd position to adopt, and as a result, it changed EU law. That solved the problem, but it also established a really important principle: the EU can be flexible where it wants to be flexible. That should give us all encouragement in trying to sort this out.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend aware that a review into the medicine Roaccutane, which is under an EU licence, has not been published because of issues with the Northern Ireland protocol? Since then, there have been 81 adverse health effects, including one suicide. It has been specifically said that that delay is due to the Northern Ireland protocol and the issues with the licensing arrangements. Roaccutane is licensed across the EU, and unfortunately the publication of the report has been held up, with 81 adverse health events as a result.

**Hilary Benn:** I am sorry to hear what my hon. Friend says. That is news to me—I do not know anything about it. No doubt, those with responsibility for trying to find a solution will have heard what my hon. Friend has said, and will see what more can be done to address the issue.

At the heart of the argument has been this really quite simple, but very complex, question: “How do you identify a good that is moving into Northern Ireland and is going to stay in Northern Ireland, and how do you identify a good that is moving into Northern Ireland on its way to the Republic?” That is why the concept of goods at risk was at the heart of the Northern Ireland protocol, but it was never defined in its application. The negotiation since, between the Government and the Commission, has all been about what that concept means in practice.

Eventually, the EU and the UK both developed their proposals—again, with slightly different names—for what we now refer to as red and green lanes. When I saw that the Commission had proposed that and the Government had also proposed it, it did not seem to me that there was a huge amount of difference between the two concepts, and to judge by the reporting—we are all slightly in the dark, because we have not seen any text—some agreement may well have been reached, which would allow goods that are coming into Northern Ireland and staying there to not be checked on a routine basis. I hope very much that that is an accurate reflection of what has been happening, because it provides the basis for a settlement.

Why does this matter so much? First of all, let us be frank: our relations with the European Union have been in a pretty bad place for far too long, and as the economic consequences of leaving the European Union are becoming more and more evident, that ruptured relationship stands in the way of trying to address some of the problems that arise from our exit from the European Union. To respond to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart)—it is a pleasure to follow her, because she set out her views very clearly indeed—many small businesses in Great Britain will describe the problems that they now face, and many have given up exporting to the European Union because we have left the European Union. It is not just small businesses in Northern Ireland that are facing problems. We cannot address those problems until the Northern Ireland protocol is solved. That is why sorting this out is so urgent.

As was said by the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), we want Northern Ireland to take advantage of the fantastic opportunity it has: my constituents do not have access to the single market, but his constituents do. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) raised a point about the democratic deficit, which I will come to, because he raises a very fair issue. The difference is that in Britain, we are largely subject to exactly the same laws because of EU retained law, but we in GB do not have the opportunity to export to the single market. Northern Ireland is subject to exactly the same laws, but does have that opportunity, which puts Northern Ireland businesses in a very advantageous position compared with businesses in my constituency. That is why, on my last visit to Northern Ireland, the businesses I spoke to said that they were really quite keen on that benefit that the protocol gives them. We need to get this solved.

Secondly, the fact that the Executive and the Assembly are not working is something that we should all be worried about. The EU now better understands the consequences of that than it perhaps realised at the beginning. We need both to be restored as quickly as possible.

My third point is a plea against absolutism in addressing this problem, and I cite the role of the European Court of Justice as an example of that potential risk. Of course, if there is any argument about what EU single market law means, the only body to which any person can reasonably go to try to find the answer is the Court of Justice of the European Union, because they are the EU’s rules, not ours. However, that is not the same as saying that any such ruling will absolutely determine the outcome of a disagreement or dispute about the implementation of the protocol within the wider dispute resolution mechanism. The example of medicines, which I gave earlier, is a really good illustration of that: a full application of EU law would have prevented medicines turning up in Northern Ireland, but in the end, a way forward was found. The willingness of the EU to delay the application of the rules to veterinary medicines, which I very much welcome, is another example of the flexibility that the EU has come to recognise it needs to apply.

To address the point that the right hon. Member for East Antrim made, I hope that consulting the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly on new single market rules and how they might apply in Northern Ireland will be another part of an agreement, if one can be reached.

**Simon Hoare:** Given the examples of flexibility, change and evolution that the right hon. Gentleman has highlighted, does he agree with me, and with a growing body of opinion, that the legal justification—forget anything else—for the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill has completely disappeared? Renegotiation is going on, and flexibility is being demonstrated. If the threshold for article 16 to be triggered has not been reached, it would be a complete and utter waste of time to introduce legislation in this place that is not required

**Hilary Benn:** I agree completely with the Chair of the Select Committee—I did not agree with the justification in the first place, but he makes an extremely powerful point, which I will return to briefly towards the end of my remarks. Indeed, I have asked Ministers why, if they have a problem with the protocol, they are not using the mechanism for dealing with disputes that they have negotiated—namely, article 16—as opposed to introducing the Bill. But, for reasons that still escape me, the Government decided that they were not going to go down that particular route.

The reason I raise the European Court of Justice as an example is that, if there is anyone who says, “Unless the ECJ is completely written out of any agreement, we cannot back a deal”, I fundamentally disagree with them. There are some voices in parts of the House and the wider community who appear to take that position, but the Government must disagree with that position too, because of the obligation we have—which the Government have always accepted—to ensure that the integrity of the single market in the Republic and beyond is respected, without unreasonably affecting the flow of goods between Northern Ireland and GB.

Finally, if an agreement is reached—and I very much hope that it is—two things will have to happen that, apart from anything else, will render this Bill’s provisions no longer necessary. First, the EU will have to drop the infraction proceedings it is currently taking against the United Kingdom for unlawfully, as the EU sees it, prolonging the grace periods; and secondly, the Government will have to drop the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, referring to the point just made by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Again, we read that there are voices even within Government who say that the Government should not drop it, but I cannot conceive of any circumstances in which a deal will be done in which the Government say, “Great, let’s sign. By the way, we are just hanging on to that Bill that we put into Parliament, in case we don’t like what happens subsequently.”

The reason that will never work comes to the question of trust. The Secretary of State will understand there has been a terrible breakdown of trust between the UK and the EU over this matter. I have spoken to lots of people, and it is the thing that is mentioned more than anything else. The Government negotiated the protocol, signed it and urged Parliament to vote for it. They said they would honour it, and then they did not do so. I absolutely understand the problems with the implementation of the protocol. Reference was made earlier to people changing their understanding on the road to Damascus, and I think that is true. I have certainly got a better understanding of what the problems are since this process

began, and I think the EU Commission certainly has, and we should welcome that process, because it is the route by which we will be able to find a solution.

In international relations, and in particular in our fraught relations with the European Union, if we restore trust, it means we can look them in the eye and say, “If we sign, we will honour it as the United Kingdom, and we expect you to keep your side of the bargain as well.”

**Simon Hoare:** The right hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time, but he might be using the wrong tense. I always hesitate to disagree with him, but I think trust has been restored. Mutual respect and a much better relationship between Westminster and Dublin has led to a much better relationship between Westminster and Brussels. I do not think any of the conversations would have been taking place until my right hon. Friend became Prime Minister. The trust has already been restored. I think the right hon. Gentleman is better to use the past tense, because trust is there and clear.

**Hilary Benn:** I was using the word in relation to any notion the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill would be continued. I accept absolutely the characterisation that the hon. Gentleman has put on what has been happening recently, which I find encouraging.

The final thing I wanted to say—were it not for that change of personnel and approach, I do not think we would be, hopefully, fingers crossed, at the point of reaching an agreement—is to wish the negotiators well. I really do wish them well. They need the time to sort it out. The deal cannot come soon enough, not least because then we can turn our attention to other pressing matters to do with our relationship with the European Union that need urgently to be addressed.

2.52 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is always a pleasure to make a contribution on anything that refers to Northern Ireland, but particularly today on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill. I wish to make some comments that I hope will be constructive and helpful.

Here we go again. We have heard this so much, and I am sure most of my hon. Friends in this House and those outside will be able to join in over the course of my contribution. While I may seek to change the style of address and even the words used, the substance is the same, and that is because it must be the same, because the facts have not changed. The DUP cannot and will not nominate to the Assembly until the seven conditions of the pledge that our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has made are met. With that being the case, this Bill is a necessity.

The tone today of everyone in the Chamber has been constructive and helpful. I believe we are looking, hopefully with confidence and optimism, to the future as we try to bring things together. What a pleasure it is to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I am not giving him a big head, but he does make a significant contribution and brings wisdom to these debates, and I put that on record and thank him for that. As we move forward, his understanding of where we are is something I have taken note of in the short time I have been in the House. He has been in the House longer than me.

[Jim Shannon]

I refer first to the protocol and the democratic deficit. Others have mentioned that, and I want to speak to it as well. For us, the protocol violates the Belfast/Good Friday treaty commitment protection to uphold the rights of the people of Northern Ireland to pursue

“democratically national and political aspirations”,

as the state parties committed themselves to from 1998. At that time, I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I supported that process, as did all my colleagues who were Members of the Assembly at that time. It was a stage of life where we may have been a bit hesitant in moving forward, but we realised that to have a working Northern Ireland Assembly, we had to have contributions from both sides of the Chamber—nationalists and Unionists—to move forward. The process put forward was one that certainly many of us bought into.

The people of Northern Ireland were able to pursue democratically national and political aspirations with respect to all the laws to which they were subject. The protocol strips the people of Northern Ireland of that right in relation not to 300 laws, but 300 areas of lawmaking to which they are subject. It constitutes an attack on other legal protections, such as article 25 of the international covenant on civil and political rights. There is huge interest in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement as one of the most famous treaties in the world ahead of the 25th anniversary celebrations, which afford special leverage.

I put on record my concerns in relation to the seven conditions. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) is not here at the moment, but in meetings that he and I have had in the past, I have always underlined the importance of us in this House, not Brussels, having the final decision on anything referred to the European Court of Justice. That is one of the things I would have loved to have seen, and that is one of our seven conditions—our line in the sand—for where we are as a party.

The Belfast/Good Friday agreement protects rights and safeguards equality of opportunities and human rights in particular. It has commitments to mutual respect, civil rights and religious liberties for everyone in the community. I adhere to that in everything I do in this House, and Members will know that I speak highly and rightly in terms of human rights issues. I am my party’s human rights spokesperson. I speak on freedom of religion or belief on behalf of those across the world. Just last weekend I was in Pakistan, where we were upholding the rights of people to have religious liberty and be able to worship their God as they so wished to do. The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee referred to prayer, which I believe in fervently. We must pray fervently, earnestly and unceasingly, because prayer does make a difference. With prayer we can move mountains, and I think we need prayer in this process. The Belfast/Good Friday agreement affirms:

“the right of free political thought; the right to freedom and expression of religion; the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations; the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means”.

Those are the things I wish to see in the early stages.

We have been concerned in my constituency of Strangford. We did vote to leave in the referendum, by the way, and many businesses are impacted by the

movement of goods and the extra tariffs. It has affected the contact between companies that have done business for 30, 40 or 50 years. We have the impact on nurseries, the purchase of steel, car dealers, farmers and pet travel. All these things are critical factors for people as a result of what the EU has done up until now. I know that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central referred to the fact that some changes have been made, but the changes need to be more significant. We welcome the move away from intransigence and obstacles, but unfortunately many of those remain in place.

These conditions are not frivolous. We are not being, to use a word that I use all the time, thran, as my mother would say. The spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), will know all about thran. The words I use are words that he can recognise and relate to. We do not seek to garner public support; we seek to represent the public who have felt this annexation by stealth. We seek to speak for the people who are taxed without democratic representation, and we seek to speak for the small businessman who has received HMRC correspondence asking him or her to pay duty on products being shipped from Scotland to Northern Ireland, when they have already paid duty on it and they are asked to pay it again. There are double costs for Northern Ireland businesses as against the rest of the United Kingdom.

The former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had a saying that I have often kept in my mind, which is that Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley. Well, no, it is not, but it needs to be. I know that the Secretary of State will relate to that, and others in the House as will understand the point I am making. I want to be the same as everybody else, and my people—the constituents I have the pleasure and the privilege to represent—also want that.

We seek to outline the need for constitutional changes to be voted on and dealt with through an appropriate mechanism, not as a weapon to beat the British Government with. It is not about that. For us to do this, we need a Government who take us seriously, and that was not done. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), referred to this in his contribution—and I took note of it, by the way. He is an honourable man, and I know that he seeks to find a way forward that we can all agree on. That has left us with no option but to abstain, which is a tactic well used by others before to little comment or media attention.

So I am delighted to hear that Europe is again prepared to negotiate. I will of course be more delighted when supplied with the actual detail and can go over it to ensure that it is a deal that not only works for Europe and the remainder section, but is workable for Unionists. I think Tony Blair said that Bertie Ahern had said that in any way forward there has to be buy-in from Unionists. To anybody who thinks there cannot be, I say, “Honestly, guys, you’ve got to wake up and realise it can’t happen.” In the discussions—the friendly discussions—that I have had with the shadow Secretary of State, we have very clearly said that there must be buy-in from Unionists, and that is something we must see in place.

We have all seen the co-ordination of the media pointing the finger at the DUP for standing in the way of decision making. I have been very clear in this House that the Government have taken several decisions in this House already, including a very costly Irish language



and identity Bill along with the even more costly—in terms of life—abortion legislation. Both of these and others were done from this place over the head of the institutions. When I heard the Secretary of State say last night that he had tabled an amendment to bring in Dáithí's law, I was pleased—I put that on record, and I thank the Secretary of State for that—to see that matters of life and death did actually concern the Government when it came to Northern Ireland and that saving life could be as important as the ability to indiscriminately take one in one of the most liberal abortion regimes in Europe.

I want to mention Dáithí's law. Others have done so, but I want to put on record that I am greatly moved and impressed by that young six-year-old, and impressed by his parents and his family, as well as by the honourable gentleman in the Gallery, Fearghal McKinney. He has been a friend for a long time, and we appreciate his work and efforts behind the scenes.

I want to tell a quick story about my nephew, and this is why I really support the opt-out system. I have always supported it: I have supported it in this Chamber for many years and I supported it before I came to this Chamber. I have a nephew called Peter, who was born with a kidney the size of a peanut. Members may say, "My goodness, how can you survive?" Well, the fact is that he did survive, but he survived because he had treatment from the day he was born right through until he had a transplant at the age of 16. I can remember that, as he grew up, he was the colour of a bowl of custard—as yellow as can be—because his system was not working.

I remember when Peter played with my boys, and my boys are very boisterous. They are young men now, of course, but they were very boisterous—I think boys always are boisterous, and probably wee girls are as well, but I would not know because I never had a wee girl, so I cannot say in all honesty, but others have, and they will understand what I mean. However, Peter was never able to run and play as my boys did. So for me and for his family—his mum and dad, and his brother and sister—when he got the transplant, it was really important. That is why this opt-out organ donation law is so important.

Peter waited for years upon years to get that transplant, but he got it, and today he is as fit as a fiddle. I remember that at the beginning when he had his transplant he took his first job, which was delivering newspapers. It was something he never thought he could do. It is a small thing—Members may say, "Look, Jim, that's not very much"—but it was a whole lot for him, because he was never able to do any of those things. So when it comes to Dáithí's law, I can tell Members that my family are incredibly pleased to see this coming in, because we understand this from Dáithí himself and the family, as well as from those who have worked hard, with all the party political contributions, such as those from my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), who referred to Jo-Anne Dobson as well. I remember her very well, and what she did for her son and how that gave him life. Those are the things that are incredibly important.

As colleagues have pointed out, the Secretary of State did not need to table new clause 2, because he could merely have accepted new clause 1, tabled by my

right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley and supported by the hon. Members for Belfast South, for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry), as well as by me and other party colleagues. This circumvention of our amendment is notable in itself, and it begs the question of why it is necessary when the Northern Ireland MPs across the parties that take their seats here had already submitted an amendment. None the less, we are very pleased to see it coming forward. Little wonder that, yet again, my constituents in Strangford and people across all of Northern Ireland are highlighting to me the fact that absenteeism by certain nationalists seems to get better representation from the Government here than those who take their seat and carry out voting. It is strange that it does not seem to work with negotiation in Europe for Unionist concerns; we await to be advised otherwise.

I support this Bill and the new clause that the Secretary of State will bring forward, which is necessary. This is something I have supported since my own nephew was blessed enough to be an organ recipient, and he is a fit and healthy young man. Mark has his own house and his job, and he works away. I have often said that those who do not want to donate should have a simple ability to opt out, and that is included. I therefore have no qualms whatsoever in supporting this Bill.

Geoffrey Robinson, who used to be a Member of this House—he sat on that Opposition Bench, if I recall rightly—brought forward the organ donation opt-out, supported by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), and I was one of the co-sponsors. I was very glad to play a small part on an organ donation Bill in this House to change the law in England and Wales, and ultimately we can see that coming our way in Northern Ireland.

I conclude with this. There is also a clear need to allow time before an election, and we in the DUP are ready for that election. We stand strong on representation for the Unionist people with a very strong mandate. It is a mandate on which we intend to stand firm—the rock we have taken from our people, our constituents and our supporters—which is to allow for the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill to come through and take effect. That will allow for a real and proper negotiation to take place with Europe to allow the DUP—my party, my colleagues and our supporters across all of Northern Ireland, but especially in Strangford—to get back in to do what we want to do, which is to take Northern Ireland forward as an integrated part of this wonderful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I often say, we are always stronger together and we are always better together. As long as Europe is honestly prepared for and agreeable to find an agreement, I hope and pray that those things can come our way and we can have the peace, stability and the political institutions in Northern Ireland once again.

3.8 pm

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to join everyone in the House who has paid tribute today to Dáithí, his tremendous family and friends, and the British Heart Foundation. Thank you for everything—your fight has touched us all—and it genuinely means so much that the Government and everybody has supported the change in the law today.

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

As the shadow Secretary of State has said, we support this Bill and recognise that, while it is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland to have a functioning Executive in place as soon as possible, the political realities are that an election called now would not support the restoration of the Executive. As colleagues have already said, that means the Government have to present a clear plan for how they will use that extra time, and what actions they will take to restore the Executive. This is a political problem and it requires a political solution. The Government have a political responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland, to ensure that the lack of an Executive does not have a disproportionately negative impact on their day-to-day lives.

The work that civil servants are doing in Northern Ireland to keep the mechanics of the state functioning is commendable, and I record my thanks, and that of the Labour party, for all that they are doing in incredibly difficult times. They are rightly unable to make the decisions that elected politicians should be making. Will the Secretary of State commit to his Government supporting the civil service? Will he give a voice to their concerns and the concerns of the Northern Irish people, by committing to meet public sector trade unions in Northern Ireland who are engaged in industrial action, and work with them to agree a fair deal for workers, letting them return to work?

Pay negotiations are far from the only area where the lack of a devolved Administration is having a huge impact on people's lives. I have spoken before in the House about the issues facing the Northern Irish NHS, with record waiting times and a lack of specialist gynaecological services leaving women suffering with daily pain for treatable conditions. That crisis is exemplified by the ongoing problems at Enniskillen Hospital, where challenges in recruitment have seen emergency surgery suspended. Patients are rightly concerned about the impact of reduced services, and issues of safety.

But the issues are not limited to the health service. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) rightly highlighted how Northern Ireland produce feeds people across the United Kingdom and the island of Ireland. I met representatives from the Ulster Farmers Union on my last visit to Northern Ireland, and we all know how much of an impact the ongoing saga of the protocol is having on their decision making. I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) in wishing the negotiators well with the protocol.

Yesterday I had the pleasure of meeting representatives from the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group, who work for a gender-equal economy, to discuss their work on the disproportionate impact that the cost of living crisis is having on women in Northern Ireland, and the report that they published on women living with debt. Personal debt in Northern Ireland, excluding mortgages, is higher than in any other part of the United Kingdom. Debt is far from gender neutral, with women more likely to claim social security benefits, to be in low-paid, part-time and insecure work, and to be providing care for children and family members. They are also more likely to be making up for cuts to public services with unpaid work.

It was particularly startling that there currently are resources that have been earmarked to support the women identified by that group—resources that could support the most vulnerable in society and stop people slipping into the spiral of debt and borrowing in which far too many find themselves. Resources such as that discretionary support are underspent and underutilised, because there is no Executive to make the decisions needed to ensure that that money reaches the most vulnerable. I could spend hours listing those things and other issues, and hours more talking about the impact of such matters on people's day-to-day lives, and I urge the Secretary of State to do what he can to ensure that we do not see another year where "business as usual" creates damage that will take years to undo. I hope he will meet and listen to concerned voices in Northern Ireland.

One point that really touched me concerned some of the language used across the House today, and I want to pick up on some of those words. During the debate the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), spoke of a spirit of "hope and optimism", and highlighted the responsibilities of us in this place as public servants. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley spoke of the "delicate" balances at the heart of the Good Friday agreement. The priority now is to reach an agreement on the protocol, and the Bill rightly allows the Secretary of State to focus on that and not on mechanisms around elections. The Government simply cannot waste time as they have in the past, with the protocol being little more than a prop in the ongoing psychodrama in the Conservative party. Now is the time for action, not posturing. The Prime Minister must end these delays and bring his deal to this House.

3.14 pm

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** With the leave of the House, I would like to reply to the debate. Let me extend my thanks to all those who have contributed. I will answer as many of the points raised as I can. I am always struck by the deep sense of regard and affection for Northern Ireland displayed by right hon. and hon. Members when we have debates on subjects to do with Northern Ireland, and today was no exception. The shadow Secretary of State asked me some sensible questions—

**Peter Kyle:** As always.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes, actually, as always, which is nice for me. We remain committed to all parts of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, as he would expect. He surprised me: I did not know the stats on the percentage of Bills going through the House that are Northern Ireland related, and he is correct—the number is way too large, and it should not be that way. The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill is proceeding, but the Government would very much prefer to get a negotiated settlement that works for all. Really that should not need saying, but I will say it once again. The former Government Chief Whip in me tells me that the House will always find a way to have its say on anything that the Government or the Executive do, and I am absolutely sure that that will be the case here.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The Secretary of State will have heard my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). Can he reassure

the House on the issue that I raised about the review of the medicine Roaccutane, which was completed in 2021 but has not been published because of the Northern Ireland protocol, according to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency? Will that be included in any new protocol?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I admit that I was unaware of that case, but I like to think that we would address all the significant issues that occur around medicines in general. I am afraid that the hon. Lady will have to wait, as will everyone else, for the conclusion of the ongoing talks and negotiations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) made a number of points with which I concur, and I look forward to our continued conversations. He spoke of a “Taste of Northern Ireland” event that he attended on Monday evening, which alas, because of other matters—he might guess what they were—I could not attend. I was provided, however, with some of the products that I could have tasted had I been able to attend. It must have been a very warm evening in the Jubilee Room, because most of the liquid in the bottle of Irish whiskey that I was sent seemed to have evaporated. I hope that I can have a taste of the wee dram that remains when I finish with dry February.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the Secretary of State for his reference to the Taste of Ulster event. The distillery that presented the whiskey is Hinch Distillery in my constituency, and the Secretary of State would be more than welcome to come with me on a visit. I am sure that we can replenish that which he has lost.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** That is genuinely very kind of my right hon. Friend, and I add just a small sidebar to my officials: please clear the diary for 24 hours after that.

I always enjoy the contributions made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). I remember our weekly meetings when I was Government Chief Whip. He was Chief Whip of the DUP, and he would come in and tell me exactly what was going on. He will know that I completely understand his, and his party’s, position. In his usual timid, shy way, he reminded us of the importance of sorting out the issues with the protocol, and he is not wrong. I hope he will forgive me for gently pushing back on what he said about civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office. They are good—some of the best in Government—and if mistakes or decisions are made that he does not like, that is not down to them. Advisers advise; Ministers decide. Any mistakes are mine.

There were a whole host of other very good contributions, and a lot was said about a young man who is here with us, aged six, who I think will make some history today as we move forward with these proceedings.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

#### NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) BILL (INSTRUCTION)

*Ordered,*

That it be an Instruction to the Committee on the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill that it has power to make provision in the Bill about the procedure for regulations under section 3(9A) of the Human Tissue Act 2004.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

## Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

*Considered in Committee (Order, this day)*

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

### Clause 1

EXTENSION OF PERIOD FOR MAKING MINISTERIAL  
APPOINTMENTS

*Question proposed*, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton):** With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Government amendments 3 to 5.

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 17, after “Formation” insert

“and Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent)”.

*This amendment is consequential on NCI.*

Clause 2 stand part.

Government new clause 2—*Organ and tissue donation in Northern Ireland: procedure for regulations defining permitted material.*

New clause 1—*Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022: temporary provision—*

“(1) Section 52 (orders and regulations) of the Human Tissue Act 2004 is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (4B), insert—

“(4BA) During the current post-election period, subsection (4B) applies as if for “the Northern Ireland Assembly” there were substituted “each House of Parliament.”

(4BB) In this section “the current post-election period” has the same meaning as in section 1 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022.”

*This new clause is intended to bring into operation during the current post-election period the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, which received Royal Assent on 30 March 2022, by temporarily allowing Parliament (instead of the Assembly) to approve relevant regulations made by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland.*

Government amendment 6.

Amendment 2, in the Title, line 5, at end insert

“; and to make provision in relation to the Organ and Tissue Donation (Deemed Consent) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022”.

*This amendment is consequential on NCI.*

3.20 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Dame Rosie, and to move seamlessly to Committee of the whole House on this important Bill. I will speak to the two short clauses comprising the Bill, and to the Government amendments selected for debate following the motion of instruction that was agreed to a few moments ago. A number of amendments were tabled that were similar in intention to the Government amendments. Based on the conversations that we have had, I would like to think that they will not be pressed to a Division, because we will get the job done.

Clause 1 amends section 1 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022 and section 16A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to retrospectively extend the period for filling ministerial offices after the elections held on 5 May 2022 by a further 52 weeks, so that it applies from 19 January 2023 until 18 January 2024. That means that if the parties are unable to form an Executive on or before 18 January 2024, I would again fall under a duty to call for an Assembly election to take place within 12 weeks. The clause also provides the Secretary of State with a discretionary power to propose a date for a poll at any time within the extended period for Executive formation. Clause 2 is consequential and concerns the Bill’s extent, commencement and short title.

The Government amendments all relate to organ donation in Northern Ireland, were tabled ahead of Second Reading, and were selected for consideration by the Committee on foot of the Government’s motion of instruction a few moments ago. I will speak chiefly to Government new clause 2, as the remainder of the amendments are simply consequential. New clause 2 and its consequential amendments would insert a new clause to amend the procedure for making regulations under section 3(9)(a) of the Human Tissue Act 2004 while no Presiding Officer or deputy is in post. This change would mean that the relevant regulations would be subject only to the negative resolution procedure by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In short, the clause and its consequential amendments would allow for the regulations needed to give effect to Dáithí’s law without need for the election of a Speaker. Obviously, I want an Assembly in place, which could have done this, but as hon. Members from across the House have said, this issue is so important that it warrants an exceptional intervention from the Government. I therefore hope and expect right hon. and hon. Members to support the five Government amendments, and to allow the Assembly to take Dáithí’s law across the line. I stress the word “exceptional” once again. It continues to be my sincere hope that we will see the return of the institution sooner rather than later.

My short remarks reflect the length of the Bill, but I hope that I have provided the Committee with sufficient detail on what the Government are seeking to do through it, and through the amendments that we have tabled. I look forward to hearing Members’ contributions, and will endeavour to respond to as many points as possible when I wind up—shortly, all being well.

**Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab):** It has been only a few minutes since I last spoke about the Bill, but I am sure that colleagues are delighted to hear from me again. Joking aside, the swift passage of this Bill is an essential step to getting a fully functioning Executive in Northern Ireland, which, as we have heard from colleagues from across the House, is desperately needed. In my role as shadow Minister, I am starting to feel a little as though it is groundhog day: I again find myself offering cautious support to a Bill from the Northern Ireland Office—a Bill that we are discussing only because of the failure to form an Executive in Stormont, and that should not need to come before this House at all. The people of Northern Ireland are contending with a vast democratic deficit that must be rectified. I sincerely hope that this Bill is the last of its kind that we discuss in this House.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), has already offered our support for Dáithí's law—a shining example of what can be achieved when devolution in Northern Ireland is working, and a reminder of what its dysfunction can delay. Dáithí's law should have passed months ago at Stormont, but I am proud that we are making it a reality today. It is possible only because of the dedication of campaigners from across communities in Northern Ireland, who have shown how powerful their collective voices are. I again pay tribute to their unending energy and drive to ensure that this law becomes a reality.

Tradition says that a shadow Minister's speech should end with a final line directed at their opposite number on the Government Benches, but mine will not do that today, because, frankly, I think the Minister has got the message. I thank Dáithí, who is an inspirational little boy. I am not sure he knows yet quite how much of a difference he and his family have made across Northern Ireland. Frankly, he has made history.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): I see our little hero has now moved to front and centre.

I could have made this point to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on Second Reading, but I want to carve it out so that it will be noted. I pay tribute to the British Heart Foundation, which has done so much work with the family to make the case. Passing this Bill is one thing, but raising public awareness is another. This change will require some form of public information campaign, and there needs to be an opportunity for family conversations so that people's personal wishes are known. These circumstances often arise at a moment of trauma or accident, so they are a huge surprise and shock, and rational discussion is often, perfectly legitimately, very hard.

We all support this amendment, but a follow-up public information campaign is needed to ensure maximum understanding so that people take up the opportunity it provides.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Thank you, Dame Rosie, for the opportunity to speak on these amendments. I will keep my remarks brief and to the point.

I commend the Secretary of State for tabling these amendments. He noted on several occasions that they are exceptional but are the right thing to do. They will allow for the exceptional transformation of our organ donation laws in Northern Ireland. I commend the Speaker's Office for its efforts to ensure that the passage of the amendments could happen in this form.

We often hear that this Parliament is sovereign. I am taking heart today from the fact that this is law that will help to protect and save lives, which is an encouraging move by this Government and this Parliament that sends out a strong message across the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State and I differed on the abortion laws that were tacked on to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, as those laws were very much not about protecting life. This law is about protecting life, which is wonderful.

3.30 pm

Just before the Committee started, I sent a little message to Dáithí's dad to ask, "What is your message today?" He wants to encourage everyone to have a conversation about organ donation and to share their

wishes with their loved ones. The legislative framework will by the end of today be in place, but those conversations still need to happen. I encourage this message to go forth from this Chamber to every household that is listening in and has been inspired by Dáithí and his family: have that serious conversation and ensure that your loved ones know your wishes on organ donation.

I congratulate the family once again, and I assure them of our thoughts and prayers in the days, weeks and months ahead as Dáithí continues on his medical journey and as he moves towards getting his new heart.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): Anyone with experience of Northern Ireland issues will recognise what happens when they come to this Chamber. Joy is rarely associated with Northern Ireland issues when they come to the House of Commons, but Dáithí Mac Gabhann and his family have brought joy to this Chamber today. Nothing is broader than his smile from the Gallery, and it has warmed us all.

Much was said on Second Reading about the amendments, and about the politics of the amendments. I have no intention of delving into the politics but, when it was suggested that this could happen here, it was a strong aspiration but it was not guaranteed. Political parties are often accused of not working together, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry) sat down together and drafted new clause 1. As local parties, they knew the goal. Just as the family never engaged in politics and never lost sight of the prize, local representatives tabled their own amendments.

When I engaged with the Secretary of State late last week on his aspiration not only to support an amendment but to table his own amendments to make it happen quicker, there was nothing we could say in response other than, "Thank you, and please proceed." He has, and I am grateful to him for doing so. We entirely accept the exceptionalism he has injected into the debate. We know he will not do this on a regular basis, nor are we asking him to, but today, for this issue, for Dáithí and for the issue of organ donation, that has been incredibly important. So I thank the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley and the hon. Members for North Down and for Foyle. I also thank Fearghal McKinney and Denise McAnena from the British Heart Foundation. I do not think Denise has been motioned, but she does the hard work in Northern Ireland for the British Heart Foundation. Wherever she is listening, I congratulate her on her efforts. I am glad that, despite all the challenges, the Speaker's Office and the Government have accepted that this measure is important and within scope, and that the amendments could proceed today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

## Clause 2

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT AND SHORT TITLE

*Amendments made:* 3, page 2, line 15, leave out "This Act extends" and insert

"Section 1 and this section extend"

*This amendment is consequential on NC2.*

Amendment 4, page 2, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) Section (Organ and tissue donation in Northern Ireland: procedure for regulations defining permitted material) extends to Northern Ireland only.”

*This amendment is consequential on NC2.*

Amendment 5, page 2, line 17, after “Formation” insert

“and Organ and Tissue Donation”.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

*This amendment is consequential on NC2.*

*Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### New Clause 2

#### ORGAN AND TISSUE DONATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND: PROCEDURE FOR REGULATIONS DEFINING PERMITTED MATERIAL

“(1) Section 52(4B) of the Human Tissue Act 2004 (draft affirmative procedure for regulations defining permitted material for the purposes of deemed consent to transplantation of human tissue in Northern Ireland) does not apply during the relevant period.

(2) Regulations made under section 3(9A) of that Act during the relevant period are subject to negative resolution within the meaning given by section 41(6) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954 (c. 33 (N.I.)).

(3) In this section, the “relevant period” means the period—

- (a) beginning when this Act is passed, and
- (b) ending with the next day on which the Presiding Officer and deputies are in post having been elected under section 39(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

*This new clause would amend the procedure for making regulations under subsection (9A) of section 3 of the Human Tissue Act 2004 while no Presiding Officer and deputies are in post so that they are subject only to negative resolution by the Northern Ireland Assembly.*

*Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.*

### Title

*Amendment made:* 6, line 5, at end insert

“and to amend the procedure for making regulations defining permitted material for transplantation in Northern Ireland under

section 3 of the Human Tissue Act 2004 in the period until the Presiding Officer and deputies of the Assembly are elected.”—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

*This amendment is consequential on NC2.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill, as amended, reported.*

*Third Reading*

3.36 pm

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank my officials and others for their help with this legislation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Congratulations, everybody—particularly those in the Public Gallery.

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### PUBLIC SERVICE PENSIONS

That the draft Judicial Pensions (Fee-Paid Judges) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 23 January, be approved.—(*Fay Jones.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Trade (Mobile Roaming) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 15 December, be approved.—(*Fay Jones.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## National Medical Isotope Centre: North Wales

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Fay Jones.)*

3.38 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Let me start by congratulating the Minister on her recent appointment as Minister for Science, Research and Innovation in the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and thanking her sincerely for her engagement prior to the debate.

This afternoon—I originally wrote the words “this evening”—I will explain why medical radioisotopes are important, why there are significant concerns about the security of supply in the UK, and, finally, how a national medical isotope centre in north Wales could provide a reliable supply of medical radioisotopes for the UK into the future.

Let us start with the basics. What are medical radioisotopes, and why are they important? Medical radioisotopes are used in a branch of medicine that employs radiation to provide diagnostics and treatment. According to the World Nuclear Association, more than 40 million procedures using radioisotopes are performed every year globally. In the UK, around 700,000 medical procedures using radioisotopes are carried out annually. The radioisotope most widely used in medicine is Tc-99, which is employed in about 80% of all such medical procedures.

Diagnostic procedures using radioisotopes are now routine, identifying cancers and illnesses such as heart disease earlier to improve outcomes for patients and save lives. The thyroid, bones, heart, liver and many other organs can be easily imaged and disorders in their function revealed by using radioisotopes. When used for diagnostics in this way, the radiation is detected by a scanner to produce an image that can be used to track disease progression, to provide predictive information about the likely success of various therapy options and to assess changes since treatment. This information helps healthcare professionals to accurately manage diseases and to make informed medical decisions on treatment options such as surgical intervention.

When used for treatment, molecular radiotherapy delivers radiation to malignant tissue, which then weakens or destroys cancerous cells. This is a rapidly evolving discipline, with research currently taking place into new drugs that could revolutionise the management of certain cancers over the coming years. Radioisotopes can also be used to sterilise single-use medical equipment such as syringes and surgical gloves, with one of the key advantages being that this approach allows already packaged products to be sterilised. In addition, because it is a cold process, radiation can be used to sterilise a range of heat-sensitive items such as powders, ointments and solutions, as well as biological preparations such as bone, nerve and skin to be used in tissue grafts.

Despite the clear importance of medical isotopes, both as a pillar of cancer care and as a diagnostic tool, this branch of medicine is being neglected. With the World Nuclear Association forecasting the use of radioisotopes increasing by up to 5% annually and the Royal College of Radiologists expecting the use of molecular radiotherapy to increase dramatically over

the next decade, there are concerns that most nations and regions throughout the UK are neither prepared nor preparing for this increase in demand. It is for this reason that a review of molecular radiotherapy services in the UK, undertaken by the Royal College of Radiologists, the Royal College of Physicians, the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine and the British Nuclear Medicine Society, recommended that each devolved Government and each of the radiotherapy operational delivery networks in England should appoint a molecular radiotherapy champion. The champion’s role would be to identify where there were gaps in the provision and what further support would be needed to deliver treatment effectively.

The UK Government have made some progress on this matter, announcing a £6 million medical radionuclide innovation programme in December last year. Can the Minister clarify whether her Department will now be responsible for this programme and whether any progress has been made on the innovation project workstream that will look at the development of technologies that could support future access to medical radionuclides? The question of which Department is responsible is significant.

The relative neglect of this branch of medicine in the UK over the last decade and more means that we now depend heavily on imports for key radioisotopes, many of which are supplied by air from South Africa and Europe. The Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine has expressed its concern regarding the fragility of this supply chain, with post-Brexit customs backlogs, although fortunately quickly resolved, serving to highlight just how dependent on imports we are. I would like to put on record my thanks to the IPEM for its work in drawing attention to this important matter, and particularly to Paul Barrett for his assistance.

The reality is that, without decisive action, the UK is facing a likely catastrophic breakdown in the supply chain for medical radioisotopes, which could have a severe knock-on effect on diagnostics and therapy, and therefore on patients’ lives, in the UK. The key issue of the lack of availability of radioisotopes is arising because many of the reactors that produce this material globally will be decommissioned within the next decade, many of them by 2030. It is worth noting that there was some positive news just last week from the Netherlands, with the Authority for Nuclear Safety and Radiation Protection giving approval for the construction of a new reactor to produce medical radioisotopes, which it hopes will come on stream by 2030. While welcome, this reactor will only replace the reactor that is already operational in the Netherlands; it will not add any new capacity. In addition, even if the reactor in the Netherlands comes on stream by 2030—this is important—the EU will still lose a third of its production capacity over the next seven years.

In Russia, construction has started at a plant in Obninsk, which will produce isotopes for the diagnosis and treatment of patients, with the aim of having production lines operating by 2025. ROSATOM, the Russian state nuclear energy company, has said that the plant will “ensure Russia’s sovereignty” in the production of radiopharmaceuticals. I am sure I do not need to convince anybody in the House of the merits of ensuring that we are not reliant on Russia for life-saving materials—now, in the near future, the middle future or possibly beyond.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

If the UK population is to benefit from molecular radiotherapy advances and hard-won improvements in the diagnosis of symptoms and in survival rates, patients need to be able to access treatment regardless of where they live. That will require the creation of a robust supply chain, and that means being able to produce radioisotopes in the UK. While the rate of decommissioning that will take place across Europe poses a serious risk, it also gives the UK an opportunity to fill the gap that will be left in the market and, in doing so, to ensure that we have a reliable and accessible domestic supply, as well as to play a key part in strengthening the global supply chain.

In strengthening the UK's domestic infrastructure for creating medical radioisotopes, the overarching goal should be to ensure that health services across the UK have access to these materials. Having an affordable stream of radioisotopes will also relieve the burden on health services, in terms of the costs and time involved in procuring medical isotopes. My second question to the Minister is therefore this: will the UK Government's major conditions strategy, which is being developed by her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, look at the need for radioisotopes?

Securing a domestic supply, rather than being reliant on imports, would be beneficial because one challenge with using medical radioisotopes is that they have a very short half-life, which is the time required for half of the radioactive atoms present to decay. That means that many radioisotopes have to be manufactured days or even hours before administration to a patient. That makes them vulnerable to short-term disruptions to supply, as we saw when mechanical failures at a Belgian nuclear plant last year led to cancer patients in the UK having crucial scans cancelled because of a shortage of radioisotopes. In addition, because of the large distances that medical isotopes are required to travel, more are often produced than is necessary, which increases the cost of procurement and, in turn, the financial burden on the NHS.

Securing an accessible supply of radioisotopes for the UK is at the heart of expanding the UK's research and development capacities in this field. It would present an opportunity to drive forward research and clinical trials on cancer treatments and, in so doing, help the UK Government achieve their aim of turning the UK into a life sciences superpower. In addition, there is significant scope to capitalise on the variety and range of isotopes that a new facility could produce. For example, a radioisotopes production centre in Australia ships materials for research purposes all over the world, as well as conducting its own research.

Given the clear benefits of securing a UK supply of medical radioisotopes, it is opportune that there are calls for a generating reactor in north Wales. There are proposals for an advanced radio technology for health utility reactor, known as Project ARTHUR, which would be built in Trawsfynydd. The ARTHUR programme aims to establish a medical radioisotopes production facility to complement Bangor University's Nuclear Futures Institute, which is already the UK's second largest nuclear research group within UK universities. Bangor University also has a planned new medical school, so there really is an opportunity to create nuclear

medicines expertise and a centre of excellence if we look to move ahead. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Simon Middleburgh, the co-director of the Nuclear Futures Institute, for his work in this field, and for his assistance in preparing for this debate.

The proposals for ARTHUR centre on a small non-power reactor based on the open-pool Australian lightwater technology. The reactor's primary remit will be health intervention, as it will, as I said, have no energy output. The proposals are for a not-for-profit initiative, with health services in Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland all set to benefit. The reactor will be able not only to supply diagnostic and therapeutic medicines for the UK, but to provide enough to export internationally. ARTHUR also has the potential to do other things, such as enable neutron capture therapies, which are experimental therapies for treating brain tumours, and for non-health-related neutron physics research.

In order to ensure that the production of isotopes can begin before the worst impacts of the global shortages affect patients, construction must start in 2024, so that this can come online by 2030. The Welsh Government support the project and are willing to fund a proportion of the cost, but they have made it clear that financial support is required from Westminster to bring the project to fruition. That is inevitable, given the limited financial levers available to the Welsh Government in terms of capital investment, and this would be a piece of cross-nation critical infrastructure.

In a recently finalised strategic outline business case, it was indicated that by selling radioisotopes in the UK alone—this is not including overseas exports or the research opportunities—the facility would be able to cover the capital expenditure in between 11 and 16 years, depending on interest rates. The added benefit of having the site at Trawsfynydd in my constituency is that the Welsh Government have established a development company, Cwmni Eginio, whose primary remit is to bring forward potential new projects and further maximise the opportunities of the Trawsfynydd site. It is principally concentrating on bringing forward plans for a small modular reactor, but it is worth noting that there is enough room at the 15 hectare publicly owned site for continued decommissioning of the former power station, an SMR development, and Project ARTHUR. Indeed, there would be both space for a range of developments at this nuclear-licensed site and synergies between them.

Project ARTHUR has the potential to be a major Welsh and UK strategic initiative for the next 50 years or more. It is likely to operate in a way that saves countless lives, allows people to have healthier and happier family lives, and improves economic outcomes, as people will be able to work for longer and more effectively. Once up and running, it will be one of the few facilities in the world focused primarily on medical radionuclide production. It also presents an opportunity for the north Wales economy; it would bring in highly skilled jobs in the industry, create surrounding infrastructure, and build local supply chains. The jobs created, both directly and in the associated supply chain, will be long term and sustainable, and will include roles such as research scientists, engineers, drivers, operators, and production, technical and office staff. By attracting good jobs to the area, the facility will help to sustain local communities. That is incredibly important for the rural and Welsh-speaking counties in north-west Wales.



In order to realise this vision, a key stumbling block that must be addressed is the apparent lack of ownership of this issue in Westminster. Responsibility has been passed backwards and forwards between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We hope that the recent reorganisation in Whitehall and the creation of the Minister's new Department will present an opportunity for strong leadership on this matter. Will she provide clarity on whether the new Minister for nuclear will lead on this work? Who will lead on it?

I wish to touch on one final part of the puzzle that must be addressed if we are to ensure that the UK can fully maximise the benefits of medical radioisotopes: training. There is a skills gap, and a shortage of nuclear chemists and radiochemists, in the UK. New courses need to be developed and supported if we are to train the next generation of nuclear medicine physicians, oncologists and clinical scientists and deliver high-quality care using medical radioisotopes. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update the House on whether any discussions have been had on introducing regulatory reform to change the qualified person training process, so that it aligns with European standards. I have been told by those working in the sector that that would expand the opportunity for nuclear chemists and radiochemists to be involved in clinical trials and become fully qualified. At present, there are concerns that there is a shortage of qualified persons, which is hampering the number of people able to train and qualify.

Improving training is also important because the lack of trained staff means that there is a discrepancy in the provision of molecular radiotherapy services across the UK, with some patients unable to access services where they live; we have the old postcode lottery. In order to address training and the fundamental question of security of supply, I urge the UK Government to work with the devolved Governments to develop a strategy for the equitable delivery of molecular radiotherapy services—a strategy that places patients at the heart of the delivery of these services and ensures that the relevant patient advocacy groups are involved in determining the shape of molecular radiotherapy treatment.

In closing, this issue is about patients having equitable access to innovative treatments, minimising health inequalities and ensuring that the promised improvements in survival rates can be delivered to all those who could gain from them. I hope that the Minister will agree to work with me and with Welsh Government Ministers to harness the capability, skills and expertise in north Wales, and to bring Project ARTHUR to fruition.

3.54 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway):** I thank the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for the connection that we had before this debate. On the point about the portfolios in the new Department, it may well be that some questions remain unanswered, but she has my guarantee that I will get them to the right Minister for a response.

I thank the right hon. Lady for securing this debate on a national medical isotope centre in north Wales. This is such an important matter to discuss. I agree that there is more that the UK can do to maintain secure

access to the radionuclides that we need. Radionuclides, also known as radioisotopes, are vital to UK healthcare. Common uses include the diagnosis of cancer and heart and lung disease, as she mentioned. They are vital in the treatment of some cancers. The already important role of radionuclides in our healthcare system is set to grow. New radiopharmaceuticals are under development, including for cancer therapy, and there is an ever-increasing demand for diagnostics. The Government recognise the importance of finding a sustainable solution to radionuclide production to safeguard the provision and development of radiopharmaceuticals for UK patients.

Most radionuclides are produced in research reactors outside the UK. This leaves the UK reliant on ageing infrastructure overseas. A number of these reactors are due to come offline this decade, and their replacement projects have been delayed. Without a confirmed route to replace production, the supply chain will risk becoming even more fragile.

In 2022, the unplanned maintenance of a research reactor in Belgium caused global shortages of several critical medical radionuclides, including weeks of shortages in the UK. Those shortages were managed through a combination of Government, NHS and industry responses. The Department of Health and Social Care, working closely with the British Nuclear Medicine Society and other specialist clinicians, issued guidance to the NHS. This guidance outlined how to manage patient services effectively to prioritise the usage of pharmaceuticals that require radionuclides produced in reactors.

Thanks to a significant amount of work by DHSC officials and a strong relationship with UK suppliers, the UK was able to source adequate material to ensure that the impact on patients was minimal. Access to a global resilient network of research reactors is critical for these products, which cannot, as we know, be stockpiled. That international co-operation ensured a continued, albeit limited, supply of those products during the shortage period.

A European Commission report, published in 2021, supports the idea that the supply chain may become more fragile. It notes that the shutdown of European research reactors, as well as the general ageing of infrastructure and the lack of immediate replacements, are unsolved issues that require concerted European action.

The Government recognise the need to strengthen our access to medical radionuclides in the UK to mitigate the impact of shortages and to continue delivering nuclear medicine services for UK patients. As the lead Department for nuclear innovation, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is playing a central role. By reviewing our access to medical radionuclides and developing technologies, we aim to improve security of supply. We have been clear that nuclear technology has a role to play in the UK, and our ambitions have centred around providing secure, reliable, low-carbon energy to millions of UK homes.

However, we must continue to use our capability as a nuclear nation to support the provision of nuclear medicine services and to drive healthcare innovation. In recognition of the opportunity for the UK to do more to secure its access to medical radionuclides, my Department launched the £6 million medical radionuclide innovation programme in December last year. The programme will focus on encouraging innovation in technologies

[Amanda Solloway]

and techniques that could support access to radionuclides and increase our national resilience against global shortages.

The call for projects to receive funding will be competitive, but the programme has been designed to be technologically agnostic and a research reactor such as the proposed medical isotope centre is one of the technology options it could support. The programme will also provide a comprehensive understanding of global supply and UK demand for medical radionuclides up to 2050. Any gaps in supply will be analysed to understand the impact on UK patients. That work will provide the evidence base that the Government need to take informed decisions on future radionuclide supply.

DHSC continually monitors supply concerns, including through regular contact with UK suppliers, and is working closely with officials in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. Together, we recognise the need for leads in nuclear technology and healthcare to collaborate and deliver results.

Radiopharmaceuticals play an important role in the diagnosis and treatment of some cancers, as we have acknowledged, and the recovery of elective cancer services remains a Government priority. Thanks to symptom awareness campaigns and the hard work of NHS staff, there are continued high levels of urgent cancer referrals, with more than 10,000 urgent GP referrals seen for suspected cancer per working day in December 2022. DHSC is working to reduce the 62-day cancer backlog, which has fallen by 9% since peaking in May 2020.

It is promising that more cancers are being caught early. Recent data also shows that more than 100,000 patients last year were diagnosed with cancer at an earlier stage, when of course it is easier to treat. I know that researchers and staff across the service are focused on achieving the NHS long-term plan ambition to diagnose 75% of all cancers at an early stage by 2028. In addition to the immediate action to support cancer services, recognising that the majority of cancer patients will have at least one other condition, DHSC is developing a major conditions strategy that will cover disease areas including cancer.

I have outlined the important progress that the Government are already delivering across nuclear medicine and radionuclide supply. However, we acknowledge that there is always more that can be done to maintain future access to radionuclides and to deliver for UK patients. It is important to note that, when making recommendations for future policy, our advice must be driven by evidence. That is especially salient when making decisions on high-budget interventions such as the construction of a national medical isotope centre. With nuclear innovation, and especially innovation in healthcare, we must ensure that we have the strongest possible rationale for what we are asking the Government to deliver.

We aim to ensure that resources are focused effectively, giving best value and the greatest possible benefit to the taxpayer. We will do so via the medical radionuclide

innovation programme and other important initiatives such as NHS England's review of NHS trusts' radiopharmacy services to better understand the facilities, equipment, workforce and capacity needed to effectively deliver nuclear medicine.

I am keen to stress, however, that the medical radionuclide innovation programme is not running in contradiction to proposals for large infrastructure projects, including the one under debate today. Our programme aims to determine the technologies needed to deliver the radionuclides required for nuclear medicine services across the United Kingdom. As well as supporting the development of new targeted therapies, the programme will therefore consider the suitability of a national research reactor as one of the technology options once we have concluded our assessment of the radionuclide landscape. While the delivery of healthcare and the supply of medicines are devolved matters, it remains important that the four nations can come together and support one another where possible.

Our chief scientific adviser at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has had regular engagement on this issue over the past two years with his counterparts in the Welsh Government and the Department of Health and Social Care. Together, they understand the need to build an evidence base to provide clarity on the best means of supporting supply resilience of radionuclides in the future—from bench to bedside. Officials in my Department and DHSC engage regularly with their counterparts in the devolved Governments and their nuclear medicine leads. It is clear that the four nations share the same commitment to delivering patient outcomes, and the issue of nuclear medicines is no different.

One of questions asked by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd was whether we imported from Russia. Analysis performed by the Department of Health and Social Care indicated that there are no known medical radionuclides within the supply touchpoints impacted by the sanctions. She also asked about the champions we could have for radionuclides. That is certainly something that I would encourage, and I will pass it on to the relevant Minister to look into further.

My Department will progress the medical radionuclide innovation programme, and our decisions will be driven by the evidence as it is gathered over the coming months. We remain open-minded to the conclusions of the programme, and the role the Government might have in medical radionuclides supply in the future. We are keen to stay up to date with the proposal of a medical isotope centre in north Wales. Our policy teams will continue to meet regularly with their Welsh counterparts to discuss the project as it progresses. My Department is excited to play a part in the future of medical radionuclide supply for the United Kingdom. I thank the right hon. Member again for raising this vital topic.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.6 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 February 2023

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

## Energy Suppliers: Customer Credit

9.30 am

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of customer credit retained by energy suppliers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. In this debate, I am not going to focus on what I have focused on many times in the Chamber, which is the myriad failures of the UK Government in dealing with the energy cost crisis for people in their homes and the cost of living crisis. That is well documented, and it was underlined by a poll yesterday showing that nearly 70% of people across the nations of the UK feel that the Government are failing on this. That is not what this debate is about. The issue that I want to highlight is something that affects many people in their homes and is manifestly unjust.

I want to start by saying that I am grateful to the Minister for graciously taking the time to discuss this with me before the debate; it says a lot that she was willing to be informed about the perspective that I want to bring to this. I am hopeful that she will work with us to try to sort this and that we will be able to work together to aid people.

I have been asked to feel sorry for energy suppliers. I have been asked by energy suppliers to think of them and their financial position, as they are keeping customers' money in their bank accounts that they are not due through bills because it aids their business. I do not feel sorry for energy companies. I cannot imagine any other industry where companies are allowed to keep customers' money without any accountability and think that that is okay or, indeed, that we should feel for them. I understand their wish to protect themselves. For example, Octopus told me that it holds £660 million of customers' money in credit, but because of the outstanding balances, only £150 million of that is a cushion for them. I am sorry, but that does not cut it—it is not the company's money to do that with.

I am more concerned about people facing the fear of the cost of living crisis. I am more concerned about people's frustration over their household incomes and the hardship that they are expected to face in these times. People are turning off appliances and heating when it is cold to save money, because that is what they have been told they have to do, when all the time, energy companies are keeping vast amounts of their money in their bank accounts while people struggle.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does this not speak to a need for wholesale reform of how people are charged for and pay for their electricity? He is right that customers who pay by direct debit build up significant credit balances, and the energy companies can earn interest on that, but customers who pay by prepayment meters are paying up front for energy that they have not

used, and they often pay a higher premium and higher standing charges. The people who can least afford it, which is often customers on prepayment meters, are paying the most. This is another injustice that has to be resolved.

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. It speaks to the way the cards are stacked against consumers and users in favour of the energy companies. The position that people find themselves in does not seem to be met with any sympathy across the industry—it is just a fact of life; they are collateral in the game of business. That is not the way we should look at people. As I said, people are turning appliances off even when they are in credit with the energy companies.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Customers have reported being made to jump through hoops to get their credit back, and the only rules for timescales implemented by Ofgem apply when accounts are closed. Does the hon. Member agree that Ofgem should have the power to be stricter with suppliers, in line with its purpose to protect customers?

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I will spend a bit of time later talking about Ofgem and powers that the Government might take forward in relation to working with Ofgem.

As I said, people are turning things off even when they are in credit. I believe every Member of this House should be more concerned that the property of customers of energy companies is being held hostage, without the explicit permission of those customers; the money does not belong to the energy companies. Things should and must change.

I started this campaign in January. By coincidence, Alex Lawson, a *Guardian* journalist, did some research into the subject and uncovered the fact that

“suppliers had hoarded an estimated £9 billion of customer cash by November last year”.

In his investigation, he pointed out that Centrica had £400 million of customer deposits; Octopus Energy had £660 million; and E.ON, OVO Energy, EDF and ScottishPower refused to say how much money they had from customers whose accounts were in credit. It is not the energy companies' money.

I contacted the suppliers in preparation for the debate. The response I received from Utilita about high credit balances defended its customer service and the way it looks after its customers, but I was struck by a paragraph in which it said:

“Other companies such as Ovo, Octopus and Bulb have significant customer credit balances in their accounts. Indeed Octopus recently published its accounts for the year ending March 2022 in which it shows £221 million—strange to have such high credit balances at the end of winter! Perhaps their ‘innovative practices’ are not working as intended. The article by George Nixon that appeared in the Times on Saturday 28th January 2023, ‘How to get your money back from your energy supplier’ mentioned virtually all the larger suppliers (all of which had either minor or no weaknesses in their direct debit processes according to Ofgem).”

I am not giving Utilita a free pass, but it is telling that it is willing to make that comment.

In the highlands and islands, a great number of people subscribe to what used to be called the hydro board. When Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks

[*Drew Hendry*]

took that over, many accounts simply transferred, and OVO Energy recently took over all those accounts. Because of that, I may receive a particularly high number of complaints about practices at OVO, so I state that at the outset. At the start of the pandemic, OVO received an £8.9 million fine for communication and billing issues. As mentioned, OVO has declined to give an average customer credit balance. Again I state: that is not its money and it is refusing to tell us how much it has.

My inbox shows that constituents' problems with OVO are manifest regarding billing and metering. I have picked a sample of messages from people who have come to me, one of whom has allowed me to use their name and details, for which I am grateful. To get through to OVO, many of my constituents have had to spend up to

"4.5 hours on hold on the telephone."

This is a company that says there are simple things people can do to sort their accounts.

OVO will not send some customers monthly bills, insisting that "Total Heating with Total Control" bills are provided quarterly. One constituent received three bills in one month: one showed that they owed £680, which they paid; one showed £300 in credit; and another in the same month said that they owed £1,000. I will return to this issue, because it is an important factor in the way these companies work with people's money. They have consistently failed to fix faulty meters, with 18 months of changed dates and timeframes in one case.

The constituent I mentioned, to whom I am very grateful, is Mrs Frances Raw, who is a widow on a state pension. The Minister will be aware that the state pension is £611.64 per month. She has been asked to pay more than £236 a month, and the company wants to raise her direct debit. It thinks that she is going to use more energy, which is the justification for putting up her direct debit, but Mrs Raw is sitting on a credit balance of £1,796.36.

By any measure, it is a disgrace to put somebody under that kind of pressure. It is a failure in a duty to care, and a failure to do good business; and it is a failure that it is not being properly regulated, as we need to prevent that happening to people such as Mrs Raw. She has been brave enough to allow me to use her name, and I thank her one more time. I know how difficult it is for constituents to come forward and say they have an issue, and that it is okay to talk about it. It is very rare for people to do that, and I am extremely grateful to her.

Mrs Raw's problems do not stop there. OVO keeps delaying changing her Total Heating with Total Control meter as well. This is destined to continue. I met Mrs Raw and she asked me if it would be possible to get some of her money back. I said, "No, Mrs Raw, you are entitled to all of your money back." That is what everybody should get in these circumstances. It should not be a matter of someone begging to get their money back; it should happen automatically.

**Patrick Grady:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. The £1,000 or more credit balance on his constituent's account is not just sitting there doing nothing. It is

sitting in a company's bank account earning interest, and contributing to the profits of that company. I wonder how the companies would feel if they were required to apply interest to customers' credit accounts. Perhaps they would suddenly be incentivised to support the customers.

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend makes a terrific point, which has been running through my mind. When these companies hold customers' money, they are using it for whatever purpose they might have, rather than the customers being able to earn interest or pay their bills. These companies may well be using it for gaining their own interest. Some people might consider that theft. Some people might consider that using other people's money to benefit themselves, without the permission of the people who own the money. That is not good enough. It is not their money; it is the customers' money and it belongs with them.

**Margaret Ferrier:** The hon. Member makes a very good point. These companies are using that customer credit as spending capital. Does he agree that it could be propping up unstable or unsuitable business models? That is why they are reliant on that money, but at the end of the day it belongs to the consumer.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. There has been a great deal of debate in the industry about the practice of ringfencing, and whether that should be carried forward. I might touch on that shortly. The fact is that this money is being used in an incorrect way, whether it is propping up a company or aiding a company that needs it to survive, in a way that is not normal in business.

Notwithstanding the good point made by the hon. Lady, it is almost beside the point. The fact is that this money should not be used by companies, without the explicit permission of the people who have that money with them. Do not forget, they are not offering a shareholding to those customers. They are not saying, "Because you have a credit, as other people might have a credit with our company and have bought shares, we will give you back a dividend." They are not applying any dividend. They are just keeping the money, and it is not their money.

I have some personal experience with OVO because, having started this campaign and looked into what was happening, I studied my own account, and lo and behold, I had a credit sitting on my account that I was not aware of, so I did some digging around. I have a smart meter that was installed and, despite several complaints and even a change of meter, OVO has still not been able to rectify the issue, so I have some sympathy for people who are not getting correct readings and are getting incorrect bills.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The absolute crux of this is, as he says, protecting customers' credit. I have an example of the opposite thing. I went to switch supplier, then I got a bill for £1,000 because I had been inaccurately billed for so long. That could have tied me to that supplier for a long time, because I might not have been able to afford to switch. It shows another failure in the market and failure in the billing process. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It gives me absolutely no pleasure to say this, but the point that he makes underlines the fact that in certain parts of this industry, these companies are behaving like it is the wild west. Almost anything goes; almost anything is okay for them to get away with regarding customer service, accuracy and the errors that they make. By the way, undercharging is not uncommon. It is something that constituents have brought to me. People suddenly finding that they have been undercharged is also an issue and it is just as unfair. However, I want to get back to the main thrust of the debate, which is the fact that companies are holding on to money.

Part of the problem is the confusion around billing. I mentioned my own experience. I wanted to check what was happening, because some of my constituents were saying that they were getting email bills and they did not tally with what was coming through on the apps that they were being encouraged to use. I want to touch on apps and other things in a moment, but I looked at my 15 January bill and, according to the email bill that I received, I was due £181.95 for electricity. That is fair enough, but I looked it up on the app for the same period, and I was due £215.03 for electricity. What chance do people have if that is the kind of information that we are allowing energy companies to deal with? I did not come as a constituent with a complaint; I did this after investigation on my own account. There are lots of people out there who are seeing this on a monthly basis or, as I said, on a quarterly basis sometimes; they are seeing that their bills are inaccurate or confusing. That confusion is a key point, because if there is a wish to avoid paying back money that people have paid into the account and is too much, in certain quarters it might be considered convenient that people might be confused about what they actually owe and what is actually in credit.

Centrica's response was that it wanted to see customers' funds that are paid in ringfenced and it was disappointed that Ofgem had rowed back on that requirement. It mentioned that customers can request a refund from companies, but again, I come back to the main point—it is not their money. Why should customers have to go begging for a refund? They should be entitled to get that money back as a matter of course.

ScottishPower does not pay back, but at least it adjusts direct debits downwards where customers have a credit balance. It says:

“Some...companies, while claiming that they provide credit back at the click of a button, may not be taking account of a customer's credit balance when setting that customer's monthly charge. If they had a customer whose credit was £500 and their annual energy bill was projected to be £2,000, they set their monthly payment at £167. This results in a £42 a month higher charge or £504 extra per year. This means the credit doesn't go down and the supplier keeps it on their balance sheet”.

I am grateful to Scottish Power for that comment, but it is also guilty of keeping people's money.

E.ON has also talked about favouring ringfencing, which means that customers' money is kept in a separate place in their business, not in the main account, so there is some protection in case of bankruptcy, for example. E.ON says it refunds on request, and that it can flex direct debits by 10%. I am sorry—that is not enough. E.ON goes on to say:

“We are aware that a number of companies have used balances in the past to fund their own commercial activities.”

That should just simply not be allowed. They are using customers' money.

Shell Energy says that all requests are triggered so it will pay them back; it talks about the licence conditions “that ensure we don't allow a customer to build up debt which guides us to set an appropriate DD to cover usage across the year and adjust if it won't cover usage”, and about the option to choose a variable direct debit. There are some meagre attempts out there to try to smooth out this situation for people, but it is simply not enough.

We have to look at how Ofgem regulates. Ofgem was happy to respond to me on this issue, but its letter said:

“Unfortunately, Ofgem does not advise on or get involved in individual cases.”

It is my belief that Ofgem does not look at individual cases; it is not looking at the real lived experience of people in the energy market at the moment. It is just not doing that, and that is a view backed up by Christine Farnish, a former Ofgem board member, who says firms are collecting more than they absolutely need.

Ofgem suggests that customers who believe suppliers have amassed too much of their money contact the firm to ask for their money back—to ask for their money back! It is not good enough. The response from Ofgem is weak, and not good enough.

I hope I have laid out clearly today some of the problems out there. I am only scratching the surface of customer issues; I have not mentioned a number of people who have been in touch with us. We need a mechanism for returning automatically overpaid amounts. The energy companies should print credit balances in green at the top of bills, with a notice advising customers of their rights; there should be a mandate for direct debits to account for credits when being sent out; and there should be a duty on suppliers to declare their total credit balances openly to the public.

Finally, I repeat this point: this money is not the energy companies' money. I tell everybody out there to check their bills: look at them carefully. If they do not understand them, make a call, or get in touch with an MP or anybody else—Citizens Advice, or anybody who can help. Check the bills. If there is a credit amount, the bill payer should alert the company to the fact that they want every penny of that back, because that money is not the energy company's money. I say to all those people: it is your money.

9.53 am

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful to be called at relatively short notice. I echo a lot of what my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has said and I congratulate him on securing the debate.

Many people nowadays are used to paying subscription models for services or products, for mobile phones or the use of the gym, or for online streaming services, but, by and large, what you pay for is what you get. The energy model is slightly more uncommon.

Of course it is very helpful for customers' budgeting and planning to know that if they are on a direct debit and paying into that model, a regular amount will come out of their bank account over the course of the year. Yes, perhaps there will be a small credit balance, because

[Patrick Grady]

generally energy usage during the summer will be slightly less than during the winter, but over the course of the year we would expect that to balance out. But what my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey has demonstrated—and what many of our own inboxes will demonstrate as customers start to pay close attention to their bills because of the high cost of energy and the other increasing costs of living—is that people are starting to discover a very significant failure in that model. Perhaps, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) has suggested, they are even discovering failures more widely in the energy market and system as a whole.

What is particularly disappointing is the number of issues that people seem to be having with their smart meters. By the sound of things, several of us here have personal experience of these matters, let alone the cases that come to our surgeries and our inboxes. Smart meters were supposed to make all these issues a thing of the past; people would know exactly what their usage was and would pay exactly for what they had used, and as a result would be incentivised to be more efficient with their energy use, which is better for their own personal finances—and, of course, much better for the environment, if we can reduce energy consumption and emissions.

Instead, people are getting readings that make no sense—that do not appear to match with their own perceived usage, at least—and the energy companies, for whatever reason, are using the opportunity to adjust direct debits, sometimes without any say-so; people sign up in advance for an adjustment of a direct debit and suddenly find that it has gone up, or maybe gone down. That negates the whole point of smart meters enabling them to budget. Smart meters were supposed to avoid such problems entirely, but in fact those problems seem to be increasing.

I heard from a gas engineer that some models of smart meter were designed to operate in climates that are very different from ours, so if they have been installed outside that can be a reason why readings do not make an awful lot of sense or do not appear to match up.

As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, although we are largely talking about people who pay by direct debit or in arrears, this situation is also affecting customers who pay by prepayment meters. The issue of prepayment meters has been discussed at great length, so I know the Government are aware of it and are trying to take action, but we have all argued repeatedly that there is more that they can do, which comes back to my hon. Friend's recommendations.

For people who use prepayment meters in the way that they are designed to be used, the companies are getting that money up front—when the energy has not even been used. That is one of the key questions that the energy companies ought to answer and perhaps ought to be required to answer, either by the Government or Ofgem, or by any other mechanism by which they can be held to account. What are they doing with that money? I ask that question because, as I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend, it is not a balance just sitting there on an account; it is clearly not there for a customer to draw down as they see fit. It is clearly being

used for other purposes: either to prop up the company elsewhere in its operations, or to earn very tidy interest because of course interest rates are going up. It is either contributing to the vast profits of the company or it is being used to shore up other parts of the company that may be having difficulties.

If the energy companies were required, as we suggested, to consider what benefit they gain from maintaining that money in their accounts, and had to recognise that in the form of discounts or an interest payment back to the customer, perhaps they would suddenly start moving a lot faster.

I agree with all the recommendations that my hon. Friend has made about how bills should be published and presented to consumers, so that they know exactly what their balance is and have the opportunity to draw that money down as quickly and on demand as they want. The company should have an obligation to do that. If they do not have such an obligation, we should look at how they can be incentivised to do so, or penalised if they are not going to respect their consumers. We want an energy market that functions effectively and well. We want to encourage people to reduce their demand on the system, which helps the environment, the ageing infrastructure, and the bank balances of our constituents—the consumers. The energy companies have to realise that they have got away with a lot of these things for too long, and the wider market now needs to be scrutinised in serious detail.

I end by quoting my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, who said several times during the debate: this is not the energy companies' money; this is money that our constituents—their consumers—have earned and have paid, expecting a service in return. It is not for companies to keep and profiteer from that money. If it is not being spent and does not reflect the consumer's energy usage, it should be returned to the consumer so that they can use it to meet the increasing cost of living and other personal expenditure.

**Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair):** We move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople. They have about 20 minutes each if they really want to take it, but that is entirely up to them.

10 am

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I reassure you that I will not take 20 minutes, which I am sure will please everybody.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for bringing forward this important debate. As he said, the debate is about people's money and their legitimate access to it. As you alluded to, Mr Betts, it is surprising that we are hearing from the Front-Bench spokespeople at 10 o'clock in the morning in this important debate. Given how many of us have been contacted by constituents who feel that they have been fleeced, and who are worried about turning on their heating and being able to eat, that is surprising. I suppose we can deal only with who is here.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey on how he set the tone for the debate. He said he would not list Government failures or attack the Government, and that he wanted

to work with the Minister. That is commendable. I am not sure that I will be able to avoid criticising the Government, but we will come to that later. As my hon. Friend said, this debate is about people's money; it is about people's credit and what the companies do with it. I will turn to some of the examples he gave, particularly those in which people are in credit—effectively, companies owe them money—who should be secure, yet they are so frightened that they do not turn on their heating because they hear about the cost of living crisis. That struck me.

I pay tribute to the Wise Group, which works with vulnerable people. I was at an event last night, and heard an example of somebody the organisation engaged with. This individual was on a prepayment meter. They were so concerned about the cost of energy that they were scrimping on what they were eating so that they could put a £700 credit balance on their meter. They wanted to build up some form of insurance, as they saw it, by building up a £700 credit on their prepayment meter—a massive up-front payment. I cannot understand why that individual was not contacted by the energy company and asked why they had put so much money on their meter and whether everything was okay. It took engagement from the Wise Group to resolve the issue.

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend's point about fear is something that I perhaps did not cover enough in my remarks. The issue is not only that people fear not having enough to pay a bill. It has been in common parlance that we should be worried about energy costs, and people are really worrying. There is also the fear that, when people are struggling to get by—I do not know how many people in this room this will resonate with—and a bill comes in, they sometimes do not want to look at it or acknowledge that it is there; they put it away. People might panic about their bills without realising that they actually have money. My hon. Friend's point about people's fear is central to the fact that people should be getting their money back.

**Alan Brown:** I absolutely agree. That fear and the stress that comes with it were observed by the Wise Group in its report. Some 66% of people the group engaged with believe that their mental health has suffered because of the fear and concerns they have about dealing with the cost of energy. That has further detrimental impacts on individuals, but also consequential effects for the NHS and society.

In his fine contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey mentioned the struggle to get proper information about the companies' credit balances and how that is not transparent. Why is that? Back in 2018, Ofgem estimated that companies would hold surplus credit balances of somewhere between £600 million and £1.4 billion. How can the regulator itself look into the matter and not get an accurate figure? It beggars belief. We are now nearly five years down the line, and we still have no idea how much money these companies are holding. It is outrageous. I call on Ofgem to fully get a grip of this matter.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said, there should be transparent reporting, because we need a clear understanding of what these companies are holding. Had we had that understanding previously, we would not have had so

many retail companies going bust because they did not have sufficient money and capital. Just reporting customers' credit balances would give an indication of that, as well. It is concerning to hear about these companies' performances, particularly OVO. I also pay credit to Mrs Raw for allowing that example to be given. Imagine a customer who is £1,000 in credit being asked to increase their direct debits.

**Drew Hendry:** I just want to underline the point that it is £1,796—nearly £2,000. That is nearly a year's worth of bills. It is an absolute scandal.

**Alan Brown:** I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying that. It brings me to the two points: first, the credit balances; and secondly, the direct debits being increased. As *The Times* reported in December 2022, there is a real fear that companies were basically gaming the system by massively increasing the direct debits. I know this from anecdotal evidence from constituents, and I have tried to raise this with Ministers. I was afraid that when companies saw the Government energy support coming down the line, they were increasing direct debits and putting people on higher tariffs, because that would give them a bigger subsidy back from the Government. I really hope that the Government will look at that. It is commendable to give energy support to each household, but we need to ensure that householders, taxpayers and bill payers get 100% of the benefit of that, instead of companies gaming the system. That is another aspect to consider.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey for doing the work up front, and speaking with individual companies to try to get details about individual policies. It is certainly concerning that ScottishPower has said, "Yes, we'll adjust the direct debit, but in doing so we are actually still keeping that credit balance," which is the company keeping money for itself. I disagree slightly on Centrica and E.ON, because it is commendable, at least, that they want a system that ringfences and protects customers' credit balances, although that should be the bare minimum. Why should customer credit not be protected? That should not even be up for debate. Some companies do automatic returns at year end, such as EDF, which is probably an acceptable way to work.

Returning to the key issue, this is the basic principle: credit is customers' money that they have paid in advance to the energy company. It is logical that their money should be protected, and that they should be able to access it if needed. However, we also have to acknowledge that a system that allows customers to build up credit does allow smoother, equal payments over the calendar year, equalising payments over summer and winter. There are benefits in such a system: it allows steady, monthly payments, so that people can understand what they are paying and—in theory, if the smart meter and billing system work properly, which is unfortunately not always the case—will not get sudden increases in bills landing on their doorstep, causing further concern. We have to admit that allowing customers to build up credit is also to the customer's advantage, because it smooths out their payments. We should not lose sight of that.

To be fair, if every single customer decided to access their credit at the end of the summer, the system would not work properly either. If customers withdraw all that

[Alan Brown]

credit, and then build up debit in the winter, companies will need to capitalise more, which means borrowing more, which means actual bills will go up. There needs to be some sort of balance overall, whereby we ensure customer balances are protected and accessed, otherwise bills will unfortunately end up going up in the long run anyway.

**Drew Hendry:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. I am taking advantage of the time that we have, Mr Betts—I apologise for the number of interventions, but this is an important point to clarify. The point he makes about having a fair mechanism in place to ensure that people are not being treated punitively over their credit balance is important. I hope the Minister will look at that to ensure that people are protected.

**Alan Brown:** I fully agree with my hon. Friend, and it will be good to hear the ministerial response. I said that I did not think I would be able to get through my speech without criticising the Government, so here it comes: companies using customer credit as working cash flow is what caused the market failure. That market failure was on the Government's watch, and Ofgem was asleep at the wheel. Since the retail energy market has failed, we still have an inadequate response on how the Government and Ofgem will deal with this. It is outrageous that these companies went bust having used customers' credit and then walked away, but then there is the double whammy of all the other bill payers paying the next company to restore the customers' credit. We are paying twice, with other bill payers footing the bill.

I am also a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Initially, we had a one-off hearing when companies started to go bust. The then Secretary of State and now former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), appeared in front of the Committee. His attitude was that, "Companies come, companies go. It is a free market; that is what happens. We know that some companies tend to go bust when it is time to pay their renewables obligations." That laissez-faire attitude that the free market knows best is just ridiculous, and it shows that he was unsuited to be the Chancellor. It is funny how he did not like how the free market operated when he saw the effects of his policies. That meant he was putting his hands up and saying, "It is okay. We don't mind companies going bust, owing customers money or owing money for renewables obligations". The renewables obligation is supposed to fund energy-efficiency upgrades, help us towards net zero and help lower people's bills. It was a dereliction of duty, and what he said in front of the Committee genuinely shocked me.

It was crystal clear at that time that companies must have sufficient capital and a robust assessment must be in place for any new entrants to the market. There needs to be an ongoing assessment, especially as we have seen the cost of buying energy increase, and Ofgem needs to clearly and periodically check that companies still have access to enough capital. I am trying to be balanced, though. There is another benefit to companies having some customer credit on the books, and that helps in the advanced purchase or hedging of energy—for looking ahead—which smooths out risk. Again, as long as

companies are not overly reliant on customer credit balances and there is a robust system in place that assesses how much customer credit is being used for that hedging and that look-ahead, that is okay but, again, this is unfortunately another failure of Government. When Bulb, the seventh biggest energy company, went bust, it was too big to go through the normal process of another company picking it up, so it was the first company to begin the supplier of last resort administration process. The Government did not allow them to hedge ahead, costing taxpayers up to £1 billion more. Companies must be able to operate and hedge ahead, but that comes back to having the right capital in place.

It is unfortunate that Ofgem has flip-flopped on customer credit and how to deal with this since 2018. Of course, in that period from 2018 to 2022 30 companies went bust, while Ofgem was still dithering and wondering what to do. It is time that Ofgem came up with a solution. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey for what he has proposed. As he says, this is customers' money. I refer the Minister to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report published in July 2022 called "Energy pricing and the future of the energy market". Key recommendations 117 and 118 address customer credit, particularly 118, which is about Ofgem coming up with a system that manages these complexities and reporting back to the Committee and Government to agree a way forward. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response because there has not been a suitable Government response to the report as yet—I look forward to hearing more. The point is that customers' money should be protected. To throw in one last request, it is high time we got a social tariff to protect those that need it most and a much fairer system of paying for our energy.

10.15 am

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on securing the debate. I share hon. Members' disappointment that the Chamber is not more full this morning, because this issue is really important as regards the overall life of energy companies. Most importantly, as the hon. Member said—I am happy to repeat it—it is not the companies' money but the customers' money that is being used in such a way.

We know from the record what the large sum floating about in energy companies' bank balances is used for—we cannot get an accurate picture, but £9 billion is probably not too far adrift—and we know how disastrous that is on occasion for the overall operation of those companies. Between the middle of 2021 and the summer of last year, we had the unfortunate experience of 28 energy companies going bust. Some research was done into what those bust companies had been doing with credit balances. A company called Oxera, commissioned by Ofgem, did a research project on seven failed energy suppliers that found that most of the companies did not just use credit balances, but were reliant on them for their business models.

Oxera stated that the companies, "relied on receiving customer balances prior to the provision of services. Suppliers used these prepayments to fund the ongoing costs of the business and to act as a buffer against any short-term



shocks. They then relied on growth in the customer base to keep ahead of future liabilities, making the strategy unsustainable in the long term during times when growth slows down”.

This was not just an accident of balances appearing in companies’ accounts because they had not accurately worked out what to do with direct debits. It was an integral part of the companies’ business model—or so they thought at the time—to accelerate their progress by using customers’ money to borrow ahead and fund their expansion, and of course they came horribly adrift as a result of the slowdown in the market.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), underlined the other part of that dreadful arrangement. When those companies went bust, the credit balances that they held had gone. The companies that took over through the supplier of last resort arrangement looked at the books and found that there were no credit balances in the books because the companies had borrowed and then gone bust, and they had to restore the balances to their new customers. That is what they did in most instances, but they then billed Ofgem for the work they had done to restore credit balances to those customers after the companies had gone bust, and they were paid for doing that. Guess who paid for those companies to restore the credit balances? The customer. It was socialised across their bills, so bills went up as a result of companies borrowing money, going bust and having to have those credit amounts restored.

The system is not just thoroughly rotten but systemically rotten. I do not want to resort to anecdotes, but I will talk about a recent experience I had—a small straw in the wind—when I changed my parliamentary flat. It is a one-bedroom flat that I inhabit now and again. I went to set up a direct debit, and the company quoted me £350 a month to start. I am sure it is a coincidence that it is exactly the sum that the Government have put up for the average household bills. I said, “This is just not right. You can’t start a direct debit at £350 on a small flat like that. I think I would prefer a smaller sum of £150.” We had a long argument on the phone, and the person eventually agreed, but I found when I went into my account that they had stuck with the £350. I had to have further phone calls to say, “I am not paying that amount of money in a direct debit per month. Can you put it down, please?”

**Drew Hendry:** I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman is talking about his personal experience. I looked into this on a personal basis and found that what my constituents were saying was true. What he has just relayed is the real difficulty in communicating with companies that are setting these arbitrary figures, and of course in the process building up credit balances. Does he agree that this poor communication and confusion is a far more common problem than perhaps even we in this Chamber expect?

**Dr Whitehead:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Had I not had a reasonably informed view of how direct debits work, I may well have just said, “Okay, I’ll go with that,” with the inevitable result that I would have built up a huge credit balance. That would have been good for the company’s working practices. I do not know whether it was an instruction from the company that the person should start with a high direct debit and then argue down, but it looked to me like they should not have been engaging in that practice.

After various companies went bust, Ofgem started looking at companies’ financial resilience, and that process is continuing. There have been a couple of reports and processes. Among them, Ofgem suggested a couple of arrangements that might help with this scandal of how much is in credit balances—money that is not for companies to use. It proposed that credit balances should be restored to nought at the end of each contract year, even if customers had not requested it. I take the point that, in general, it is often in the customer’s interest to smooth payments out over the year, so that higher bills in certain parts of the year are countered by lower bills at other times, and the overall account can be smoothed out, but there is no justification for a large ongoing credit balance in the company’s books after the end of the contract year.

That seemed a good plan from Ofgem, but it decided not to proceed, on the grounds that quite extraordinarily—guess what?—a number of companies responded to the consultation saying, “We would really like to keep the credit balances because it is very helpful to us.” Ofgem concluded that the proposal might be a bit complicated, so it has not been proceeded with, so the situation of rolling credit balances in companies’ books continues.

Another financial resilience proposal from Ofgem was that a company’s customer accounts should be ringfenced. The company might hold the credit balances on its books for the purposes of smoothing customers’ accounts, but they should be in a separate account, since that was not the company’s money; the money should not be usable for other purposes. The company may get some interest, but the money should not be used as working capital.

Ofgem consulted on that proposal. Again, a number of energy companies responded and said, “No, we don’t think that is a good idea, because that might cause us some problems with our working practices.” So Ofgem decided not to proceed with that proposal either, and there is no ringfenced money—except where, and I am finding it hard not to laugh, a company is thought by Ofgem to be in some financial distress. Then it might decide to ringfence the balances so that they could be rescued when the company went bust and not be used to pay further bills in cases such as those when the supplier of last resort took over the bust company only to find that all the money had gone. Presumably, thanks to Ofgem’s intervention, all the money would not be gone in these cases. That is perhaps a sort of progress, but it is not exactly the sort of progress anybody in this Chamber would see as a serious attempt to address the issue.

My concern is not that the matter has not been looked at by the regulator; it is that the regulator has failed to implement the more or less common-sense measures necessary to ensure that where there are credit balances, they are used for the purposes for which they are intended—smoothing over accounts and nothing else. After all, as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey said, this is not the companies’ money. The companies should use it on the basis that they have permission from the customer to keep it on trust for the customer, for their bills, and not for the company’s own purposes. That should be the central principle of this whole arrangement in the future.

I congratulate the Minister on her good practice in talking to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey. I hope that that good ministerial practice

[*Dr Whitehead*]

will wash over into good practice on energy companies. She might have a quiet-ish word with Ofgem and say, “Maybe your consultations and discussions on financial resilience did not work out quite as we all hoped. Could you reopen the matter and have another look?”

The principle on which we all agree is that people’s money is there in trust. It is not there for the companies to use; it is there only for the purpose of smoothing out bills. That is the principle that Ofgem ought to apply to protect customers, but I am sorry to say that in this instance that has not happened. It would be great if the Minister addressed that. I hope that she will respond positively and get on the phone to Ofgem to see what can be done.

10.31 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway):** It is a pleasure to be here. I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) for securing the debate and for meeting me yesterday to discuss the matter. That was important for me, because I am new in the role and it is important to have our eyes wide open when we take such a role on. I want to make it clear that the customer has to be at the heart of all we do. If there is any point to which I am unable to respond, given my newness in the role, I am happy to write to hon. Members.

The Government welcome steps to increase customer awareness and engagement. We believe that energy suppliers need to ensure, now more than ever, that customers do not build up large credit balances. Suppliers should not be sitting on money that is not needed to pay for the energy that a customer is using. An account might move between credit and debit over the course of a year, in line with energy demand, but accounts should not build up an excessive credit balance. I concur with the hon. Member: it is the customers’ money.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero wrote to the energy suppliers in November and urged them to ensure that their IT systems are more responsive to changes. I note the point about the app; I had not heard about that, but we will look into it. The Secretary of State called on suppliers to ensure that direct debits are more accurate and that customers do not end up with large credit balances on their accounts. He has also urged Ofgem to ensure that suppliers are complying with the rules.

Ofgem requires energy suppliers to review their customers’ direct debit arrangements at least once a year. Most review them twice a year. As the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey has mentioned and has noted in his campaign, it is important to have accurate and regular meter readings. That is easily done by having a smart meter fitted so that readings are sent automatically to the supplier and stored electronically. I note, and will look into, the comments about smart meters not always being fit for purpose.

With the combination of a smart meter and an online account, customers and suppliers both have an accurate and up-to-date record of energy usage to hand. That is one of the most effective ways of ensuring that direct

debits are at the right level, but I note the examples of customers not finding it to be the easiest of things. I have been reflecting on my father, who will not like my admitting to his age of 88; it is certainly a problem for older customers and others who will not necessarily have access to the app or the IT, so I will look at that. Elderly customers and those who are less able to engage have a dedicated helpline run by the supplier or the citizens advice bureau. However, I understand from my conversation yesterday with the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey that customers might not always know that, so we need to look into that.

In August 2022, Ofgem changed the licence conditions on suppliers to ensure that direct debits are based on the best and most current information available in all cases. The tightening of the licence conditions should reduce the likelihood of suppliers accruing excessive credit balances. Ofgem requires suppliers to explain the reasons for any changes that they make to a customer’s direct debit arrangement and to inform them of any change at least 10 days in advance. A customer may challenge a proposed increase and ask for a revised level. However, as has been acknowledged in today’s discussion, that option is not always readily available and the customer may not always recognise that it is there, so we need to reach out to ensure that they know how to ask for it.

A customer can ask their supplier to refund a credit balance at any time. Suppliers must do so promptly. If a supplier refuses to give the customer a refund, it must explain why it is unable to do so. If the customer is not happy with the situation, they should lodge a complaint with the supplier. I am aware that there are often complaints about suppliers increasing direct debit amounts; I have said as much to the Secretary of State, who has urged improvement. We must ensure that refusal by suppliers is not allowed. My understanding is that suppliers have so far not refused to refund a credit balance. I discussed the matter yesterday with the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, but I am happy to look into it more fully.

If a customer remains unhappy with the outcome of their complaint to their supplier, they can reach out to the energy ombudsman. Ombudsman Services, an independent body that provides dispute resolution and is free for customers, can investigate and where appropriate oblige the supplier to rectify the situation. Customers can also contact their supplier at any time to request a review of their direct debit arrangement. The review should be based on their annual consumption, using actual data or, where that is not available, estimated data. Customers can often change the direct debit themselves via the supplier’s website, over the phone or via their bank. However, it is much better for the supplier to get it right in the first instance, and that is what I want to see.

As has been acknowledged, the advantage for customers of paying for energy with a fixed direct debit or standing order is that they pay the supplier the same amount at regular intervals—usually monthly—irrespective of how much energy they have consumed. Customers typically build up a credit balance on their account over spring and summer because they use less energy for heating during those warmer periods. The credit balance is then drawn on during the colder autumn and winter periods, when more energy is consumed. Actual energy use will

vary and is dependent on weather conditions. We must be mindful that this is the customer's money we are talking about.

**Drew Hendry:** It is important to clarify one thing. There is no dispute that energy suppliers, if pushed, will return credit balances, but "if pushed" are the active words. Many of my constituents have told me that there are sometimes barriers to getting their money back. "You don't want to do that, do you? You should really take a smaller amount"—that is the message. As I commented earlier, Ofgem seems to be missing on the issue.

**Amanda Solloway:** I noticed that point in the hon. Gentleman's speech. Maybe we should look at whether there could be some automatic repayment. I believe that that has been looked into before, but I am certainly prepared to do so and to give an assurance on that.

**Alan Brown:** Everybody here welcomes what the Minister says about looking at automatic refunds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, Ofgem does not currently require refund requests to be processed within a specific time. It is only if a customer closes their account to switch that there are stipulations on the time period in which their credit must be returned. The issue in the short term is that the companies are not obliged to keep to a timescale to return the credit, so I welcome the Minister's comments about automatic refunds.

**Amanda Solloway:** I thank the hon. Member. This is an important debate, not only because it is on an important topic, but because it is important for me to listen and understand the issues.

Ofgem recently provided a progress update. It has opened formal compliance engagement with 12 suppliers and has required them to submit remedial action plans to address its concerns. To date, Ofgem has satisfactorily resolved 95% of the concerns and has secured several supplier improvements in relation to policies, processes and controls, credit balance arrangements and staff training.

Ofgem has proposed further measures to protect consumer credit balances. The reforms would require suppliers to have enough working capital to run without needing to rely on customer credit balances, about which concern has been illustrated today. The reforms should further ensure that suppliers do not gain a financial advantage from holding credit balances. Ofgem's reforms will mean that when an energy supplier fails and Ofgem's safety net quickly moves the customers to a new energy supplier, the customer credit balances with the failed supplier are limited in size and can, where necessary, be ringfenced.

I was unaware of the problem with smart meters, which I will certainly look into. I mentioned the app problem; I was unaware that there was an inconsistency between the reports from the app and from the website, but I am happy to look into that.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey for securing the debate and for his campaign to encourage customers to take more control over their energy account balances. I also

thank him for noting that we must ensure that we are as helpful as possible. Customers must be at the heart of this, because it is the consumer who is affected.

The Government and Ofgem are taking clear and firm action to ensure that customers are treated fairly, are protected and receive good service. The Energy Security Secretary has written to energy suppliers about the importance of setting direct debit payments more accurately. He has also made it clear that protecting consumers is a top priority for this Government. Finally, one of the early meetings that I will have in my new role will be with the Ofgem CEO. I shall press him on what can be done to ensure that customers get their money back swiftly and easily, and to prevent suppliers from building up consumer credit balances.

10.43 am

**Drew Hendry:** Once again, it has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I will not speak for long, but I want briefly to cover a few points from the debate.

I thank the Minister for the open and helpful way in which she responded. Such a response is a breath of fresh air in this place. I look forward to working with her to solve these problems for people who are struggling in their homes. I thank the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), for his comments, which were spot on.

All hon. Members in this debate have shown—perhaps more diplomatically, in the Minister's case—that Ofgem is not stepping up to the plate. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for their comments, which were helpful in underlining the plight that people face. People's money is being held captive. It is their money and they should have it back.

May I again be clear about some of the asks? An easy ask is for a clear, printed credit balance at the top of bills so that people can see their credit. That is easy to solve right away so that people can understand their bills. We need plain language billing. A click of a button is not the answer for everybody out there, because not everybody can do it. I have constituents who do not have email, let alone a computer or a smartphone, so that is not the answer for everybody.

The Minister talked about helplines. She is absolutely right that helplines should be available, but the problem is that often they are not. If they are available, they can be quite obstructive and there can be enormous delays getting through. There has to be a better system.

The Minister referred to having the best available information for direct debits. She is right that that is how it should be, but the system is clearly not working. There are many examples of information not being taken into account.

The debate has been helpful in raising the issue, and hon. Members' contributions have been welcome. I hope we can go forward, working together as a group to ensure that we solve the problem and make it clear to people that the money that is being held by companies does not belong to those companies. I say to every consumer, "Check this out, because it is your money."

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered regulation of customer credit retained by energy suppliers.

10.46 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Smart Motorways

*[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Transport Committee of Session 2021-22, Rollout and safety of smart motorways, HC 26, and the Government response, HC 1020; Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 20 July 2022 on Smart motorways: progress update, HC 606.]*

11 am

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered smart motorways.

As ever, it is a real pleasure to serve under your guidance, Mr Betts. I know that, as the MP for a neighbouring constituency, you are very aware of this topic, so thank you.

On the morning of 7 June 2019, Jason Mercer said goodbye to his wife, Claire, and left for work. While travelling on the M1 near Rotherham, he was involved in a minor collision. Two years prior to the collision, the hard shoulder on that section of motorway had been converted into a full-time running lane. Local authorities, emergency services and local people had all objected to that, but were ignored. With no emergency refuge nearby, and with the hard shoulder removed, Mr Mercer and his fellow motorist stopped on the inside lane of the motorway to exchange details. Minutes later, both were dead. With a steep bank immediately behind the safety barrier, Mr Mercer was unable to move out of the live lane. Their vehicles were hit by a lorry, and both men were killed instantly. The stationary vehicles were not detected by the then Highways England for more than six minutes. The lane in which they were stranded was closed only after both men had been killed. Mr Mercer's was one of 79 lives claimed on Britain's growing smart motorway network in the period up to July 2022.

Since their inception, the alarm has been raised repeatedly about all-lane-running motorways. In 2016, the Select Committee on Transport found that the attendant safety risks of all-lane-running motorways had not been addressed. It recommended:

“The Department should not proceed with a major motorway programme on the basis of cost savings while major safety concerns continue to exist.”

Five years later, in 2021, the Committee again criticised the smart motorway programme, noting that

“the promised safety improvements were delivered neither efficiently nor effectively.”

It argued that safety risks

“should have been addressed before those motorways were rolled out.”

It is hard to escape the conclusion that had they been addressed, Jason Mercer might still be alive. Multiple inquests into deaths on smart motorways have said as much. In recording a verdict of unlawful killing, the inquest into Mr Mercer's death listed five contributing factors, including the absence of a hard shoulder, the lack of stationary vehicle detection technology, and insufficient driver training on how smart motorways work. The inquest into the death of Sheffield-based Nargis Begum, killed in 2018 on the same stretch of the M1 as Mr Mercer, found that the lack of a hard shoulder contributed to her death. Yet National Highways, inexplicably, continues to claim that smart motorways are safer than conventional motorways. Data that it offers to support that conclusion is misleading, to say the least.

The 2016 Select Committee report noted:

“The ‘smart’ in smart motorways does not come from the loss of the hard shoulder... It could be seen as disingenuous to present this change as part and parcel of ‘smart’ motorways. The Department cannot use a reduction in risk in some hazards to justify an increase in risk in others.”

The implementation of new safety features is of course welcome. The installation of stopped vehicle detection technology in particular is a much-needed safety feature. But it is far from a magic bullet. Although SVD can reduce the time that it takes to identify stopped vehicles, it is far from perfect.

The lack of a hard shoulder is inherently dangerous, particularly without frequent emergency refuges to provide a place of safety. The spacing of emergency refuges is one of the most concerning aspects of design changes made as the all-lane-running programme has developed. The initial pilot project saw refuges spaced at 400-to-800-metre intervals. In later designs, that was expanded to a frankly staggering 2,500 metres between refuge areas. That is more than 1.5 miles.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady, who brings to Westminster Hall and the Chamber many issues that I support, and this is one of them. I look forward to the Minister’s comments. There are conflicting opinions on smart motorways and their safety. Northern Ireland has seen the introduction of smart motorway techniques, which in Northern Ireland are referred to as intelligent traffic systems. We have that on the A12 Westlink. We cannot ignore the fact that many fear smart motorways because of the arguments about no hard shoulder. Does the hon. Lady agree that before smart motorways are implemented, the Government must ensure that there is sufficient signage to make drivers aware of that? They may be driving on roads they have never been on before and not notice the change. More signage is needed before any more people panic or become involved in road traffic incidents.

**Sarah Champion:** I agree with every word the hon. Gentleman says.

Just imagine that someone is having a heart attack, their car is breaking down or they have been in an accident, and they then have to drive a mile and a half to get to a safe space of refuge. It is difficult to fathom. The only explanation that I can come up with is that a decision has been made on cost grounds, and that is hard to reconcile with the repeated claims of National Highways that its overriding priority is the safety of motorists.

The 2021 Select Committee report recommended that the roll-out be paused pending the collation and analysis of five years of safety data. The Government’s acceptance of that recommendation was welcome, but misleading. Not only do all-lane-running motorways continue to operate but, as the hon. Gentleman said, new schemes are being built and brought online. By spring of this year, four new sections of all-lane-running motorways will begin operation. While the Government dither, constituencies like mine continue to host death-trap roads. Make no mistake, all-lane-running motorways are death traps.

In 2014, with the road operating as a conventional motorway, an average of 14 vehicles became stranded in live lanes each month between junctions 32 and 35A of

the M1. In 2018, the first year of all-lane running for the same stretch of motorway, a staggering 81 vehicles per month were stranded in live lanes. Each of those incidents represents a potential tragedy. Each saw a motorist stationary in high-speed traffic, hoping and praying that other motorists would see them in time—staring in terror at their rear-view mirror as vehicles hurtled towards them. And what is National Highways advice to motorists stranded in live lanes? Hon. Members will not believe this, but it is: “Keep your seatbelts on, turn on your hazard lights and call 999”. No place of refuge is available. Motorists are forced to wait and hope.

We are told that technology mitigates the risks—that stranded vehicles will be spotted quickly, that lanes will be closed and we will be safe—but even with stopped vehicle detection technology, it can still take several minutes to detect a stationary vehicle. Almost 10% of vehicles stopped in live lanes on smart motorways are not detected within a minute. Almost 2% are not detected within five minutes. Still worse, SVD does not even work properly. The Office of Rail and Road has disclosed that SVD has failed to meet key performance requirements on detection rates, speed of detection or even the number of false alerts. That is simply not good enough, and it makes the claim that all-lane-running motorways are safer than conventional motorways difficult to comprehend.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is illustrating the issue well. I was sitting here and thinking about when someone is stuck on the hard shoulder and vehicles are going by at a speed in excess of 70 miles an hour. Does she agree that the speed factor contributes to how quickly they can stop, and that compounds the panic and fear?

**Sarah Champion:** If we have to stop on the hard shoulder, having those cars racing by is terrifying. If there is no hard shoulder and we are stuck in a live lane, we can see them coming, but we have no control other than to hope that our seatbelt works.

The claim that smart motorways—all-lane-running motorways—are safer than conventional ones is ridiculous. It is based largely on offsetting the safety risk that is introduced by removing the hard shoulder against the safety improvements that a managed environment delivers, but those two things are not mutually dependent. As a 2016 Select Committee pointed out, it is perfectly possible to introduce a managed environment while retaining the hard shoulder. National Highways should not continue to offset the safety improvements delivered by technology against the risk of removing the hard shoulder in an ever desperate effort to justify what it does.

Roads with safety features in place that retain the hard shoulder do exist, and they are called controlled motorways. It would seem logical to use them as a realistic point of comparison when determining relative safety, but that is a comparison that National Highways seems hugely reluctant to make. I have repeatedly questioned it about this and have requested a direct comparison between the rates of fatal incidents involving stationary vehicles in live lanes on controlled motorways and on all-lane-running motorways. It was with much kicking and screaming that the data was eventually published in the second year progress report. The comparison is truly shocking. The rate of incidents involving stopped vehicles in which someone was killed or seriously injured

[Sarah Champion]

on controlled motorways was 0.06 per 100 million vehicle miles travelled. For all-lane-running motorways it was a staggering 0.19 per 100 million vehicle miles travelled.

In the name of increasing capacity on the cheap, National Highways has more than tripled the likelihood of serious incidents involving stationary vehicles. Given those risks, it is hard to overstate just how important the proper functioning of the managed environment is, and yet the technology is far from reliable. For the month of September 2022, the national availability of stopped vehicle detection technology was recorded at 98%, and for warning signs 90%. That might sound reassuring, but for crucial safety equipment, a failure rate of 2% and 10% is shocking. Would we trust a seatbelt that worked 90% of the time? It is not unreasonable to ask that those features work reliably before placing our lives in their hands.

Last month, technology across the network was down for several hours during planned maintenance on National Highways' DYNAC system. No advance warning was provided to motorists. This was the latest in a series of outages that whistleblowers have reported and that have deeply alarmed National Highways staff. Those whistleblowers have said that the technology is out today, but I am unable to verify that. It is hardly surprising that the public lack confidence in these roads.

E-petitions calling for smart motorways to be scrapped and hard shoulders restored have received more than 10,000 signatures. Research conducted by the RAC has shown that 85% of motorists believe that safety is compromised by the removal of a hard shoulder. Worse still, just 46% of respondents felt confident that they knew what to do in the event of a breakdown in a live lane. The consequences of that lack of public awareness were shockingly exposed during the inquest into the death of Nargis Begum. The inquest heard that 153 vehicles passed the stranded vehicle, but no one reported it to the authorities. Why? Because they believed the vehicle would be detected by CCTV. That is not unreasonable in the face of National Highways' repeated claims about the efficiency of its technology, and yet National Highways testified to the inquest that detecting a stopped vehicle using CCTV was not "practicable".

National Highways belatedly recognised the importance of public education in ensuring that smart motorways can operate safely. The result was a public information campaign in which actors dressed as insects smeared on windscreens sang to the tune of the Pet Shop Boys' "Go West". Understandably, this staggeringly misjudged campaign was condemned by those who had lost family members on smart motorways.

During the recent Conservative leadership campaign, it was a relief that both the former Prime Minister—the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—and the current Prime Minister expressed concern about these roads. The current Prime Minister branded them "unsafe" and committed to banning all new smart motorways. Campaigners and bereaved families were left bitterly disappointed when, just weeks later, he U-turned, with the Secretary of State for Transport reverting to the familiar refrain of waiting for evidence.

How much evidence do the Government need? How many more people have to die? How many more families will be left to grieve for their loved ones? We cannot

continue to gamble with the lives of motorists. Removing the hard shoulder greatly increases the risks for motorists. The technology that is meant to secure their safety is unreliable, incomplete and ineffective. Tinkering around the edges, tweaking designs and rolling out flawed technology will not remove the inherent risk that the Government have chosen to introduce to our motorways. People are dying and yet the Government continue to delay, searching for an answer that is staring them in the face.

Had Jason Mercer been able to pull on to a hard shoulder, he would still be alive and Claire Mercer would still have a husband. The Government can prevent further loss of life, but to do so they need to recognise something that even the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), the former Minister who commissioned these smart motorways, has admitted, namely that they were a mistake. Nothing will bring back Jason Mercer, but the Government can at least put right their mistake and restore the hard shoulder across the motorway network. I plead with the Minister to do so right now, before more lives are needlessly lost.

11.16 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. Because your constituency neighbours that of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), I know you also have an interest in this issue. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham for securing this debate about smart motorways. I will make some general points before I address the ones that she and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made.

The strategic road network—our major motorways and A roads—is the safest part of the country's road network. Data shows that there are far fewer incidents and casualties per mile on the strategic road network than on the rest of the network. However, that does not detract from the fact that every death on our roads is a tragedy and one death too many.

The M1 is a route that I use regularly to go to and from my constituency of North West Durham. Recently, I visited junction 28 to see the issue with traffic backing on to the motorway, which hon. Members from the region raised recently in Westminster Hall. I have every sympathy for those who have lost loved ones in road accidents and particularly Jason's widow, Claire, who is here today. I promise to listen as they and others continue to press for greater improvements in road safety.

Hon. Members will be aware that in 2021 the Transport Committee conducted an inquiry into the roll-out and safety of smart motorways. We have agreed to take forward all the Committee's recommendations. Most significantly, we have paused all new schemes that are yet to start construction until we have built up further safety and economic data. That pause continues and the data continues to be gathered.

**Sarah Champion:** I am listening acutely to what the Minister is saying. He must be aware that the pause is not impacting the schemes that have already left the drawing board, so smart motorways continue apace. If the Government are concerned enough to pause the new ones, why are they not pausing all of them?

**Mr Holden:** The hon. Lady is right that several schemes are well under construction. National Highways felt that it would be more detrimental to stop construction, because doing so would perhaps cause more incidents than continuing with construction as planned.

**Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I thank the Minister for giving way. I also thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate.

On that point, Baroness Vere, the roads Minister from the Department for Transport, came to the Transport Committee—I am a member of that Committee and was involved in both its reports on smart motorways, in 2016 and 2021—and said that all schemes would be paused. Why has National Highways changed the remit?

**Mr Holden:** My understanding of the commitment made is that any new scheme would be paused. To stop an ongoing scheme would potentially be more detrimental than to finish it.

I want to address the statistic that the hon. Member for Rotherham raised about deaths on smart motorways. The 78 fatalities she mentioned are across all smart motorways—that is all-lane running, dynamic hard shoulder and controlled. Removing the controlled element, that figure is 47; even on controlled motorways, there will be issues. However, the motorway network per mile is far safer than dual carriageway or A road options, or anything that is not a controlled environment. I just wanted to put that on the record as a clarification.

The hon. Lady made important points about breaking down on the motorway and stopped vehicle collisions. Although collisions involving a stopped vehicle are rare, I recognise that they are a major concern for drivers, and that there is a higher number of such collisions on smart motorways without a permanent hard shoulder. We have therefore committed £900 million to bolster safety features across smart motorways, including rolling out additional technology to help to spot stopped vehicles—I have been at the control centres and seen that in action myself—and putting in an additional 150 emergency location stops. In 2020, we changed the design stats on spacing to a maximum of 1 mile, and three quarters of a mile where feasible. In our response to the Transport Committee's 2021 report, the Government committed in January 2022 to an extra 150 emergency areas by March 2025, on which work has already started.

I will turn to a few of the hon. Lady's questions. Road users expect high standards for response times on the motorway network. It is worth remembering that

the interrelated system of features on smart motorways are not present on conventional motorways, such as stopped vehicle detection radar technology. This new feature has been rolled out across the entire all-lane-running network to improve the detection of stopped vehicles and reduce the duration of live lane stops. As the hon. Lady said, National Highways detects around two thirds of stopped vehicles within 20 seconds, and almost 90% within 60 seconds, allowing it to quickly set signs and signals, such as the red X, to keep drivers safe. That feature is not available on conventional motorways.

National Highways does recognise that stopped vehicle detection can perform better, which is something I have been pushing it on, and it is working hard to deliver further improvements by the end of June this year. Right now, I can report that we have made further strides in attendance: the time it takes a traffic officer to attend has fallen from an average of 17 minutes to under 10 minutes in December 2022. As with any technology, there are occasions when something does not work as expected or improvements need to be made. National Highways is fully aware of that. It is investing £105 million over the next two years to improve CCTV and other technology, not only enhancing the management of the network, but improving drivers' day-to-day experience with other issues on the motorway network. However, when the availability of technology on smart motorways is reduced, we need to find the root cause and plan ahead.

National Highways has well-rehearsed mitigation measures to deal with operational challenges, including those relating to technology, whether that is increasing the number of traffic officers on the network or reducing speed limits on certain sections and enhanced monitoring of CCTV. We will continue to expedite every effort to ensure that technology on the network is as reliable as possible. I recognise that drivers need to feel confident on smart motorways, and we are using all the evidence we can to act to ensure that those concerns are addressed. We have listened and will continue to listen to concerns. We will make as many mitigations as possible. We are hugely enhancing stopped vehicle technology and the pull-in areas. We are absolutely committed to making our busy motorways as safe as possible for everyone who uses them across the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.24 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Electric Vehicles: Infrastructure

[PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered electric vehicle infrastructure cost and availability.

It is nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. Today, I am raising what I think is an important point about electric vehicles and their supply, charging, cost and implications. The Government have, in my opinion and that of many of my constituents, rightly committed to securing net zero by 2050—that is the easy bit. A big part of that commitment is the move to electric vehicles by phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and all new cars and vans will be zero emission by 2035. That was announced by the then Prime Minister in response to the Climate Change Committee in November 2020.

Transport is, of course, the largest carbon-emitting sector in the UK, making up 27% of greenhouse gas emissions, with 91% of that stemming from vehicles. It is obvious that tackling that is a key part of the route map to decarbonisation. However, there are many concerns about the cost, availability and infrastructure that must be taken into consideration as we look to meet the 2030s targets. Are we really ready to fully transition to electric vehicles? Some may question whether we want to, and they can contribute if they wish.

Last March, the Government's electric vehicle infrastructure strategy highlighted the fact that 300,000 public electric charging points would be needed by 2030 across the UK to meet the demand, following the phase-out of petrol and diesel vehicles. However, in January—just last month—it was reported that just over 37,000 such devices have been installed. Will the Minister update the House on that, as those figures clearly suggest that the infrastructure is lagging a little behind schedule? It is not unreasonable to question whether the UK will be able to meet that target.

Since 1 January 2022, the number of devices increased by 8,500—a 31% increase. That is the good part, but that is clearly not at the rate we need to meet the 2030 target. To give the Government credit, I was very pleased that they announced a further 2,500 charge points yesterday—well done—but we are still off the pace setter. Further to those numbers, there is a huge disparity in the geographical distribution of charging devices in the UK.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. This is a really important topic because, as he says, we are not just behind the Government's target, which most people in the industry say is lower than what is needed, but way behind what is going on in Europe. That is really concerning, in terms of increasing vehicle production and getting vehicles into the market for consumers who want to do the right thing.

**Steve Brine**: I thank the chair of the all-party group for electric vehicles for that intervention. I hear what he says. Ultimately, it is a race to this prize—this technology—and once we fall behind, there is no point in reinventing

it. I think it is quite an ambitious target. Certainly, given the pace that we are setting behind it, it is quite ambitious. If the Labour Front Benchers have a more ambitious target, I am sure we will hear it from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The distribution of charging points is quite unequal across the UK: London and Scotland have the highest provision. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ministers should urgently invest in charging points to ensure parity across the regions and therefore make EV ownership look more attractive and feasible to the public?

**Steve Brine**: I will come on to that. The hon. Lady's point is absolutely accurate. I will make some progress, and then she will hear what I have to say about that.

There has been significant activity from local authorities in developing regional low-carbon transport strategies, and enabling charging infrastructure in some places. Hampshire County Council, which covers the whole of my patch, has implemented an EV charger framework. About £124,000 of Government funding has been awarded to my Winchester constituency towards that, and we are very grateful for that. However, to echo the hon. Lady's point, that is not the case for all. Some local authorities have bid for funding from the Government while others have not, so there are disparities, as she says. The Government need to keep a beady eye on that trend to ensure that it does not continue.

Most of the installations and much of the infrastructure for EVs have been market-led; many individual charging networks and other businesses have chosen where to install charging points. As a Conservative MP, I believe that that has to be right—Government cannot and should not do everything—but we cannot overlook the fact that it has added to geographical disparities, for obvious reasons. It is not dissimilar to the high-speed broadband roll-out—it follows the money—but Government have a role here.

I looked at the statistics ahead of today's debate. London is far ahead of other areas in the UK, with an average of 131 charging points per 100,000 people, but the next country or area has an average of only 69. We clearly need further intervention to tackle that inequality and help the rest of the UK to catch up with London as we make the desired policy move to EVs. My constituency has 78 charging points, and only 13 are rapid charging points. Winchester has 76 charging points per 100,000 people, which I admit is higher than most areas and in the top 100 in the UK. It has 1,270 registered EVs and a ratio of EVs to public charging points of 16:1. That needs to improve as the number of registered EVs increases; even a 16:1 ratio means a serious wait time to charge a vehicle if that cannot be done at home, and it cannot always be done at home for reasons I will come on to.

I appreciate that the number of charging points in an area can fluctuate for many reasons—faults, maintenance, other restrictions or just the market. Owners and operators can choose to temporarily or permanently decommission or replace devices with no controls in place. Do the Government need to act on that? If we expect everyone, as we do, to switch to an electric vehicle, people cannot be left without access to charging points.



**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. The Government told Birmingham that we needed a clean-air charging zone in the city centre; we resisted that, but obviously that did not succeed. We now have charging zones, which makes it difficult for families and ordinary people to get in without paying. Bus services are not as good as they should be. Above all, as the hon. Gentleman rightly mentions, the price of electric vehicles makes it very difficult for ordinary families to get into the market. We need to resolve that properly, and the Government need to help.

**Steve Brine:** I will come on to the pricing of electric vehicles, which was my motivation for applying for the debate in the first place. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that many people want to do the right thing, but the economics do not stack up right now. Is there a role for Government? Partly, and I will come on to where they have made moves in that space. I realise that I am raising lots of problems, but that is because the Minister will answer all my problems and then we will all go away happy.

As we increase the number of charging points across the UK and get ahead of our ambition, it is vital that we future-proof our energy system. Great thought must be put into the pressure that the move will have on the grid so that we protect consumers as new challenges and vulnerabilities present themselves. Obviously, the transition to EVs will massively increase the demand for energy. We have some of the greatest wind, wave and tidal resources in the world. Should we promote the use of domestic energy production, rather than relying on imports, so that we can ensure our domestic renewable energy is used to guarantee the security of our EV ambitions? I appreciate that the Government have promised vast sums of funding for the transition and implemented schemes, but perhaps that issue could be revisited.

In June 2022, the Government pulled the plug on the car grant scheme, which provided over £1.4 billion and supported nearly 500,000 sales of electric vehicles. Although I appreciate that it was said at the time that that measure was always a temporary one, it increased the sale of EVs from less than a thousand in 2011 to almost 100,000 in the first five months of 2022, which meant that uptake exceeded projections. Surely that is a policy success and if something is working like that, I ask the Minister today whether people will be offered further support.

**Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On that particular point, does he agree that in very rural areas, such as Suffolk and—I would imagine—parts of Hampshire as well, the practicalities of having public charging points are difficult and the reality is that if we are going to incentivise this switch, it has to come through helping people to charge their vehicles at home?

**Steve Brine:** Yes. In my constituency, as I am sure is the case in my hon. Friend's constituency, charging at home is obviously the ideal, but there are lots of challenges to people being able to do that, because the three-point plug is not always the answer; a three-point plug can lead to a 30-hour charge. Of course, if someone does not have a nice secure driveway where they can park

their Tesla and plug it in to charge overnight from the solar panels on their roof, it is difficult. That is all very tidy and ideal, but it is not the reality.

May I tell my hon. Friend the Minister that that is a kind of a theme of the debate? The ambition is great, but I worry about the practicalities of the roadmap to get there, and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) has expounded that very well.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): From our end of the country, we see things through the other end of the telescope. We have an enormous surplus of renewable energy generated in Orkney but no way to feed it into the grid because of grid constraints. Using the availability of that energy to charge cars and other electrical devices is a real opportunity for us. We have the ReFLEX project, which was born of that very opportunity. However, does this situation not tell us that we need to have a fundamentally different way of thinking about the grid and how we use energy, and a greater degree of decentralisation than we have ever had?

**Steve Brine:** Without question, and the right hon. Gentleman makes his point well. That is another reason for my wanting to have this debate. I am pleased to see so many colleagues here today, because I think the ambition was set out and some things were done, such as the grants that I talked about and the way in which they increased the number of sales, but I am not sure that enough thought has been given to the wider picture of how we make these electric vehicles available, how we charge them and how we find the energy sources to do that. In a massive constituency such as his, I can see why the scheme he talked about works and I would like to hear more about it, if he would tell me more; I am sure that he has already told the Minister about it.

The subject of production has been raised and I will say more about it. The Government have stated that they have plans to set out a legally binding annual target that manufacturers must meet in the form of a zero emissions vehicle mandate, or ZEV mandate; in saying that, I recognise that this debate has become even more nerdy than I had imagined.

The Department for Transport states that auto manufacturers will be required to produce a certain number of zero-emission cars and vans from 2024, and it launched a ZEV mandate consultation in 2022. Next year, which is 2024, that would equate to a 22% uptake for cars and an 8% uptake for vans; in 2030, it would equate to an 80% uptake for cars and a 52% uptake for vans; and both cars and vans would reach a 100% uptake in 2035. The mandate also details the arrangements for a tradeable element, which will allow manufacturers to buy credits to make up for any shortfalls in the required production of electrical vehicles.

However, we have not heard about any real progress since then. The consultation website states that the Government are still analysing the responses. As stated, the ZEV mandate is meant to be implemented by 2024, so we need further details of what will be required from manufacturers and what exactly the targets will be, because—dare I say it?—2024 is fast approaching. Can we have an update on that from the Minister?

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I just wanted to clarify the accounting on carbon dioxide, because the aim is CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. If a lot of people destroy diesel and petrol cars before the end of their useful life, and acquire new electric vehicles, that is a huge amount of CO<sub>2</sub> for the two processes. Is that accounted for? If those people then drive those electric vehicles on days when 70% of our electricity comes from fossil fuels, how does that help?

**Steve Brine:** That, may I tell my friend, is a question that the Minister will be delighted to answer. Net zero is exactly what it says: net zero. The production of electric vehicles is part of the net zero calculation, but the Minister understands that better than I do. I wonder whether the Minister would update us on the ZEV mandate.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. I want to reference the ZEV mandate, particularly in relation to van production. The hon. Member mentioned manufacturers; I am alive to the fact that van production in Luton is currently diesel, but we want to see a transition to electric vans. That is the target, but we need to see Government support for the electric van manufacturers to ensure that we can make that transition. Does the hon. Member agree?

**Steve Brine:** I agree with that point. I would expect the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) to raise van production for obvious reasons. The mandate is a fine idea, but we need the response to the consultation on the mandate. I suspect the companies that the hon. Lady talks to in her constituency want to know the rules of the game before they can work with those rules. I am sure she is looking forward to that point being raised.

The transition to electric vehicles brings into question fuel and excise duty. It is well known that the Treasury is set to lose a lot of money and a new source of revenue will be required. Fuel duty revenues pre-pandemic were about £28 billion per year, and vehicle excise revenues were approximately £6 billion. I cannot believe this has not been discussed in the hallowed halls of the Treasury, but does that mean that road pricing is a serious possibility? There has been no mention of that as a solution from the Government. Does the Minister concur?

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): It is interesting to hear the hon. Member talk about road pricing. Does he actually support something like “pay as you drive”, in order to charge people for the miles that they drive rather than anything else?

**Steve Brine:** No, and before the Liberal Democrats try to produce another attack leaflet to say that is what I was saying, the hon. Lady can strike that from the record. That is certainly not what I was saying, but I am asking the Minister whether the Government are considering it. Surely the Treasury are considering that loss of revenue. From his previous role as Chair of the Transport Committee, the Minister will know that that was laid down as a challenge to the Government. I know that the Committee is still waiting for a response to that. I am rather cheekily asking the Minister whether he has yet to respond to himself. Could he do so today?

I will raise some more concerns about the availability of electric vehicles. Certainly in my constituency, consumers are embracing the change to electric vehicles as people are understandably more and more concerned about the environment. However, we have already heard about the supply available to buyers. The current average waiting time for an EV is seven months, according to the Library. Companies such as Volkswagen have at least a 10-month wait from the time the car is bought to its delivery. I would suggest that that is a barrier to purchase. It is concerning, because forcing people to make the change to EVs will once again increase the waiting times as demand increases. People cannot be expected to bear a cost that is due to factors out of their control.

There is a current fall in demand for EVs because of the dip in the economy and the spike in inflation. I asked a previous Minister in the Department about this. What conversations are the Government having with industry to try to help them meet demand? I realise that the pandemic has hugely got in the way of that, but what conversations are the Government having with industry to try to stimulate demand?

Tesla has recently smashed the cost of EVs by a reported £7,000. There has been an expansion of EVs, but only 24 models are priced under £32,000 due to the cost of the battery technology. Even the UK boss at Kia, Paul Philpott, has said that car makers are finding it “economically difficult” to bring affordable smaller vehicles to market due to the high cost of batteries, despite the ban on the sale of all new petrol and diesel cars looming in 2035.

I will gently remind the Minister about the up-front cost and a serious lack of a second-hand market for electric vehicles. That is a whole other subject, with only 3% of used car transactions involving EVs in 2021. I hope that that market will start to emerge as we make the transition, so that many lower-income families will not be priced out of even having a conversation about switching to an EV. It is hugely unfair that they want to do the right thing, but they know they cannot.

In closing, I support the move to electric vehicles, and I know that my constituents do. I see more and more EVs on the streets of my constituency. The phasing-out of all new petrol and diesel cars by 2035 has my support, but it is clear that the infrastructure is far from fully developed, with many complaining about teething problems. It is obvious that to meet the target, and seriously increase the rate at which the infrastructure is being implemented, especially the distribution of charging points, we need to see a step change to meet the current ambition.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for calling this timely and important debate. I am sure the Minister is aware that last week Welsh Labour, propped up by their Plaid chums in Cardiff, cancelled all major building projects, including plans for a third bridge across the Menai Strait. Does my hon. Friend agree that their priority should be increasing the number of electric vehicles, and that means better scrappage schemes, grants and rolling out more EV charging points? That is the responsibility of Labour in Cardiff as a matter of urgency.

**Steve Brine:** I hope other Governments around the UK will be listening to today’s debate. My hon. Friend mentions the issue of scrappage. There are many different

subjects I could have covered in today's debate, but I did not want to go on for another 20 minutes and test the Chair's patience. This is long enough, surely. She is right that scrappage schemes in Wales would be good to see. I look forward to her updating the House.

There does need to be consideration of the loss of revenue in Treasury. What conversations have been had about the change in vehicle excise duty? I am concerned that the Government have said that they plan to set out a legally binding annual target that manufacturers must meet up to 2035. We have no idea of what that will take. The cost to consumers needs further consideration, at a time when we face cost of living challenges. Supply and cost are major barriers right now to people who want to do the right thing. We can all support the phasing-out of combustion cars. I suggest that the current target of 2035 may be beyond us. I look forward to the Minister's response to disabuse me of that thesis.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** It would help me greatly if hon. Members who wish to be called, stand. They have done so. It is also very good for their health if they bob up and down.

2.52 pm

**Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing the debate. I could wax lyrical about the woes of being an EV car owner who is not able to charge at home, because I live in a block of flats, but I will resist the temptation to vent about that and stick to some of the facts.

As we have heard, we have seen a bit of a success story, with the number of EVs on the road exceeding expectations, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to charge. I have a lot of questions for the Minister, but one is about regulation and ensuring the reliability of charging points. Perhaps he could say something about that. In addition, to what extent should the charging point provider be blamed if the wi-fi is not working or there is no access to the premises? Where are we with that?

Thankfully, charging points are mostly more accessible, in that drivers do not have to join lots of different schemes, and they tend to work better. The downside is that there is very often a queue. If I am going to see my mother in Milton Keynes, I no longer just cross my fingers and hope that the charging point is working; I now also have to worry about whether someone will already be there charging for 45 minutes, with someone else queuing to charge for 45 minutes.

We are also seeing, with the Tesla points coming along, that service stations sometimes just do not have the power to keep all the points open at once. We need to ensure that the number of public charging points is keeping pace. It simply is not at the moment, particularly on rapid and ultra-rapid chargers.

In Bristol, we are ahead of most places other than London on having public charging points in places such as Morrisons car park or in parks and public places. That is probably better than trying to do on-street charging, with everyone fighting for one or two spaces

by a lamp post. The problem with on-street charging is that if someone attaches their car to a charger when they get home from work and it finishes charging at 1 am, they are not going to go out and move their car to allow their neighbour to charge theirs. That is why I particularly like the quick chargers.

The Government set a target in March last year of making 300,000 public charging points available by 2030. That means we need about 30,000 to be installed per year. Last year, only 8,800 were installed. That is clearly not good enough, and the Government need to step up.

This is also a levelling-up issue. A year or two ago, when I held the green transport brief, I asked a series of questions to try to find out which local authorities had not applied for grants to install public charging points, but nobody would tell me; they just kept telling me which authorities had them. There are a number of pots of money, so I was trying to piece it all together, but quite a lot of councils were not mentioned anywhere. That is partly a capacity issue, because it can be quite difficult for some councils to do the analysis and just to have people whose job it is to fill in the forms and make the applications. There may also be an issue about political will and some places not seeing this as a priority, but that just means that provision is really patchy.

EV charging points should be treated—I was talking to National Grid about this this morning—as strategic infrastructure. This is not just about where people can charge their cars; it affects remote tourist areas, such as Devon and Cornwall. Five years ago, when I first got my EV, I thought I would go on a trip to Dartmoor to run it in, but I realised that there was one charging point in the whole area and that if that was not working, it would get a bit scary. Obviously, we want people to use public transport where they can, but if we are to keep tourism going down in Devon and Cornwall, we need those charging points—in Scotland, they have put some in on the strategic road up to the north—because, otherwise, people will not be able to make those trips any more, and that will have an impact on the local economy.

On grid connectivity, again, we need a strategic vision. There is no certainty about future funding for charging infrastructure. There is a big queue for grid connectivity—it is about 10 years—and all sorts of people have done the equivalent of putting their towels on sunbeds to reserve spaces. There is a whole separate debate to be had about how National Grid can prioritise applications for grid connectivity. However, I am told that motorway service stations are not joining the queue to expand their connections to the grid for rapid charging, because they are not sure what funding will be available in the future.

In the next seven years, we will need five times as much grid connectivity as in the last 30 years because of the move towards clean power and things such as EVs, but I just do not see a strategy. It is good that we have a new Department that is prioritising energy security and net zero, but we need to see a strategy for grid connectivity, for the sake of green investment, house building and EV charging points.

The £950 million rapid charging fund, first announced in March 2020, is meant to be focused on areas where it is less economical to put in charging infrastructure. As I understand it, it is still yet to issue any funds to projects

[Kerry McCarthy]

that applied. It was announced nearly three years ago, so it would be good to know what is happening on that front.

The final thing I want to mention is manufacturing. I spent the first 40 years of my life in Luton, so Vauxhall Motors was very much a part of my upbringing, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) on all the work she does to push on that point. I want to know the Government's ideological approach to support for our green industries, but particularly for electric vehicle manufacturing. We saw a pretty successful intervention in the market with the ban on the sale of new internal combustion engine vehicles by 2030 and of hybrids by 2035, although there are questions about the proportion of EVs that are being bought by fleets rather than for private ownership. We need to make sure that the second-hand market develops.

The ZEV mandate has been talked about, and there were plug-in grants, but there seems to be a move away from that sort of intervention. There is the issue of the cost of owning and operating an electric vehicle, alongside the cost of buying one; we are seeing electricity prices increasing and car tax being brought in for EV owners. It seems that the Government are stepping away.

What particularly concerns me is that we now have a very interventionist Government in the US—Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act is giving \$369 billion a year to areas to create green industries—and the EU is rapidly following suit, but I do not see any sign of that here. I have asked questions of the Minister's colleagues in other Departments; I asked a named day question on the very first day back in January and got an answer, in the end, that said, "We are very worried about it." The approach of the Secretary of State for Business and Trade seems to be to tell Joe Biden off for being protectionist, which does not get us very far. I asked about this at Scottish questions today, and I do not think the Minister knew what I was talking about. We absolutely need a response to the Inflation Reduction Act to support our green industries, including our car manufacturing.

3.1 pm

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this debate; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing it. I speak as an unabashed enthusiast for the expansion of electric vehicles, but I want particularly to speak for those of my constituents for whom they are still an expensive aspiration. About 25% of my constituents do not have their own driveway and cannot charge easily.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, it is good that the Government have committed to 300,000 public charging points by 2030. I like the scale of that ambition, as I do the commitment to 6,000 ultra-rapid charging points on our strategic road network by 2035. Those ultra-rapid charging points are generally able to charge a car in about 30 minutes. For most of us, a stop at a motorway service station—after we have answered the call of nature, got a coffee, and sorted out children and dogs and anything else that needs to be attended to—often takes about that time; if there a few

minutes left over, we can always check a few emails while we wait. That charging time is excellent, and we need to push forward on it.

A couple of weeks ago, I was privileged to chair a meeting in the House of a number of significant electric vehicle charging point installers. They were quite enthusiastic. They had a number of problems, which I will speak about, but they said that there is no shortage of private capital looking to fund this work, which is excellent. Investment funds and wealth managers around the world have absolutely got the direction of travel. No one wants to be found holding stranded assets when the music stops, and this is absolutely the direction for the future. It can be monetised, and there is a lot of private money willing to flow into the sector if we can get the overall public policy architecture right. That is reasonably good news.

There is a case—perhaps this might be an early Budget submission by the Minister—for cutting VAT on public chargers, which is more expensive than on private chargers. That would help, and it would be a sensible policy intervention. I would also like to see a requirement for interoperability if charging points are going to receive public funds. I thought we had committed to that a while ago, but we are still not quite there yet. That would be a sensible move because, as the hon. Member for Bristol East said, sometimes it is difficult enough to access a charging point; if we then find that it is not in our network or not for our car, that just adds to the stress and anxiety. It does not help us get where we need to go.

**Margaret Ferrier:** In his last Budget statement, the Chancellor announced that, from 2025, EVs will no longer be exempt from vehicle excise duty, paying the lowest rate in the first year and the standard rate from the second year, and that they will lose their exemption from the expensive car supplement. As that will come some years before the complete phase-out of petrol cars, does the hon. Member think that it could impact the public's willingness to prioritise purchasing an EV?

**Andrew Selous:** The hon. Lady makes a sensible point, in that we must clearly phase in these two moves together. There will be a serious loss of revenue to the Treasury as the number of electric vehicles increases, and we all have to be sensible about how we will replace that revenue, but we must do it in a way that encourages the transition that I think all of us here want to see. I thank the hon. Lady for making that point.

Before the debate, I contacted Stephen Mooring, the excellent head of sustainability at Central Bedfordshire Council, and he raised four points that I want to draw to the Minister's attention. The first is connection costs for public charging points. It is not uncommon in central Bedfordshire for the grid to quote up to £45,000 for a connection. That is simply not economical for local authorities, so we must ensure that the grid is working with installers to make the continued roll-out of charging points economical.

An issue remains about people who do not have off-street parking. There is a lack of clarity about the position with cables running over pavements. To me, that is clearly a serious trip hazard. We do not want anyone to fall over and be injured, so that issue must be addressed. I think that there are some solutions—

**Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Like my hon. Friend—and my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who introduced the debate—I am a passionate believer in public access to charging points, but he is right. We allow utilities and others to put all sorts of cables across our streets, in most cases safely. One of the simplest ways to increase access—this is relevant to the levelling-up point—is for local councils to change byelaws to allow people without off-street parking to use cables safely in order to charge EVs. That is a very popular campaign across my constituency.

**Andrew Selous:** I thank my hon. Friend, who obviously has great experience in this area, for that sensible point. It is also possible to put cable gullies into pavements so that people can charge safely. That is a relatively straightforward technical proposition, so we should see more of it. I think clarification is needed on that, to help the many people who do not have off-street parking with charging.

When they grant planning permissions for new supermarkets, retail parks and so on, local authorities can require the installation of electric vehicle charging points, but the position with existing supermarket car parks and so on is less clear. There is a lack of clarity on that front. I would think that having charging points would be a competitive advantage. A number of my supermarkets—Tesco in Leighton Buzzard springs to mind, and I hope the others will forgive my not remembering them—have moved forward and installed them, which is very welcome. This is a big opportunity, and I think that some direction from the Government would be helpful.

Installing charging points in rural areas is more challenging, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, but there are opportunities in village hall car parks and elsewhere. We must ensure that that is a possibility—certainly, it is sensible to have one charging point among a number of neighbouring villages—so that we are fair to people in rural areas.

I want to mention something important that the EV charge point installers said to me when I met them a couple of weeks ago, which is about the capacity and capability of local authorities. Some very good authorities have really got this and are powering ahead; others are still struggling because they do not have sufficient officers in this area, or their officers are not sufficiently well versed in what to do.

My final point is about the second-hand market and, perhaps, slightly greater assurance for consumers about battery life and warranties on second-hand batteries to encourage that market. As we get greater take-up in the fleet market, there will be many more vehicles coming on to the second-hand market, which will offer real hope to our constituents on lower incomes. Again, some support or assurance that the Government could assist with battery warranty would be helpful.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. This is a really important debate, and four Back-Bench Members still want to speak, but I have to start the wind-ups at 3.30 pm. I will not impose a time limit, but if people could work to that, it would be most helpful. I call Jamie Stone.

3.11 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I want to start with the North Coast 500 tourist route, with which many Members will be familiar. The route takes tourists around the whole of the top of Scotland—the north, east and west coasts—and we hope that tourists will come and use electric cars that they hire or own.

However, I am worried by the fact that the Highland Council has recently been debating an increase in the price of charging. At present, rapid charging points are charged at 30p per kWh, and the slower chargers are 20p per kWh. The council is looking at taking that up to an eye-watering 70p and 35p respectively. Earlier in the budgeting process, it was even thinking of 84p. A price rise of that scale would have a devastating effect not just on locals but on tourists coming up, because it starts to get pretty expensive to charge the car. For rural constituencies such as mine, we have to be careful about this.

My first point is that it seems that the Highland Council is in an invidious situation. It would be easy for me to point out that it is an SNP/independent council, but that would not be fair. That would be a cheap political point. Any administration would be faced with this problem. I believe that the cost of charging the car is a bit like the cost of paying for electricity from SSE. It should not vary by council area; it should be a constant. It is more like the railways, and I believe it should be applicable right across the nation.

I appeal to the UK and Scottish Governments to look at this issue and see if we can smooth it out. If that means that there has to be a budgetary consideration for authorities such as the Highland Council or others in the UK, let us look at that. This links back to what the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) was saying. Some councils are better equipped to do this than others, and that is something that national Governments—perhaps devolved Governments working with the United Kingdom Government—have to have a good look at.

Turning back to the North Coast 500, we have charging points around my vast constituency, but if someone were to take a map of the top of Scotland and stick a pin in the middle of Sutherland, they would come to a village that I have often mentioned in this place, called Altnaharra—it is the coldest village in the UK every winter, but that is not my point—where there are no charging points. It is 17 miles from Altnaharra to Tongue on the north coast going one way, and 21 miles going south to Lairg. Think of a tourist who is having a great holiday and arrives in Altnaharra when they are a bit low. What are they going to do? It is not great. It is kind of a personal point, but I do hope that somebody, some day very soon—perhaps next week—will get in touch with the owner of the Altnaharra Hotel and say, “Wouldn’t you like to have a charging point? This is how we’ll help you to get it.” Having spoken to him only this morning, I think that would be exceedingly well received.

My second point is that, as other Members have said, we have to think about the distribution. I have the widest and most far-flung constituency, perhaps rivalled only by that of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), and it is a real issue for my constituents with where they live and work. It is about not just the tourists, but the local people.

[*Jamie Stone*]

My third point is linked to what the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said. He mentioned the rate of VAT, and it is my belief that something similar should be done on the purchase price of an electric car. It might have to be tapered, we would have to be clever and think about what it would mean for the Exchequer, and the point is well made that as sales increase, we will have to look at doing it differently; but I believe that strong consideration should be given to that proposal, because at the end of the day most of my constituents simply cannot afford to get into that market. An electric car is just too expensive.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said that we need to think afresh about the approach. He mentioned the grid, and he is absolutely correct. Because it is my wont to forever name-check my constituency, I point out that we have a freepoint in the Cromarty Firth—I thank His Majesty's Government for that. It is for generating hydrogen, which can be either stored and exported or used to create electricity when the wind is not blowing. My final point—my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is urging me onwards—is that, in looking for a solution, we must have an overall view of the grid and hydrogen.

3.16 pm

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): At the outset of this debate, the question was rightly posed, “Are we ready?” The emphatic answer is, “No, we are not.” We are not ready for the EV revolution that is fast coming, and we need to be prepared for it.

Northern Ireland's electric infrastructure is antiquated. It was developed in the 1960s and it is not fit for purpose for what the Government have planned on electric vehicles for 2025, 2030, 2035 and 2040. With the best will in the world, it will not be fit for purpose by then, so we need to wake up to the unmovable fact that the infrastructure in Northern Ireland, where I come from, will not be able to cope with the electric vehicle revolution, which we so desire to see. There is little point rushing forward with higher, new and better standards if our infrastructure cannot cope with them, so we need to have work done on it. The National Franchised Dealers Association described Northern Ireland's infrastructure as ruinous for this revolution. We therefore have to address that important matter quickly.

How can we do that? How can car traders advance the green electric vehicle revolution on such a narrow platform? There is a huge roadblock coming. Hybrid vehicles, which people think are the answer at the moment, will be outlawed by 2035. People will not be able to buy a hybrid; it is over. How can we deal with this on such a narrow platform? We need more space to advance the argument and the alternatives. We need opportunities set aside for alternative fuels, which also need to be part of this debate—there is not just one answer. We need to put in place a more extensive network to give consumers confidence that if they invest in an electric vehicle, they will be able to use the thing to their advantage to get them to the far-flung parts of the United Kingdom and back again without anxiety about running out of electricity.

If we get this wrong, we destroy—in Northern Ireland, at least—the Northern Ireland retail motor industry. It will shock some people to learn how poor the Northern

Ireland charging infrastructure is. The gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom is significant, and it will soon be impossible for Northern Ireland to catch up. In October 2022, Northern Ireland had 18 working charging points—18 publicly facing rapid charging points in the whole of the Province! They are antiquated, unreliable and first-generation, and not all of them work with the new vehicles that are available. Scotland is doing tremendously well: it has something like 66 electric vehicles per rapid charger. England has 155 vehicles for every rapid charger, but Northern Ireland has something like 600 vehicles per rapid charger. The gap is rapidly increasing, so we need to catch up.

There is therefore very little consumer confidence in electric vehicles. The roll-out is far too slow. Planning for electric vehicle charging points is complex and hardly works. NFDA did a survey in Northern Ireland and found that 76% of people found it difficult to find a working charger. Some 68% said they had to wait too long, because there was someone else in the queue, and 53% said that charging is a barrier to them purchasing an electric vehicle.

The situation also puts tourism at risk. Tourists want to be part of the green revolution, but they cannot be without proper planning to enable them to find electric vehicle chargers along their route. We are creating a rural versus town divide in the provision of chargers.

I chair the all-party parliamentary motorcycling group in the House. The Government are urgently encouraging electric vehicle solutions for motorbikes but, again, they are setting a standard that is far too high and could end up destroying the marketplace. We need them to take this forward in hand with the traders to ensure that we have the proper solution at the proper time, not the proper solution too far in advance of the time.

3.21 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. As we have heard, it is no secret that we are approaching one of the biggest changes to the structure of the car industry in its history. The UK's commitment to ending sales of new carbon-emitting cars could make us a world leader in this space. It is a crucial step for not just this country, but the entire world. As we have heard, the transition is crucial on both the manufacturing and consumer side, and it must not be forgotten when we are discussing electric vehicles that manufacturing is critical in all this.

A report published back in 2013 outlined an industrial strategy for the automotive sector and emphasised the need to prepare for the transition. In some ways, that has been a success; I need look no further than my own constituency and the Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port, where we are in the middle of converting the production lines to produce electric vehicles. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) will have the same experience in her constituency in the not too distant future, and Nissan in Sunderland has also taken such steps.

Those are encouraging signs, but I am afraid there are far too many other examples where we are missing out. Only a few days ago, Ford announced plans to axe 20% of its UK workforce. Not so long ago, Britishvolt announced that its plans to set up a gigafactory were on

hold; I know there have been some developments with that, but it is still in the balance. BMW have announced that the electric Mini will not be produced in Oxford, and Jaguar and Honda have closed their vehicle production plants in Castle Bromwich and Swindon. From a position of great strength a decade ago, we are now in a position of great struggle.

What is the reason for this malaise? There are a number of factors in play, which I will not be able to rehearse in the time we have, but one of the fundamental problems is a lack of Government commitment to the strategy we have discussed. It seems to me that the central impediment is a mistaken belief that things should be left to the markets. The two positive examples that I have given of investment in new production were not left to the market; there was Government intervention, and that needs to be continued on both the manufacturing and consumer side.

In the minds of consumers, there is a hesitancy about making a huge financial commitment when the initial cost and convenience of running an electric vehicle are still up for debate. Brand new electric vehicles are far more expensive than traditional vehicles and, although they are becoming a greater proportion of sales, there is a natural ceiling to how much ordinary families will be able to afford.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Justin Madders:** I am afraid that I do not have any time for interventions. As technology has progressed and electric vehicles have become more numerous on the roads, focus has turned to the availability and practicality of owning one and the concerns arising about access to on-street parking and charging. About a third of UK homes do not have off-street parking, and that means that we need a more holistic approach to charging for the significant numbers of people who, at the moment, do not have off-street access. We have to deal with the iniquity that they will pay up to four times more in VAT than those who can access electricity directly.

The Government's commitment to building 300,000 new charging points is welcome, but the vast majority of those are in London. Indeed, in boroughs such as Westminster, London has exceeded the 2025 target by 358%, whereas in places such as western Cheshire, which I represent, local authorities reach only 28% of the 2025 target. That is not a good record for a Government that stood on a platform of levelling up the country.

It appears that there is a lack of strategy to deal with those disparities. The Government's infrastructure report claims that:

"Installing and operating chargepoints requires several parties across the energy sector, local government and the transport sector to work together effectively."

That is correct, but what are the Government going to do about those challenges? Where does the responsibility ultimately lie?

I believe that in order to achieve the transition to electric vehicles, local authorities need to be given the capacity, the resources and the authority to plan and deliver what is needed. The necessary powers must be backed by proper funding. From my rough calculations, what the Government have set aside so far will fund about a third of the requirement for electric charging points.

However, it is about more than just cash, because there needs to be leadership and a proper national strategy. This will ultimately be a major change in the country's infrastructure, and it cannot simply be left to the market as it is at the moment.

3.25 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Owning a car is a lifeline for many people. We need to encourage people to use their cars less and public transport more, but I am not blind to the need for cars. Car journeys are here to stay, but they need to become net zero. The transition from petrol and diesel to electric vehicles is at the heart of this effort, and it is an important step towards decarbonising the transport system and getting to net zero.

The Government's pledge to end the sale of all petrol and diesel cars by 2030, and hybrids by 2035, has acted as a powerful signal to the car industry and the markets, but the failure to prepare the ground for the transition to EV charging infrastructure is now threatening that target and, indeed, our net zero targets. Like the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), I am absolutely in favour of the transition to EVs, but we need to prepare the ground. We cannot say, "The target cannot be achieved, so let's just throw it out altogether."

Until now, drivers have charged at home around three quarters of the time. However, as we shift from early adopters to the mass market, policy needs to support people who do not have the space for their own charge points. We have already heard about the regional disparities: there are many more charging points in London compared with the rest of the country, and yet two thirds of the new infrastructure is proposed for London. The lack of EV chargers is a concern for more than half of motorists. Volkswagen has noticed that, apart from the cost, the key concern for buyers today remains charging anxiety.

The lack of charging infrastructure is leading people towards do-it-yourself charging, and I want to throw that in. Electrical Safety First has found that 90% of EV owners have used domestic multi-socket extension leads and three quarters have daisy-chained extension leads. That is highly dangerous, because daisy-chaining, whereby multiple extension leads are used together, can increase the risk of socket overload and electric shock, so we are putting people at risk. Don't do it, guys! It is really dangerous, and we need to make sure that this is not happening.

In last year's EV infrastructure strategy, the Government made no firm commitment to ensure that EV infrastructure roll-out is in line with EV market uptake. The main problem is grid capacity. The Liberal Democrat council in Bath has worked hard to build more charging infrastructure, but it is constrained by the weak grid in the region. National Grid wants to upgrade the grid in the west of England, but Ofgem has not accepted the funding proposals. The Government need to encourage Ofgem to be part of the solution and not the problem. We need a reform of Ofgem's remit to allow for pre-emptive investment in grid infrastructure.

A publicly funded network needs to prioritise fairly priced and equitable access. If we simply prioritise capacity over the number of locations and usefulness, we risk locking lower-income drivers, who rely on public chargers, into the most expensive rapid charging options. The Government must stop penalising people who are

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

not able to charge their EVs at home. These people currently have to pay 20% VAT to charge their vehicles at a public charge point, compared with the 5% VAT for people charging at home. The Government must end this unjustifiable discrepancy and equalise the VAT rate at 5% for all electric vehicle charging.

Transport is responsible for nearly a third of the UK's carbon emissions, with more than half of emissions from domestic transport coming from private cars and taxis. The quicker we get people using EVs, the closer we get to meeting our net zero targets. The benefits of owning an electric vehicle must outweigh the costs. From infrastructure to incentives, the Government need to meet words with actions and drive the electric vehicle revolution forward.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** I am very grateful to Members; you have been very good. I will now call Gavin Newlands, the SNP spokesman, who will also be very good.

3.29 pm

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): That is the aim, Mr Bone. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing the debate and highlighting a crucial part of these islands' journey to net zero.

As has been highlighted, the hon. Gentleman posed a question: are we really ready to transition to zero-emission vehicles? As the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said, any objective respondent would have to say an emphatic no. I hear what he said; having studied the figures many times over the last few years, I know that those for Northern Ireland are atrocious. I certainly would never have switched to an EV if I was living in Northern Ireland with that network. His points about road pricing were also well made.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is no longer in his place, made a good intervention about excess renewable energy and problems accessing the grid. That is becoming an ever-increasing problem, and the Government and National Grid need to get a grip on the issue of the grid. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke of the improvements to charging and the strategic road network in Scotland.

I agreed with almost every word that the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said. This is one of the very few debates in which I have listened to Conservative Members and found it hard to disagree with a single word. Well, the Minister is still to speak, but hitherto I have not disagreed with a word that a Conservative Member has said. [*Interruption.*] It is probably me who needs to resign, rather than the hon. Member.

My Scottish colleague, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), made some very good and fair points about charging. The highlands—apart from Altnaharra—have benefited from enhanced infrastructure over the last few years, compared with probably anywhere else in the country outside London. In my county, Renfrewshire, we still have free public chargers. We are moving to a paid model, but at a

reasonable price. The figures that he mentioned seem quite high when we are trying to move people over to electric vehicles.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke of the discrepancy between domestic and on-street VAT, which the Government need to get a grip on. Lastly, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke of a different inequity in charging infrastructure—not just from a postcode lottery point of view, but for those homes without a driveway on which to park their car.

I am the SNP member of the Transport Committee, which has been engaging with this subject over a number of years, including in our current “Fuelling the future” inquiry. The resulting report was agreed just yesterday and will be hitting the bestseller list any day. It is clear that Scotland has led the way compared with England and, indeed, the rest of the UK outside London; London has had great results for some time. Over the last year, the number of public charging points per capita has increased by no less than 33% in Scotland. That is ahead of England, even allowing for Scotland's head start. Inner London has largely dragged England's figure along with it.

The hon. Member for North Antrim mentioned the figures for rapid chargers. We have 73% more rapid chargers per capita than south of the border, and in just the last quarter of last year there was an increase of 15% in the number of rapid chargers. The UK Government's target of 300,000 public chargers by 2030 is looking more and more like a pipe dream rather than a reality in making the switch to net zero. We can also see the difference that a wider network of public chargers makes to the uptake of battery electric vehicles. In the year to September 2022, there was a 16% higher increase in the number of EVs on the road than there was in England. There is still a great deal to do in Scotland, and an ever-diminishing timeframe in which to do it, but that progress should be encouraging.

I have said many times here and in the main Chamber that the Scottish Government's approach should be exported down south, because they are doing something right while the UK Department for Transport is lagging behind. Moreover, if the UK Government were to get anywhere near their annual targets for charger installations, that would allow Scotland to ramp up our charger installation to a point where we were getting close to the required amount.

We are also lagging miles behind Norway, where more than 50% of new car sales are now fully electric, with another quarter coming from hybrid. They are on course to meet their goal of phasing out all private petrol and diesel cars within the next two years, which is a phenomenal achievement in such a short period of time. I would say this, wouldn't I?—but imagine that: a small, energy-rich, independent northern European country with control over its own finances and infrastructure, setting ambitious targets and taking the radical steps needed to meet those targets. It will never, ever catch on.

**Jamie Stone:** We were doing so well until then.

**Gavin Newlands:** We can't agree on everything!

On electric public transport, it is only due to the Scottish Government's continual action that the UK Government feel able to proclaim that they might meet



the 4,000 buses targets set by the previous, previous Prime Minister, three years ago. Only this week Ayrshire has benefited from another two dozen zero-emission buses serving local communities, which will be on the road next month—they are not added to the stats while awaiting a tender, which I am afraid has been the Department for Transport's way of pockling the stats whenever anyone—more often than not, me—asks how the 4,000 buses target is being met.

The former Prime Minister may have forgotten the words, but the wheels on the electric bus are very much going round and round in Scotland. Indeed, without the hundreds of buses funded under the Scottish Government's ScotZEB and SULEBS—the Scottish zero emission bus challenge fund and Scottish ultra-low emission bus scheme—the UK Government's target would be in tatters, despite them having no control over those Scottish schemes.

Even with smaller-scale initiatives, such as the extra financial support available for domestic charge points in Scotland compared with elsewhere, there is a clear gap, and it shows no sign of being closed. That extra support for domestic infrastructure is particularly well targeted to rural areas where the additional need for state support in transitioning to electric is well recognised.

I should declare that, as an EV owner myself, I was able to access the interest-free car loan scheme in Scotland that was available at the time, in addition to the home-charging top-up grant. That is the key difference in approach. When we have such important environmental targets on shifting drivers over to zero-emission cars, which are still usually more expensive—some often far more expensive and beyond the reach of most households—we need a Government that make zero-emission driving available to all without slashing and then ultimately removing any carrot they had dangled before the market was mature enough and costs low enough to ensure much more equitable access.

Whether it is rural or urban, what is clear is that, across a spectrum of measures, the UK Government's offering is just not up to scratch, either to fulfil current needs or to take on board future demand. On the Government's 300,000 chargers target, with current figures, we need to install 32,860 per year to meet that target. Last year, despite an increase on the previous year, 7,680 were installed. That is miles behind the target, and that sort of progress will prevent the phasing out of petrol and diesel cars by the same year.

There is still time to ramp things up and accelerate deployment. As I said, the Transport Committee's "Fuelling the future" report will be out shortly, but we can look at its "Zero emission vehicles" report from 2021, where we see recommendations that have been ignored by this Government. It was an excellent report, ably drafted by the Chair at the time—I am not sure what happened to him.

Time is against me, so I will raise two or maybe three points from that report. The Committee recommended that the Government intervene to support the second-hand market in electric vehicles. The Scottish Government did that with their interest-free loan scheme. The Committee recommended that all charge points should be interoperable. We spoke about that point at length, but we are getting nowhere fast on interoperability. People who rely on public charging infrastructure should get value for money.

Finally, and more importantly, the Government have to address the discrepancy between the 5% VAT and the 20% VAT incurred at public charge points.

I hope to hear the Minister address his own report when he responds. I hope he does respond to those issues, because if we are serious about a net zero economy, it cannot just mean action at one end of the supply chain for the end consumer. It has to include an industrial strategy that reflects innovation and modernisation of production and supply. Unfortunately, that is currently just not happening in the UK. We are falling way behind the curve. We need to make Project Rapid move a little less glacially, and we need to do so as soon as possible.

3.39 pm

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing this debate on electric vehicle infrastructure cost and availability, and thank him for providing an opportunity to draw attention to this vital issue. Climate change presents one of the biggest threats and greatest challenges facing humanity. However, the greatest barrier to progress today is not climate denial, but climate delay. We are at a critical juncture in our journey to legally binding net zero targets. Now is the time for bold and ambitious policy that will unleash the huge opportunities that the transition offers, but that is a far cry from the reality under this Government.

**Tahir Ali:** Does my hon. Friend agree that so much has been promised by Government on this issue, but in so many constituencies—including my constituency of Birmingham, Hall Green—people are missing out on being part of delivering the climate change agenda? When will the Government deliver on those promises by delivering EV charging points for many households?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is an amazing champion for his constituents. I could not agree with him more. In fact, I will be delving into that very topic—regional disparity—later in my speech.

As the largest emitting sector in respect of greenhouse gas emissions, transport has a crucial role to play in getting to net zero. In 2020, transport accounted for almost a quarter of total emissions, at a time when the pandemic meant that domestic travel was at just a fraction of usual levels. Petrol car journeys produce similar emissions per capita to aeroplanes—that is a startling fact—and over three times more than electric cars. Therefore, ramping up the transition to EVs is imperative if we are to meet our climate goals. But the roll-out of electric vehicles is only as good as the roll-out of the charging infrastructure supporting it. There is no time to lose, as the EV enthusiast, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), explained, along with pointing out the VAT anomaly for charging outside one's house. It is of course true that most drivers charge their EVs at home, but even those with home chargers need to be able to rely on a nationwide charging network, or they will be held back by range anxiety. In addition, we must not forget the estimated one third of households without access to off-street parking. They must not be left behind. Charging at home or a workplace has a huge role to play, but it is no alternative to a truly nationwide and reliable public charging network.

[Mr Dhesi]

This Government are asleep at the wheel while the UK falls behind on the infrastructure that motorists need. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) highlighted, as did the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), that areas such as Northern Ireland are being failed and left behind. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, highlighted how we are falling further and further behind our European neighbours.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) eloquently highlighted—in a very powerful speech, because she speaks with a great deal of experience on this matter—we need to install 37,000 charging devices a year to meet the Government’s own target of 300,000 by 2030. However, last year we achieved just a quarter of that. At the current pace, Ministers will miss their own target by a staggering 20 years. There are now 30 electric vehicles for every charging device, compared with 16 at the start of 2020. Motoring groups have been calling for a mandate on the installation of charging devices, to complement the upcoming net zero emission vehicle mandate. Motorists and manufacturers alike are crying out for clarity on the timescale for the transition to electric cars and charging infrastructure. Will the Minister consider targets in this area? I look forward to hearing his views on that.

Furthermore, the public charging devices that are available are highly concentrated in London, at the expense of the north and other areas of our country. There are now more public charging devices in Westminster alone than in 11 of the biggest northern cities combined, and this gap is stretching out wider still. Over the last three months, for example, more devices have been installed in Westminster than in any English region outside London. While this Government sit on their hands, the regional divide continues to get worse and worse. If the Government do not get a grip on this, those in more rural and less affluent areas are destined to be excluded from this transition, as was ably demonstrated by the hon. Members for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse).

Even when motorists are able to find a charging device, all too often they find out that it is too expensive, complicated to use, or not even working. Research carried out by the RAC showed that the cost of rapid charging on the public network rose by 50% in the eight months up to January 2023. Indeed, the AA has warned that the cost of public charging could become comparable to high-emission alternatives. That should be a huge cause for concern. Cheaper running costs are a major selling point for switching to electric vehicles. To lose that means risking the transition.

Turning to consumer experience, many have called for stronger regulation to standardise payment methods, and set minimum standards, so that public charging is as simple as filling up a petrol tank. It is unacceptable that many charging devices do not accept contactless card payments and force users to download an app or carry multiple membership cards. I can attest to that from my own experiences of driving my electric car. That would not be tolerated in any other industry and puts up yet another barrier to the transition.

In addition, all too often charging devices are not acceptable for people with disabilities. That must urgently be addressed, if we are to achieve a just transition. We welcome commitments made in the EV infrastructure strategy for new consumer experience regulations. In particular, it is vital that proposals for a 99% uptime requirement are followed through. Will the Minister confirm that those commitments will be delivered in full, and that there will be no scaling back? Will he also provide a timescale for their implementation? It is imperative that these crucial steps are not watered down or kicked into the long grass.

On funding, will the Minister take this opportunity to announce when the local electric vehicle infrastructure scheme will be up and running? Many local authorities are awaiting this funding to get their own roll-out going, particularly in areas where the business case for the private sector is weak. When will the rapid charge fund, first announced years ago, finally be delivered?

More widely, there are a number of other factors threatening an effective transition to EVs. As my hon. Friends the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) rightly lamented, car manufacturers are being left in limbo by the lack of clarity from the Government on their zero-emission vehicle mandate. The mandate will come into force in less than a year, but 11 months out we are still waiting for details on what the mandate will be and what penalties it will carry. That uncertainty is adding to the challenges facing the car industry. Will the Minister confirm when the Government will finally respond to the ZEV mandate consultation? Delay after delay and a lack of clarity risk stalling the transition to electric, and reversing the momentum built up behind it. Manufacturers and motorists need confidence in a reliable, affordable and accessible nationwide network of charging infrastructure.

Labour stands ready to turbocharge the electric vehicle roll-out. A Labour Government will support new gigafactories, leveraging private sector investment and creating thousands of British jobs. We will offer interest-free loans for new and used EVs, to those on low and middle incomes. We will support a truly nationwide and accessible charging network, so that range anxiety is ended everywhere and for everyone. We stand on the precipice of a major change to the way people drive. In under seven years, the sale of new purely petrol and diesel cars will end. Motorists and manufacturers are ready to make the switch, but they need a Government who are ready to make the switch. This Government have failed to rise to the challenge. Labour has a plan, and a Labour Government will deliver on that plan.

3.50 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) for securing this important debate, and I thank every participant for their words. It may not be possible to answer all their questions, but I hope we can cover the bulk of them.

The Government are committed to decarbonising transport and to phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2030, becoming the first G7 country to do so. The benefits of zero-emission motoring

are there to be won: improved air quality in our towns and cities, economic growth through our automotive industry, and ultimately cheaper and cleaner driving for all. Getting to that point will require Government and industry to furnish this country with an accessible, affordable and secure charging infrastructure network.

Perhaps I can give you some reasons to be cheerful, Mr Bone; I fear the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) also needs cheering up. Industry data shows that in December 2022, 32.9% of new cars sold were fully electric. That was the best ever month for new battery electric car registrations, with more sales than in all of 2019 combined. The UK had the second highest battery electric car sales in Europe in 2022, with Germany being first and France third. A survey by Zap-Map found that only 1% of EV drivers want to switch back to a petrol or diesel vehicle. One in five public charge points in the UK are rapid or ultra-rapid, and under our plans, new homes and non-residential premises undergoing renovation will have to install charging infrastructure at the point of construction. That should lead to 145,000 further charge points across England every year. Those are some reasons to be cheerful.

Last March, we published our strategy and set out our plans to accelerate the roll-out of the network. To answer one of the questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, the Government expect at least 300,000 public charge points to be installed across the UK by 2030. We do not regard that with the same cynicism as my good friend from the SNP, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). A recent industry report by New AutoMotive, "On the Road to 2030", found that the charge point roll-out is

"progressing at an adequate pace, growing by a third every 12 months, and the UK is on track"

to meet the expected 300,000 public chargers by the end of 2030. So do not just take my word for it.

That will all be achieved thanks to billions of pounds of investment by industry. There are more than 37,000 open access public chargers already on UK roads, hundreds of thousands of charge points in homes and workplaces, and more than 600,000 new chargers added to our road network each month on average. In fact, public charging devices have more than tripled in the last four years. We are on track to meet expectations.

On electric vehicle uptake, Government grants have supported drivers to buy plug-in vehicles for over a decade, with more than £1.4 billion already having been invested in the early market. Colleagues at the Treasury are committed to ensuring that motoring tax revenues keep pace with the changes brought about by the switch to electric vehicles, while keeping the transition affordable to consumers.

I will touch on local charging infrastructure, which has been raised. This debate is a timely one. Lack of access to off-street parking should not be a barrier to owning a plug-in electric vehicle. We are working with local authorities to ensure local provision meets local needs. Just yesterday, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester mentioned, we announced that drivers across the UK will benefit from a further £56 million of public and industry funding to support the roll-out of electric vehicle charge points across the country.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Will the Minister give way?

**Huw Merriman:** I will not give way due to time, I am sorry.

The funding will expand the current local electric vehicle infrastructure pilot, boost the existing on-street residential charge point scheme, and help councils across England secure dedicated resources to develop in-house expertise and capabilities to co-ordinate charge point plans and work with private operators. This will lead to thousands of new chargers and plans for tens of thousands more, helping more people than ever to make the transition.

Turning to rapid charging, alongside local infrastructure the tipping point for mass adoption of EVs also relies on the ability of motorists to access a reliable, long-distance charging network. Today, those making long-distance journeys on England's motorways and A roads are already never more than 25 miles away from a rapid charge point, and more than 99% of motorway service areas in England have electric vehicle charging available. However, more work needs to be done. The rapid charging fund will futureproof electrical capacity at strategic locations to prepare the network for a fully electric car and van fleet, ensuring that the private sector can continue to expand the charging network at pace.

People's experience of public charging has been referred to in the debate. We have heard motorists and we are listening to their complaints that certain charge points do not work and that it can be difficult to find the right charge point at the right time. As a result, the Government have announced new regulations to improve confidence in the charging network and to make the user experience truly seamless. This includes regulating to deliver 99% reliability across each rapid charging network; to simplify payment methods through introducing contactless payment and to encourage roaming, which relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about interoperability; and to make public EV charge point data freely available. These changes will give drivers the information they need about price and location.

Accessibility should also be embedded in public charge point design from the outset. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Slough about those with disabilities, we know that disabled EV drivers face specific barriers when using public charge points and that many of them are likely to be dependent on the public charging network. That is why the Government have co-sponsored an accessible charging specification alongside Motability, the national disability charity. We are pleased to see that charge point operators are already considering how to incorporate these standards into their data and charge point design.

Before I close and give time to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester to wind up the debate, I will just pick up on a few more points that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and others referred to the grid. Ofgem's upcoming distribution network price control includes £3.1 billion of funding for strategic network upgrades, which will help to deliver EV charge point roll-out across Great Britain. We are committed, in the British energy security strategy, to work with Ofgem to accelerate connections to the network. Ofgem has also decided to change the connection charging regime from April to make it cheaper for EV charge points and solar photovoltaic systems to

[*Huw Merriman*]

connect to the electricity distribution network, where reinforcement of the distribution network is required. We recognise that there is work to be done, but we have put in place work that we believe will deliver the grid for all.

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Bristol East and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, have referred to local authority uptake of funding. Some local authorities have taken up funding, but it is true to say that others have not done so. We understand that uneven level of engagement, capability, resource, political buy-in and certainty about EVs across England means that the roll-out of charging infrastructure is also uneven. Under the LEVI—local electric vehicle infrastructure—capability fund, which we announced yesterday, we are keen to provide an injection of up-front resource funding to help to ensure that local authorities in England have dedicated staff to undertake the planning and delivery of local electric vehicle charge points in their areas. I say to all right hon. and hon. Members present that the way to do that is for us to contact our local authorities and make it happen, as I have done. My local authority said that it did not have the funding or the capability, but with a bit of work it was able to do it. This fund will help that process a lot more, so I ask Members to please advertise it.

The Government will soon publish more details about the design of the ZEV mandate, including uptake in trajectories and accompanying CO<sub>2</sub> emissions regulation regarding how the targets will be set and enforced. That comes back to the point about philosophy. We are moving away from subsidising individuals buying electrical

vehicles, towards a mandate that will incentivise car manufacturers to produce EVs, and if they do not do so, they will end up being penalised. That is our future philosophy.

Finally, what will replace vehicle excise duty and fuel duty? That is a matter for the Treasury. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester very kindly referred to a Transport Committee report, but I am unable to answer his question because that report was written for the Treasury. I understand that the Treasury will respond shortly.

I will close there, to allow my hon. Friend his 30 seconds to respond, and I thank all Members present.

3.59 pm

**Steve Brine:** I am very glad that the Minister managed to keep hold of his folder and that it was not mislaid. [*Laughter.*] I had to say that. He has, characteristically, covered a wide range of issues that are not part of his brief, and I thank him for doing so. We have talked about charging, power, cost, availability and investment, and we have asked whether we are ready and on track. I am encouraged by the Minister's response. This is not his brief; it is another Minister's brief. It is great that the Government have a plan. I know from being a Minister that it is great to have a plan with staging posts to make sure it is adhered to. I encourage Ministers to stay on it—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. I am really sorry, but time has beaten us. We must move on to the next debate.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Child Literacy: Disadvantaged Areas

4 pm

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered improving children's literacy in disadvantaged areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I rise to argue that we need to consider the access that every child in the UK has to a school library or even a book, as that has consequences for their literacy attainment.

I am sure we all agree that reading is at the very basis of our daily existence, from reading delayed train notices to the daily news. It would seem almost impossible to function in our society today without that necessary skill. That is why I am sure hon. Members will be as shocked as I am to learn that three quarters of a million school-aged children in the UK still do not have access to a school library. That is quite frankly an alarming statistic, given that reading makes up a fundamental part of how we operate in our everyday lives and of how future generations will continue to operate.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised libraries. Last year, staff and pupils at Woodchurch Church of England Primary School in my constituency were supported by the children's laureate and the BookTrust to transform an unoccupied area of corridor into a fantastic reading space with mushroom cushions, dragon wall art and hundreds of books. The school has embedded reading for pleasure into its culture, and it reports that that has been a key part of improving outcomes for some of its most vulnerable children—particularly those with special educational needs. It also told me that children now see reading not only as a skill for learning but as something that helps their mental health. Some have described the library as a haven and a safe space. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that it is important to develop a culture of reading for pleasure at a very early age to improve children's educational attainment and to ensure that they feel part of wider society.

**Alexander Stafford**: The hon. Lady summed up in a matter of minutes what I am planning to say in half an hour. That is a summary version of my speech. I could not agree more.

The focus must clearly be on how primary school libraries help improve children's literacy in disadvantaged areas. They are indisputably a vital part of the education system. Numerous studies have shown a clear correlation between having a good school library and not only academic achievement and literacy performance but a child's attitude to learning as a whole. Improving children's literacy clearly relies on the availability of school libraries and access to books. Sadly, the reality is that availability and access to books for children relies on efficiently allocated funding.

The Government's recent levelling-up White Paper indicated that by 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased. In England, that will mean that 90% of children will have achieved the expected standard, and the percentage of

children meeting the expected standard in the worst-performing areas will have increased by over a third. Without efficiently allocated funding, that mission seems unlikely to reach its full potential.

Early childhood, from birth to the age of five, is instrumental both in itself and as a foundation stage for language and literacy development, which is why funding channelled to early-years education is essential. The Prime Minister—then Chancellor of the Exchequer—said in his autumn 2021 Budget speech:

“The evidence is compelling that the first 1,001 days of a child's life are the most important.”—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 277.]

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. In the short time he has been here, he has shown himself to be an assiduous Member, and he is very good at bringing things forward that we are happy to respond to. I endorse what he said. I am a grandfather with six grandchildren, and it gives me a wee bit of insight into their insatiable desire for books. They want to learn and know about the world. They show an eagerness that I did not see in my boys—perhaps it was because I was not there enough for them. I commend the hon. Gentleman for what he is saying. It is really important for literacy to be part of the primary school curriculum. By making books available, we are building adults for tomorrow. Some of the children at those schools might even grow up to be Members of this House!

**Alexander Stafford**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having six grandchildren. I have only two children, Persephone and Charlotte, but one day I hope to have six grandchildren or more. I hope that they, too, will have a love of books and learning.

At present, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are already behind their more affluent peers when they enter primary school. That is extremely concerning, especially coupled with the 40% development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers that emerges by the age of five. The primary school rate is currently set at £1,385 per pupil, whereas the early years rate is only £342. That deeply affects the access to books that children have in their early years, as well as their chances of developing strong literacy skills. Ultimately, the funding currently allocated to early years does not reflect the evidence on child development or sectoral need.

My constituency of Rother Valley is by no means the worst-performing area in the UK in literacy and education rates—it has some great schools—but its literacy scores are certainly below the national average. On a recent visit to Dinnington Community Primary School, I was joined by Cressida Cowell—a former children's laureate and the author of the hugely popular series “How to Train Your Dragon”—to discuss children's literacy. A vast proportion of our conversation concentrated on the inequality in children's access to school libraries. Yorkshire and the Humber holds the unenviable place of being the geographical area of the UK with statistically the lowest children's book ownership: some 9.2% of children do not own a single book. It is particularly concerning that two in every five children in England are eligible for free school meals, but many of them do not have a dedicated library in their school.

[Alexander Stafford]

I make it clear that prioritising the availability of books in primary schools should not be confined to disadvantaged areas. While there are apparent regional differences in library provision between the north and south of England, it should be a priority across the whole UK. It has been estimated that if all children were to read for pleasure, the economic impact of their increased skills, and therefore increased potential, would raise the UK's GDP by £4.6 billion a year within just one generation. National Libraries Week encapsulates this notion with its most recent theme, "Never Stop Learning", which seeks to draw attention to the valuable role that libraries play in supporting not only primary school children, but lifelong learning. If we prioritise children's literacy, the whole UK will reap the benefits in every aspect of our society, most notably economically and socially.

A school library is a driving force for so many opportunities for children. It is essential for it to possess a wide range of books, from novels to graphic novels and even comics. It also needs to be an inviting place—we need to move away from the idea of a small, dark, gloomy room. It is not simply that if children have access to a primary school library, they will have a higher probability of attaining good literacy levels. It goes beyond access; it is also about quality, engagement with children, and the books on offer. Children need to be drawn to a library and to what it has to offer.

School libraries and efficiently allocated funding are critical, but I accept that they are not the only things that matter. Primary schools up and down the country are doing incredible work to boost literacy levels, but there is only so much that they can do, especially as much of what influences children and young people is beyond the school gates: it happens at home and in their day-to-day interactions with their local community and environment. That is why it is necessary for the private sector to play an active role in helping to boost literacy levels. Through their products, services and charitable initiatives, businesses have channels to influence children and young people that schools simply do not have.

A prime example of this multi-partner approach is the National Literacy Trust's work with McDonald's since 2013 as part of the McDonald's Happy Readers campaign. Some 61 million books have been distributed as a result of that initiative, which is based on McDonald's swapping toys and happy meals for books and including a book offer on the box. That is an undeniably strong example of the outcomes that can be achieved through a multi-sector, multi-partner approach.

The rewards of access to books are not confined to academic and economic achievement. Reading is a vital aid to a child's mental wellbeing. There are proven, identified links between children's literacy engagement and their wellbeing. Children who are most engaged with literacy are three times more likely to have higher levels of good mental wellbeing than children who are least engaged. I believe that engagement with literacy relies heavily on libraries being a place to which children have access during their lunch breaks—a "third space" away from the classroom.

For me, a library is a wonderful form of escapism—indeed, just like the best books. As a result of my strong belief that the availability of primary school libraries,

as well as books at home, is instrumental to improving literacy attainment, I have canvassed many schools across Rother Valley over the past couple of months to assess their reading facilities. I was delighted with the level of engagement. It was encouraging and confirmed to me that, with the right support, schools are receptive to prioritising reading.

Initiatives such as Michael Morpurgo Month—a competition where schools enter to win a live virtual event with the author—are incredible ways to engage children, even those who do not consider themselves natural readers. I am extremely proud that some primary schools in Rother Valley will enter this competition, and I urge other Members to encourage their primary schools to start thinking outside the box and to engage with similar initiatives that bring reading to life for children.

Ultimately, we need to challenge the outdated notion that reading is boring or irrelevant. My strong belief in prioritising children's literacy prompted me to meet the National Literacy Trust and the World Book Day charity. I was incredibly pleased to learn of the invaluable work they do to raise awareness not only of the significant role libraries play in helping children reach their full potential, but of the benefits that reading for pleasure can bring. The annual World Book Day, which takes place on Thursday 2 March, is dedicated to reading for pleasure. It witnesses 15 million book tokens being distributed each year, with an impressive 90% of schools participating throughout the UK. I strongly encourage Members to attend the parliamentary event on 28 February to show their support for World Book Day.

It can be easy to think that World Book Day is an isolated day that comes round once a year, but the charity's work challenging the notion that reading is outdated continues throughout the year. It releases book club content, reading recommendation lists and video stories with the aim of helping parents engage their children in reading beyond the classroom. A distinct aspect of the charity is how it introduces children to comic books and graphic novels for those who perceive reading as not for them. I was surprised to learn that research from 2015 found that reading a Dickens novel and a manga comic book have exactly the same impact on a child's development because of the way they engage the brain with pictures and tests to open up their imagination in a new way. I am in the process of becoming a World Book Day champion, and I urge all other Members to do what they can and to consider joining as well for the good of the children.

The National Literacy Trust works to address low literacy rates in disadvantaged areas by combining a range of evidence-based programmes with community-driven, place-based solutions. Across the UK, the trust has 20 literacy hubs in areas with the highest levels of deprivation and literacy vulnerability. The hub's approach is characterised by a mix of strategic local partnerships, community campaigns and targeted programmatic activity in earlier settings than schools, run by local teams that have strong existing networks in these communities. Literacy hubs are leading the way in breaking cycles of intergenerational low literacy by engaging the entire community, which encapsulates the innovation we all should be striving for.

In October 2021, the National Literacy Trust, together with Penguin Random House, launched the Primary School Library Alliance, which strives to address the

chronic lack of investment in primary school libraries and to change the narrative where one in seven primary schools in England does not have a library by transforming library spaces. As of 2022, the alliance has worked with more than 330 schools, and its mission is to help transform 1,000 primary school libraries by 2025 by giving them the books, training and support they require to make that possible. The fact that the programme is worth over £5 million and is supported by many children's authors, publishers and private companies proves the extent of support on prioritising improving children's literacy skills.

One aspect of its work that should be noticed is its intense focus on engaging parents to encourage their children to read, such as in early morning reading groups for parents, by having books in the house and the school library being open in holidays. These are all innovative ways to encourage parents to see the value in reading and for children to view the library as their third space outside the classroom. The success of the scheme speaks for itself, and I am sure Members will join me in advocating for the expansion of such a wonderful scheme, which is pioneering in creating not just a library space, but a reading community.

Having argued the merits and value of primary school libraries, what can be done to ensure their secured future in our educational institutions? We all want to reach the end point of a statutory requirement for all primary schools to have an adequately sized and well-resourced library. That would greatly complement the White Paper published in March 2022 and help achieve its aim of improving literacy rates across the UK. However, it is recognised throughout the sector that we must transition towards that through the support of public-private schemes, such as the Primary School Library Alliance.

Secondly, the Government must recognise the importance of early years for language development. That needs to be reflected in the funding invested in resources, which should result in early years receiving the same rate as the primary school rate. As a consequence, the early years rate should equate to the £1,385 per pupil received by primary school children.

Thirdly, the Government should ensure that the allocation of funding across the UK is weighted towards disadvantaged areas to target the pupils who are persistently disadvantaged. One of the ways the Government can do that is by taking a multi-sector, multi-partner approach to activate private sector investment. In practice, that requires the Government to support initiatives such as the Primary School Library Alliance, to try to further their goal of reaching 1,000 schools by 2025. That support would prevent the statutory requirement from being solely tokenistic, since it strives to engage pupils, teachers and parents. The Government need to form partnerships to create a readers' community throughout the whole United Kingdom.

Ultimately, I propose that we must ensure every child in Rother Valley and across the whole of the UK has access to an adequately sized and well-resourced library at their local school to achieve high levels of literacy attainment. We must do more to help every child fulfil their potential—that was a pledge of the school White Paper. I firmly believe that introducing the statutory requirement for all primary schools would be a force for change to make that truly possible, and improve not

only the quality of our children's access to books, but the rest of their lives. Children are the future generation, so it is crucial that we ensure they are provided with adequate resources to excel fully and change the narrative of 25% of 11-year-olds leaving primary school being unable to read at the expected level. That figure rises to 40% among disadvantaged children.

Reading is a simple, cost-effective and powerful tool to unlock prosperity in Rother Valley and across the UK, and it is our duty to make the United Kingdom the world's foremost reading community. I hope that my sponsoring today's debate can be in the first chapter of the very exciting story of children's literacy.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. Sir John, I have not been notified that you wish to speak in the debate. I have not been told by the Member that he has your permission, nor have I heard it from the Minister.

**Sir John Hayes:** I did ask—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** It is easy to do. Does the Member have any objections?

**Alexander Stafford:** No, I would like to hear Sir John's contribution.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Minister, would you like to hear from Sir John?

**The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon):** As long as it is short.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** That, I am afraid, I cannot guarantee. Keep it short, Sir John.

**Robert Halfon:** I want to give a proper response.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Yes, exactly. It is unusual, Sir John, but in your case we will allow it.

4.17 pm

**Sir John Hayes:** Unusual is my middle name, Mr Bone. I am immensely grateful for your indulgence. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) spoke about the debate earlier this afternoon; I had not expected to be here, but when he told me the subject I felt that I ought to be.

The way in which we store, exchange and use information has changed immeasurably in my lifetime. The internet has done good but, of course, much more harm—not least because, paradoxically, it makes finding information more straightforward but simultaneously makes serendipity less likely, as the pursuit of speed replaces the journey of discovery. Search engines mean that we are directed to exactly what we need when we need it, rather than the business of finding out things that one did not expect, which might stimulate all kinds of thoughts, ideas and adventures, and that is just what a library does. When someone enters a library or a bookshop, they do not always necessarily know what they will come out with; in fact, they very often come out with much that they did not expect to.

[*Sir John Hayes*]

Libraries play a critical part in exciting and enthralling and seeding dreams and memories. School libraries are particularly important in that regard, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley made clear. T. S. Eliot said, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?” If he was alive now, he would say, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in data?”, as we drown in a sea of data. Libraries—whether they be public libraries, such as the one I helped to save in the Deepings, my constituency, which is now flourishing, or school libraries in the schools in my constituency—are places where children, often for the first time, encounter the canon of English literature. No childhood—no rich and enjoyable childhood—is complete, surely, without knowing C. S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, dear Enid Blyton or Tolkien, so I congratulate my hon. Friend on this motion. Every child in every school should—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. Thank you, Sir John; that is all very good. I call the Minister.

4.20 pm

**The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon):** Thank you, Mr Bone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on his very thoughtful speech. He will know that I am standing in for the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb).

My hon. Friend does incredible work as an active champion of literacy in Rother Valley. He is right to draw attention to fantastic initiatives, such as Michael Morpurgo Month, a competition to highlight the importance of literacy for all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In my own constituency of Harlow, I run a Christmas card competition. I met the winners recently, and I always give them books by Tolkien, who was just mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley says that if we prioritise children’s literacy, the whole of the UK will reap the benefits. The Government wholeheartedly agrees with him. That is why we have strengthened the national curriculum to focus on developing reading and writing ability, and put phonics at its heart. There is sound evidence that systematic phonics is a highly effective method for teaching early reading, and I pay real tribute to the Minister for Schools, who has done so much work to drive up standards and drive so much change over the past few years.

**Margaret Greenwood:** The Minister is talking about phonics. He might come on to this, but in a primary school in my constituency, which I mentioned earlier, I have witnessed a huge drive to encourage reading for pleasure. The children are not being tested; nobody is monitoring them. We get these lovely pictures of children sitting around, sharing books and reading books on their own, and it has really ignited their interest. Would the Minister agree that embedding reading for pleasure in the curriculum is massively important?

**Robert Halfon:** The hon. Member is absolutely right and is showing, in essence, how libraries can play an important role in reading for pleasure and encouraging children to read. There is no doubt that reading for pleasure brings a range of benefits—it is something that I did as a child—and that is supported by the Department.

In 2018, the Department launched the English Hubs programme. So far, the programme has intensively supported 1,600 schools, with those schools having an above-average proportion of pupils on free school meals. That includes schools in Rother Valley, which are supported by two English Hubs—Learners First and St Wilfrid’s, which have intensively supported more than 100 schools.

The success of our increased emphasis on phonics and early reading has delivered results on an international scale. England achieved its highest ever score in reading in 2016, moving from joint 10th to joint eighth in the progress in international reading literacy study rankings. That improvement is largely attributable to increases in the average performance of lower-performing pupils and of boys. It follows a greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, and a particular focus on phonics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley has highlighted the importance of reading for pleasure—as has the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood)—and of enabling access to books. My hon. Friend talked about World Book Day and the National Literacy Trust working tirelessly to raise the profile of reading for pleasure in our country. The National Literacy Trust’s partnership with McDonald’s is a brilliant example, as he highlighted, and I am sure that he would not mind me saying that I’m lovin’ it.

The Government believe that all pupils deserve to be taught a knowledge-rich curriculum that promotes extensive reading, both in and out of school. The national curriculum promotes reading for pleasure, with evidence showing that that is more important for children’s educational development than their parents’ level of education. Libraries are absolutely an important way of promoting reading for pleasure. I spent my childhood in libraries, so I completely get where my hon. Friend is coming from.

**Margaret Greenwood:** Will the Minister give way?

**Robert Halfon:** I had better not, because I have not got much time; I hope the hon. Lady does not mind.

It is for individual schools to decide how best to provide and maintain a library service for their pupils, including whether to employ a qualified librarian. Head teachers often recognise the important role that school libraries can play in improving literacy, by ensuring that proper library facilities are provided. I absolutely agree that school libraries are important, but they are not the only thing that matters. We recognise the vital importance of the teaching profession and are committed to offering the very best professional development. The national professional qualification for leading literacy was launched in October last year to train existing teachers and leaders to become literacy experts and to drive up standards of literacy teaching.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley is absolutely correct when he talks about the importance of early intervention. The early years foundation stage reforms aim to improve outcomes at age five, especially in early language and literacy, and especially for disadvantaged children.



On funding, my hon. Friend will know that we have spent more than £3.5 billion in each of the past three years on our early education entitlements to support families with the cost of childcare. At spending review 2021 we announced three years of additional funding increases, which come to £510 million in total over the funding provided in 2021-22, for local authorities to increase hourly rates paid to childcare providers. He will also know that the early years pupil premium will be up to £353 per year for each eligible child, an increase from the £342 made available this year. We have made £180 million available to improve early language and train early years staff.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the pandemic has had a wide-reaching and uneven effect on attainment, including in his constituency. The fall in attainment in 2022 was anticipated, sadly, and does not diminish the hard work of teachers, support staff and pupils in challenging circumstances. He will also know about the £5 billion recovery plan, with the recovery premium and the national tutoring programme, to try and support catch-up.

The Department is sending almost £2.9 billion of pupil premium funding to schools in 2023-24 to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. In my own area, some schools have used that for library facilities; some schools in Harlow have bought black and white Kindles to help pupils to read. We constantly review and assess the effectiveness of our approach to targeting funding towards deprivation.

Given that I am the Skills Minister, I hope that my hon. Friend does not mind if I mention that we have also improved literacy and English skills. Disadvantaged students are significantly more likely to leave school without a GCSE grade 4 or higher in English, so our resits policy ensures that colleges, sixth forms and training providers support those young people towards achievement. From the introduction of the resits policy in 2014 to 2019, there was an 80% increase in the numbers of students achieving level 2 in English by 19 who did not have it at 16. We have also hugely improved the number of apprentices achieving functional skills.

I want to reflect on the recent changes made to some of Roald Dahl's work. I support the Prime Minister's sentiment that

"we shouldn't gobblefunk around with words."

My hon. Friend talks about libraries. I hope very much that people choose to read the original Roald Dahl texts in the school libraries that my hon. Friend is promoting. There are many Roald Dahl books.

The Department is committed to improving literacy levels for all pupils, because reading and writing are an essential foundation for success in all subjects. We are determined to drive progress further still and ensure that all children can benefit from high-quality teaching, giving all children a solid base upon which to build as they progress through school.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Overseas Aid: Child Health and Education

4.29 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered overseas aid, child health and education.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate about this important subject. I want to start with a moment's reflection. All of us here today are lucky to live in the developed world, and in the United Kingdom in particular. So many people around the world face such enormous challenges, and it is important to remember that many of those challenges are getting worse, as far too many people struggle with the effects of the climate emergency, war and natural disaster. It is our responsibility in the developed world to help those who have not had the same opportunities that we have had. Indeed, that is a duty for all of us.

That duty has been thrown into sharp relief by the recent tragic events in Turkey and Syria, and I turn first to the earthquake before addressing longer-term development issues. It has been simply heartbreaking to watch the horrific images of the earthquake in Turkey and northern Syria. The recent quake was the worst for nearly 100 years, and measured 7.8 on the Richter scale. It was, quite simply, an incredibly powerful natural disaster, and sadly the effects seem to have been made worse by what can only be described as apparent shoddy building practices and lax regulation.

I pay tribute to all those taking part in the response to this dreadful disaster—both those in Turkey and Syria, and those across the whole world. The Disasters Emergency Committee in Britain, local branches of charities, local communities and local residents who have taken part in collections are all doing their bit to help those in need at this most awful time. It falls to us to help, both in emergencies such as the earthquake or the recent floods in Pakistan and over the much longer term. I am sure that everyone in the United Kingdom shares those concerns and that commitment to help.

Let me turn to wider development issues, which are the subject of today's debate. There is no doubt that the world is changing, but although many countries are developing, there is still enormous economic and social inequality across the world. It is truly sobering to consider the scale of this enormous problem. Even today, nearly one in 10 of the world's population lives in extreme poverty, despite considerable steps forward in the last 40 or 50 years. That poverty is found in many countries, and in particular blights the lives of people living in rural areas and many of those who have migrated to the enormous cities that are emerging around the world. There remains extreme inequality in health and education, as I will return to later.

I want to make some broader points and recap the recent direction of Government policy. Turning to recent history, the last Labour Government made real steps forward. They brought in the 0.7% target for aid, so that the proportion of GDP spent on aid matched the amount recommended by the UN—picking up on work that went as far back as the Brundtland commission in the 1980s. It is important that Britain led on that policy, and there were very real results: 1.5 million more people received improved sanitation and water services, and

[*Matt Rodda*]

this country helped 40 million children go to school. I also acknowledge the very important work that Cameron's Conservative Government did in continuing that policy.

Sadly, the 0.7% target was scrapped by more recent Conservative Governments, which has left the UK presiding over a declining aid budget. Worse still, there have been attempts to rebadge other spending as aid, including the deeply mistaken plan to spend £3 billion from the development budget on the cost of housing refugees. That mistaken approach has knocked down the pillars on which the UK's international leadership was built, and it has damaged Britain's credibility around the world. Added to that, a botched merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has undermined delivery.

Development spending is not only a force for moral good, as I mentioned earlier, but sensible policy. Aid from the developed world is helpful and important, and although it is not the only answer, it can be a significant force for good. British aid has played an important part in helping those in need around the world. Our contribution has declined, and our influence and ability to be a force for good are in retreat.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate; he always brings very important subjects to Westminster Hall and the main Chamber. Does he recognise that, although the Government have a role to play, there are many non-governmental organisations and charities—I think of many church groups in my constituency—that come together to make significant contributions to health, education, job opportunities and ensuring that young girls have an equal opportunity to young boys? I can speak for the Elim church mission in my constituency as one example. We cannot ignore what they do in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Swaziland. They make a contribution alongside Government, and that cannot be forgotten.

**Matt Rodda:** I commend the hon. Gentleman for his words. Of course, the work of community, voluntary, church and other faith groups is so important and makes an enormous contribution, and in many ways plays a leading role in aid around the world.

As I was saying, I am afraid that our influence is in retreat, as is our ability to be a force for good. That sad reality should be—and I hope will be—a cause for reflection and a much-needed reassessment by the Minister and his colleagues.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I might expand on this point later. I was struck in a conversation I had with someone working in one of our embassies who remarked that, from their perspective, the D in FCDO is currently silent. They were worried about their ability to do other things in that country as a result. Is that similar to conversations the hon. Gentleman has had with others in this space?

**Matt Rodda:** The hon. Member makes an excellent point. There is a real risk that the development work of the Government gets downplayed due to the reorganisation. As I said earlier, there are also issues with delivery and capacity in the new merged Department.

I would like to spell out what this retreat means in real terms on the ground for the very poorest. We now know that bilateral aid on education fell from £789 million in 2019 to just £545 million in 2020. That is a reduction of nearly a third. Final spending in 2021 was just £457 million. That falls way short. The UK's £430 million pledge for the Global Partnership for Education for 2021-25 was an increase on previous commitments, but lower than many had expected. Further analysis by charities indicates that education programmes were cut by 30% in the first round of cuts in 2020. Those are severe cuts.

Many local and international NGOs have spoken about the impact of cuts on children's education and health. For example, the Dhaka Ahsania Mission, after seeing 100% of its funding cut, said that 1,250 out-of-school children living in flood prone areas in northern Bangladesh will not have access to quality non-formal primary education. It said,

“Within weeks...our project would have enrolled 700 out-of-school girls (and 560 out-of-school boys) into rural-based, non-formal primary education centres.”

All that has been cut.

In another case, an NGO that preferred to remain anonymous saw a 100% cut to funding for a programme that protected the rights of children and enabled them to grow up healthily. The project improved access to inclusive quality education for 1,700 children marginalised by ethnicity, gender and/or disability in three rural villages in Laos.

Again on health, in 2022 the UK pledged £1 billion to the global fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, which is £400 million less than in 2019. I remind colleagues that every minute of the day a child dies of malaria, and hundreds—around 600—are estimated to die every day of TB. I hope I have set out what the current policy means to those who are most in need of help.

I turn to some of the principles that I believe should guide our wider strategy, at a point when, as I said earlier, I hope the Government are able to rethink their recent approach. It is clear that current policy is simply not working, and Ministers should start again. They should think again about how the world has changed, at the same time building on what we know has worked in the recent past.

We need to take a sensible and strategic approach to this important issue. First, the UK should lead by example, not break our word or commitments. That means not reducing our development spending or asking others to do more in our place. It also means not preaching about net zero without a credible plan to get there. Secondly, our strategy should mean rediscovering our core principles, which should always guide us, and our commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Thirdly, our approach to development needs to reflect the world we live in—a world that, as I said, is quite clearly changing. We should focus on where we really can make a difference, and our approach should be grounded in an understanding of the wider world and of how aid can be delivered in partnership with local communities and developing countries.

There is so much I could say about innovative work in partnership with local community-level initiatives. However, time is pressing and I want to sum up, because I

appreciate that many other colleagues want to contribute. As I said earlier, we are responsible for supporting people in need around the world. This is about responding in an emergency, and I thank those who supported people in Turkey and Syria following the recent earthquakes. However, there is a much longer-term need that we need to acknowledge and address properly.

Sadly, I am afraid the current Government are failing, and the cuts have set back vital work around the world. This is having a very real effect on communities and, indeed, on the most vulnerable, and the failure to continue with the 0.7% target is harming the education, health and economic opportunities of the very people who need our support the most. We need to get Britain back on track to meet its commitment to the UN's 0.7% target as soon as the financial situation allows. What is needed now is a reassessment of the situation and a new strategy, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** We have to start the wind-ups at no later than 10 past 5. I have the names of only two Members who have notified the Chair that they wish to speak.

4.41 pm

**Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bone, and to follow my excellent colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). In his powerful opening speech, he reminded us why funding for overseas aid is so critical.

I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, and it is good to see one of my fellow co-chairs, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), present today.

Four decades on from the start of the AIDS crisis, the global HIV response is caught in a perfect storm of waning political and public engagement, diminishing funds and the global shock of covid-19. It is fair to say that the reality is that, in many countries, the AIDS crisis never ceased. Currently, a child dies from an AIDS-related cause every five minutes, and only half of children living with HIV are on life-saving treatments. In 2021, 160,000 children newly acquired HIV. Children accounted for 15% of all AIDS-related deaths, despite the fact that only 4% of the total number of people living with HIV are children. Adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately impacted by HIV—for example, around 4,200 adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa acquire HIV every week. This is not right, and it should not be happening in 2023.

The cut in ODA spending—from 0.7% to 0.5%—and further raids on the ODA budget have come at a critical time for the HIV response. There have been significant cuts across all the UK's multilateral, bilateral, and research and development funding. As highlighted in a joint report from the APPG on HIV and AIDS, STOPAIDS and Frontline AIDS, the cuts have disproportionately impacted key and vulnerable populations, including children affected by HIV. I hope the Minister will realise that the cuts are damaging our soft power while others are on the rise. UNAIDS estimates that \$29 billion will be required in 2025 for the AIDS response in low and middle-income countries, including countries formerly

considered to be upper-income countries. This funding is desperately needed to get us back on track and to end AIDS as a global health threat by 2030.

I want to ask the Minister whether the Government's actions are in line with the UK delivering on its commitments on girls' education and on ending preventable deaths. What assessment have the Government made of the UNAIDS "Education Plus" initiative? Will they commit to the Global Alliance to End AIDS in children? Will the UK Government give political and financial support to these mechanisms? Britain can and must do so much more.

This is one issue that unites us across the country and across this House. At a time when we are seeing the country and the world facing critical threats and competing challenges, the Government must restore this funding. I urge the Government to rethink these cuts.

4.45 pm

**Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op):** It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who gave a powerful speech on the significant impact of the cuts on the fight against HIV and AIDS. I very much hope that her points are heard and acted on. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for securing the debate and for his opening remarks, rightly praising all those from the UK, in particular, doing their level best to help the peoples of Turkey and Syria to deal with the terrible impact of the earthquakes. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also rightly praised the many church groups that help to keep all of us in this House focused on these issues—I can think of a number in my constituency that do just that.

I share the views of my hon. Friends the Members for Reading East and for Vauxhall, in that I think we need a timetable to get back on track to 0.7%. I certainly think we need to re-establish an International Development Department as a separate Department, which perhaps reflects the point made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Perhaps slightly unfashionably, I also think we should renew support to the World Bank, which saw one of the biggest cuts in multilateral aid as a result of the UK's cuts in development assistance. I will return to that in a moment.

I have always believed that our first responsibility in this House is to our own citizens. However, there is surely also a moral responsibility for us, as one of the richest nations in the world, to do our bit to help those in the poorest countries and the worst circumstances to access better lives, too. I have also always believed that it was in our self-interest to do so. DFID was a global leader in development throughout its existence, which certainly enhanced UK soft power. Development assistance helps to build up markets, creating job opportunities not just in country but, as a result of trade, that benefit people here in the UK. It helps to reduce the pressures on those in the poorest places to migrate and seek sanctuary in the UK or other developed countries. In the light of covid, better healthcare in developing countries also helps to reduce the threat of diseases that may start in other places having a significant impact on our citizens too. The charity ONE estimated that, as a result of the cuts in development assistance, some 3.7 million girls worldwide would no longer receive a decent education—surely a matter of significant shame for the UK.

[Gareth Thomas]

The International Development Committee looked particularly at the impacts of the decline in UK aid on specific countries and sectors. It noted that the biggest cut in long-term development assistance would be to Pakistan, where the largest sectoral decrease as a result of the cut to aid spending would be in education, and that there would be

“significant and abrupt cuts to programmes focused on education, economic empowerment, and sexual and reproductive services targeted at women and girls in Pakistan”.

While earthquakes in Turkey and Syria have rightly caught the world’s attention, it has not been that long since the terrible floods in Pakistan were on our television screens. More than a third, at least, of the population in Pakistan were very directly affected by those floods. Surely Pakistan, a fellow Commonwealth country, is worthy of continuing and significant support from the UK. I stress that nearly 23 million Pakistani children aged five to 16 do not attend school, because of teacher shortages, distances and parents’ safety concerns. Surely we have a particular responsibility to provide increased support there.

Another area of development assistance that does not always get the attention that it deserves is the support that we give in the Palestinian territories—particularly support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency with investment in education in the west bank and Gaza. Education is very highly valued by families across the Palestinian territories, and there is very high enrolment in basic education, but there are issues with the quality of education. The protracted nature of the conflict, the significant threat of exposure to violence and the many other humanitarian issues affect the quality of schooling that can be provided. Again, British support to UNRWA has been fundamental in helping to keep the Palestinian education system moving in the right direction. I gently encourage the Minister to take a particular interest in that issue.

**Layla Moran:** As a Palestinian myself, I fully agree with the hon. Member about the value of education to a community that feels completely abandoned and let down. Will he join hon. Members across the House in condemning the fact that schools have been torn down by the Israeli Government illegally, and in saying again to the FCDO that we thank it for its support in saying that that is illegal, but that saying that and then doing nothing more about it is frankly a bit toothless?

**Gareth Thomas:** Any school being torn down, particularly in a developing country and particularly in the circumstances that the hon. Member describes, is devastating for the communities affected. We need to support the people of the Palestinian territories to get those schools back up, because education gives hope—it gives a route out of poverty and hope of a better future. Surely that is something that the whole House could row in behind.

I am privileged to have a very large Indian community in my constituency. India has seen huge growth and development over the past 20 years, with massive progress on access to education along the way, but there are still significant issues with access to the necessary quality of education on occasion. British development assistance

can help to provide support to address some of those issues, in particular by providing the ideas to improve them. Clearly that is done in partnership with the Indian authorities and other multilateral players.

The World Bank developed what is called the learning poverty indicator, which flags, as a key statistic for each country to be measured against, the proportion of 10-year-old children who are unable to read and understand a short, age-appropriate text. The World Bank’s ambition is that the number who cannot read and understand a short, age-appropriate text by the age of 10 should halve by 2030. That is a significant target that the UK should get behind. I suspect we will need an increase in development assistance to the World Bank to support that. I urge the Minister to look again at reversing the cut in funding to the World Bank as another way of addressing the challenges of access to education in developing countries.

4.55 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I start by declaring an interest. Last week, I went to Kenya with STOPAIDS and Unitaid to look at public health projects in and around Nairobi. The details are submitted and will appear on the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as soon as they can be processed.

I thank the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for securing this incredibly important debate. Liberal Democrats have always made the case for the UK to meet its commitments to the world’s poorest: it was we who proudly introduced, during the coalition Government, the private Member’s Bill that was adopted by the Conservative-led Government of the time to enshrine 0.7% in law.

Helping those most in need not only changes lives, but ensures that we build a stronger, safer and more sustainable world for us all. It is in our self-interest as much as theirs. That point seems to be missed constantly by this iteration of a Conservative Government, who have reneged on a promise in their own manifesto. They seemed to be very happy to keep others, but this one they were very happy to lose.

The scale of the cuts has been utterly eye-watering. In Lebanon, aid has been cut from £85 million to £13 million; in Ethiopia, a country dear to my heart—my family lived there for three years—aid has been cut from £350 million to £100 million; in Yemen, one of the most war-torn areas of crisis across the world, aid has been cut from £240 million to £100 million. These are huge sums. It is impossible to talk about these millions and billions of pounds that are being slashed.

What gets lost in debates is the stories of the individual people who are affected. Development is about helping the poorest and the most vulnerable around the world. Sometimes it is the smallest of actions that make the biggest impact—something as simple as providing a mug of porridge before school can help a young person to stay in school and receive a better education, and can transform their life. We are campaigning for that for children here, but it applies even more elsewhere, where the children have even less.

I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about the impact of the cuts, particularly on children’s health and education. I will start with a country-specific example,

in Malawi. Cuts to BRACED—the building resilience and adaptation to climate extremes and disaster programme—meant that budgets plummeted from £25 million in 2019 to just £5 million in 2022. Water Witness International, which also works in Malawi, reported that early warning systems funded by BRACED had failed in the run-up to Tropical Storm Ana in January 2022. In the wake of that storm, 84,000 people were displaced. The flooding exacerbated the outbreak of cholera; 1,160 children contracted the disease and 184 died. These cuts have had a real, tangible and mortal effect.

As I mentioned, I was in Nairobi last week and the power of education, particularly for women and girls, was plain to see. We visited a Government-run healthcare facility on the outskirts of the city and met women carrying their babies. All those women were miracles in their own right, because they were living with HIV. It was very moving.

One mother came over to talk to us. She could not wait to tell us her story. She said that she had received little education about HIV in school. She had got HIV from her second husband, after three children. She did not understand that the treatment was now so sophisticated that the viral load could be suppressed sufficiently to save her fourth child from getting HIV in the first place—she had no idea. It was possible only because of healthcare professionals, trained with money that we give via the Global Fund and the money put in by the Kenyan Government to fund community health workers and peers who were able to get that message across. It was really amazing.

**Florence Eshalomi:** Is the hon. Member aware that the UK was sadly one of the only countries to reduce its funding to the Global Fund, so the excellent work that she has just highlighted could be impacted further?

**Layla Moran:** The hon. Member is absolutely right. We want to celebrate the fact that we are a big donor. It is vital work that is literally saving lives, and it is such a shame that the funding is being cut.

The good work is not just in Kenya. The charity STiR Education does fantastic work in India and Uganda by supporting education systems through training and development for teachers. One teacher, Juliet, said after taking part in its programme:

“I have now fallen back in love with my job, and believe in helping my learners perform beyond their limits!”

But in March 2021, STiR was given just three weeks’ notice that the entire remainder of its FCDO grant was to be cut. It lost £828,000 with three weeks’ notice. It was forced to make a number of redundancies, cut back on its programme spending, move to smaller officers and postpone all salary increments and promotions. That all meant fewer resources available to help people like Juliet. The fundraising team worked hard, but that was just to keep STiR afloat—imagine what it could have done if it had that funding basis and could spend the fundraising money on doing even more work.

It is not just delivery of projects but research that is affected. Research and innovation is a vital part of the international development landscape and helps us to understand what kinds of interventions work, thereby making sure that projects deliver value for money, which I am sure the Government are very keen on.

**Matt Rodda:** The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the cuts have a terrible impact because there is not only the immediate impact on the specific project, but often a multiplier effect? The cuts are made very abruptly and, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, they affect other agencies, which may come from a faith or other background, as well as local groups. There is a dreadful multiplier effect that cascades through the aid and development provision in countries that often have a very great need to develop.

**Layla Moran:** When NGOs that are based here have had to make cuts, the in-country staff have usually faced the deepest and quickest cuts. That is a real shame, because it takes expertise out of that ecosystem.

The Government are clearly worried about value for money, and they should be, because our constituents are, too. The Institute of Development Studies, which is based in Sussex, carried out research into projects that work to support teachers, students and school communities in crisis-affected areas. The research found a measurable and sharp increase in the number of students in schools where ODA funding kept education free. Even research projects of that kind are now under threat. The Institute of Development Studies here in the UK has had its budget cut by 50%.

What does this all mean? The United Kingdom used to be an international development superpower, but the D in FCDO is silent. We hear it nowhere unless a debate such as this one is initiated by Back Benchers. It is clearly not a priority for this Government. The aid cuts continue to hit budgets in terms of research and project delivery.

The bottom line is that this is not just the moral, compassionate thing to do, but the smart thing to do. At a time when we should be more muscular on the world stage, we are retracting in all areas. The Liberal Democrats are proud of our record of championing international development and will continue to call for an immediate reinstatement of the 0.7% target that would deliver so much more that is appreciated around the world.

5.3 pm

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which I am pleased the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) secured.

The speech that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) has just made demonstrates the importance of MPs going on visits to see for themselves what is happening around the world. Although we are often criticised for such trips, they are really important so that we can get a grip on what is happening.

I recently benefited from a trip to Washington, where, as the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) will be pleased to know, I visited the World Bank and had a very good conversation with its representatives. I made the point to them that they must do better on selling their own message and making clear the outcomes from what the World Bank does. We have to acknowledge that the public have moved away from the view that large global organisations are automatically a force for good. Many people have formed the view that actually they just gobble up money and do not achieve outcomes.

[David Mundell]

I do not think that that is the case in relation to the World Bank, but it has to sell the outcomes that it achieves much more clearly, and we have a role in that.

I think Members of all parties actually did a very good job in relation to the Global Fund. I fully appreciate that hon. Members may think that the sum given was not enough, but let us be honest: it could have been less if it had not been for the active lobbying of many Members from all parties. I certainly believe that the Global Fund is the best way to deliver across the world in relation to malaria, HIV and TB, but we have to make the positive case for it.

As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned, I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS; I am also co-chair of the APPG on nutrition for development, which is the successor to the APPG on nutrition for growth. That APPG and others lobbied very effectively to ensure that the UK made a pledge to the nutrition for growth summit; it came right at the final hour, but the UK made a £1.5 billion pledge. That pledge, for which I will hold the Minister and indeed all FCDO Ministers to account, needs to be delivered, because, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall said, nutrition is at the heart of everything we deliver for young people and women. The statistics are very clear that if children are undernourished, they will not benefit from the school experience to the extent that they could. Nutrition has an impact on every aspect of what they are doing, and on every aspect of the support and development that we can provide.

I fully concur with what the hon. Lady said about HIV and AIDS. The battle is not over. The situation in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among women and children, is very concerning, and we must play our part in addressing it. I am very much looking forward to the opportunity to visit South Africa and see the situation on the ground, although I know that it is not positive.

**Layla Moran:** Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern about the impact of these cuts, particularly on the LGBT community? We know that there are Governments in sub-Saharan Africa who have moved politically in a direction that suggests that they will not be as open to funding programmes as they might previously have been, particularly with respect to men who have sex with men. I met a man who said that he had been taught at school that it was not possible to get AIDS, because they did not talk about men having sex with men. Surely this is an area in which our Government should be able to step in where other Governments may feel that politically they cannot?

**David Mundell:** I think our Government have a very good record on championing LGBT rights internationally. The most significant thing, as the APPG has recognised, is decriminalisation. The criminalisation of gay sex with men, and of sex workers, is the single biggest impediment to people getting the support that they need. I think this Government are taking forward as many measures as they can, but we have to continue to lobby in that regard to ensure that more is done, because the hon. Lady is right that this is a serious issue.

I am sure hon. Members welcome the fact that the International Development Committee is about to produce a report on ODA budget spending on refugees in the UK.

The current situation is not acceptable: every £1 that is spent on a hotel for a refugee is £1 less for HIV, for nutrition or even for the World Bank. That is not a situation that we can tolerate. As hon. Members, we must highlight it so that people fully understand the link between that budget and the international budget.

Finally, I commend what other hon. Members have said about the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. There is so much to be done, and we must play our full part.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** I call the SNP spokesperson.

5.10 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for securing this important debate.

The cumulative impact of covid-19, conflict, the climate crisis and poverty means that more children around the world need humanitarian assistance than at any time since the second world war. UNICEF recently provided an overview of the situation:

“Across the globe, children are facing a historic confluence of crises—from conflict and displacement to infectious disease outbreaks and soaring rates of malnutrition... Meanwhile, climate change is compounding the severity of these crises and unleashing new ones.”

In 2022 alone, children across the world have been affected by war and conflict in Ukraine, in Palestine, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in Tigray, in Afghanistan, in Myanmar and in Yemen. Then there are the climate-induced natural disasters: the floods in Pakistan, the drought in east Africa and the Sahel, the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, and the extreme tropical storms in the Philippines and in Latin and North America. It is children who are bearing the brunt of a planet in crisis, with millions struggling to survive.

Rather than rising to meet the challenges head on, the UK Government continue to oversee devastating cuts to the UK's overseas aid budgets. This Conservative Government like to portray themselves as a compassionate force helping the world's most vulnerable communities, but the reality is that they are falling far short of the image that they like to project. As we have heard, the Conservative party vowed in its 2019 manifesto to maintain official development assistance spending at 0.7% of gross national income, but in 2021 the Government cut their international aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5%—an overall cut of between £4 billion and £5 billion.

The effects on children's health and education of those cuts are extremely stark: 7.1 million children, including 3.7 million girls, are losing out on education, 5.3 million women and girls are losing access to modern family planning methods, and more than 11 million children, girls and women are losing out on nutritional support. Those examples are just a snapshot of the damage that these aid cuts have caused to children across the globe.

The FCDO's international development Minister, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), wants the UK to become a “development superpower”. His Department could achieve that very easily just by standing by the very Tory manifesto funding pledge on which the Government were elected. To spare even more children from being left behind in education and healthcare, the UK Government must urgently restore their aid budget to a 0.7% level. The SNP believes that that is a bare minimum requirement.

SNP Members wholeheartedly support increased funding for refugees and asylum seekers here in the UK, but it is completely unacceptable to divert money from ODA budgets for that purpose. Our unwavering support in Scotland and across the UK for those who are fleeing war and persecution in Ukraine, Afghanistan and elsewhere should not come at the expense of international development efforts. Instead, the ODA budget should be ringfenced for spending abroad, and the Home Office should be given increased funding to drastically improve its asylum processes.

We know that the system is broken. It needs to be fixed, and it needs the finance to fix it. The UK Government have already cut international health and medical funding during a global pandemic, cut food programmes during a global food security crisis, slashed environmental projects in the midst of a climate crisis, and reduced conflict resolution projects at a time of renewed war.

**Matt Rodda:** I commend the hon. Gentleman for his point about the current food crisis. One of the background points that are so important to today's debate is the dramatic increase in the cost of food, which is having a huge effect in many countries that have been mentioned today, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa and the middle east. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should be more mindful of the huge crisis that is facing so many people living in poverty around the world?

**Steven Bonnar:** I thank the hon. Member for his excellent intervention.

I agree wholeheartedly. The cost of food crisis is impacting on people in this country, let alone those in less developed countries across the world. He makes an excellent point.

The cuts to conflict resolution projects come at a time when the world has renewed war, as in the invasion of Ukraine. Those cuts have cost lives. The Government should not wait any longer before they reverse that devastating policy direction.

5.15 pm

**Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** It is an absolute honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for securing this important debate and for his absolutely excellent speech.

The past two years have shown us just how damaging and dangerous a short-term approach to aid can be. So many Government decisions have caused havoc with children's lives, including slashing the aid budget, suspending so-called "non-essential" aid payments just last July, allowing the Home Office to consume £1 billion in aid in 2021—£1 billion going to the Home Office—and, let us not forget, the badly managed merger of the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development.

All those decisions will continue to cause catastrophic damage to children's lives in some of the poorest parts of the world. The cuts have let down children in Yemen, where there are regular outbreaks of cholera and more than 9 million children lack access to safe water. They have let down millions of children in Bangladesh, where floods and cyclones cause devastation year in, year out. There have been impacts in so many other countries

across the world, but I am the shadow Minister for Africa, so it will be no surprise that today I want to focus on that beautiful continent that has so much to offer.

Africa is home to 60% of the poorest people in the world, but aid budgets for the continent have been cut dramatically. African countries experience climate disaster, poverty, child malnutrition and conflict, but they were not spared from those cuts—and we know it is children who pay the biggest price.

Only this month, we have seen reports that the funding cut to a climate disasters response programme has contributed to a major cholera epidemic in Malawi. The epidemic has so far killed more than 1,000 people, including 184 children, but it gets worse. Funding to prevent catastrophic levels of death by starvation has also been slashed. In 2017, UK funding to support people in Somalia and the wider region during the famine was £861 million. Late last year, one person was dying of hunger every 36 seconds in the horn of Africa due to drought. We now expect a sixth failed rainy season—the region's longest drought in four decades. Millions of young children are badly malnourished, but I fear that the Government's response has been truly abysmal: they are providing only a fifth of the support that they gave in 2017.

Hunger has an especially damaging impact on children. It is likely that thousands of children died of hunger last year in Somalia. It is not an easy death. Parents had to watch their malnourished babies die in agony, and then the exhausted mothers buried their children at the side of the road as they continued a frantic search for food and water. Even when children survive malnutrition, it marks them for life, causing permanent, widespread damage to their health and development. Hunger makes children more vulnerable to a raft of illnesses and diseases and can cause permanent blindness. Malnutrition affects brain development, and even when children manage to get to school in areas of mass hunger, hungry children simply cannot learn. A desperately hungry child is far more vulnerable to recruitment by armed gangs if those groups can offer them food, and much more vulnerable to child marriage—and we know where that can lead.

We have a moral argument for wealthier northern countries to help developing nations. Now, let us take that moral argument away, just for a while. It is so short-sighted not to understand that our prosperity as a nation and our ability to tackle climate damage are reliant on the economic growth of the African continent and on our partnerships with it. By 2030, nearly half of the world's young will be living in Africa. African children will shape our future. Labour recognises that when we talk about development support. We know that overseas aid has to happen within a long-term and sustainable plan if it is to be effective. There is no room for opaque decisions or last-minute announcements, and no room for wasteful spending by the Home Office. It needs to get a grip. Labour will put an end to this chaos.

**Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair):** Order. The shadow Minister knows that she has only five minutes. She has already run over to six, which reduces the time for the Minister. I am afraid that it is now the turn of the Minister.

5.21 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):**

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Bone, and I am sorry that the shadow Minister was cut off in her prime. I have a huge amount of respect for her, and our friendship extends outside this room as well, so I am sure that our conversation will continue. She makes important points. Indeed, everyone has made important points. This is an important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on securing it. It is unusual for me to debate with him on this subject; just a few months ago we had quite a few exchanges on the Floor of the House on matters related to the Department for Work and Pensions. It is good to see him in what I consider an unfamiliar setting, but this is clearly, for him, a subject close to his heart. He made his points incredibly well.

Those who know the subject area well will know that our Minister for Development and Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would normally respond to this debate. He is in country, travelling on his ministerial duties, not the least of which was a recent visit to Turkey, where he thanked international partners and UK responders for their amazing work in response to the terrible tragedy in Turkey and Syria. We all thank them. Tomorrow there is another debate on that, which I think some of us will look forward to. It will highlight the important work that has gone on.

I am grateful for the contributions to the debate, and I will endeavour to respond to the points that have been made. Given the economic impacts of the pandemic and Russia's barbaric attack on Ukraine, the UK's aid budget currently sits at around 0.5% of gross national income. That equated to over £11 billion in 2021, and we are proud to remain one of the world's biggest aid donors. Over the last 18 months, the UK has provided enormous support to people fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine and seeking sanctuary in the UK. Across the House, people will recognise that those are huge priorities. However, it has not come across so loudly in the debate—I understand that there will be political differences—that that support has without a doubt placed significant pressure on the aid budget. It has placed significant pressure on some of our communities. I think any right-minded person would recognise that these are incredibly challenging circumstances. Among those challenging points, the good news is that the Treasury has provided an extra £2.5 billion of official development assistance over two years—£1 billion in 2022-23 and £1.5 billion in 2023-24.

**Layla Moran:** Will the Minister give way?

**David Rutley:** Yes, but only once, because we need to crack on.

**Layla Moran:** Does the Minister accept that the point about a percentage is that as the economy shrank, the amount of money was always going to shrink? The issue with taking it down to 0.5% is that it was an even greater cut, but it is wrong to say that the money was not always going to decrease to recognise the pressures on our communities as well.

**David Rutley:** We have been through the pandemic, which has conveniently not been talked about in this debate. That has had a huge impact on public finances. Some really difficult choices had to be made; it would have been the same for whoever was in government at the time. I think we can all recognise that. Even with this extra money, we are having to make difficult decisions. That was the point I was making in response to the contributions today.

Our decisions and approach to spending are guided by the international development strategy. That means focusing our work on the priorities set out in the strategy, including, as many hon. Members have highlighted, women and girls and global health. We will do that in a way that maximises the positive impact of the available resources and our ability to respond to emerging issues, which is important. As the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) highlighted, it has meant that we have been able to respond to the cholera outbreak in Malawi with £500,000 of funding and an emergency medical team. We want to be agile; we have that support available in Turkey and Syria as well.

We continue to support work through multilateral organisations, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. That point was raised by my colleague—my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)—and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi). We want to make sure that we can empower UK development experts across the world to recommend which bilateral programmes to prioritise.

There has been a lot of talk in this debate about 0.7%. That was an important contribution from the Conservative-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats. We remain absolutely committed to protecting the most vulnerable and to returning to spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA as soon as the fiscal situation allows. Those conditions have been set out by the Government. In terms of the reductions of the ODA budget, we will ensure that we focus on the poorest and most vulnerable, the humanitarian programmes and supporting women and girls, which fits neatly with many of the priorities that have been raised today.

Our work around the world is helping to improve children's health and delivering on our commitment to end preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children by 2030. Health remains a key priority for our development assistance. Through our £340 million core voluntary commitment to the World Health Organisation, we are strengthening primary healthcare services, which are the first port of call when a child becomes sick.

As part of the Nutrition for Growth summit in December 2021, we pledged to spend at least £1.5 billion between 2022 and 2030 to improve the nutrition of mothers, babies and children. In recognising that immunisation is one of the most effective ways to protect a child's health, we have committed £1.65 billion to support Gavi's core mission between 2021 and 2025—the biggest contribution by any donor. We have heard about the important Global Fund. We pledged a further £1.5 billion to that fund, which will protect children and families from HIV, tuberculosis and malaria and prevent over 28 million new infections. We remain the third largest ever public donor to the Global Fund—a point made by my right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale.



We use our position on the global stage and work with our partners to support innovative approaches to ending preventable child deaths and ensuring that children can thrive. We co-led a landmark joint statement with 71 signatories at the UN General Assembly, committing to protect and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights and bodily autonomy.

A key priority is our work on global education, and we continue to stand up for the right of every girl everywhere to access 12 years of quality learning. Although we have had to make difficult decisions, we have prioritised programmes giving direct support to children's learning. We have mitigated the impacts of budget reductions by reprofiling or delaying spend where possible, rather than cancelling education programmes, with a view to scaling them up in future years if further funds become available.

We are committed to improving health and education for the poorest children in the world. We remain a world leader not only through our financial support, but through

our partnerships, expertise and, of course, civil society, such as Churches, faith groups and others that have been highlighted today. It is a comprehensive approach that helps to improve the lives of millions of people around the world.

5.29 pm

**Matt Rodda:** Once again, it has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank Members across the House for taking part in what has been an important and detailed debate covering a wide range of aspects of this issue. I hope the Minister will take back the messages from today to his colleagues and will think about how we can get back on track with the 0.7% target.

5.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 22 February 2023

## DEFENCE

### War Pension Scheme Upating 2023

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** The new rates of war pensions and allowances proposed from April 2023 are set out in the tables below. The annual uprating of war pensions and allowances for 2023 will take place from the week beginning 10 April. Rates for 2023 are increasing by 10.1% in accordance with the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the autumn statement on 17 November 2022.

#### War pensions rates

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	RATES 2022 £	RATES 2023 £
<b>WAR PENSIONS</b>		
Disablement Pension (100% rates)		
officer (£ per annum)	10,436.00	11,490.00
other ranks (weekly amount)	200.00	220.20
Age allowances payable from age 65		
40%-50%	13.35	14.70
over 50% but not over 70%	20.60	22.70
over 70% but not over 90%	29.30	32.25
over 90%	41.20	45.40
Disablement gratuity (one-off payment)		
specified minor injury (min.)	1,274.00	1,403.00
specified minor injury (max.)	9,513.00	10,474.00
1 - 5% gratuity	3,181.00	3,502.00
6 -14% gratuity	7,072.00	7,786.00
15-19% gratuity	12,369.00	13,618.00
<b>SUPPLEMENTARY ALLOWANCES</b>		
Unemployability allowance		
Personal	123.60	136.10
adult dependency increase	68.70	75.65
increase for first child	16.00	17.60
increase for subsequent children	18.75	20.65
Invalidity allowance		
higher rate	24.45	26.90
middle rate	16.00	17.60
lower rate	8.00	8.80
Constant attendance allowance		
exceptional rate	151.00	166.20
intermediate rate	113.25	124.65
full day rate	75.50	83.10
part-day rate	37.75	41.55

(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	RATES 2022 £	RATES 2023 £
Comforts allowance		
higher rate	32.50	35.80
lower rate	16.25	17.90
Mobility supplement	72.00	79.25
Allowance for lowered standard of occupation (maximum)	75.44	83.04
Therapeutic earnings limit (annual rate)	7,904.00	8,684.00
Exceptionally severe disablement allowance	75.50	83.10
Severe disablement occupational allowance	37.75	41.55
Clothing allowance (£ per annum)	258.00	284.00
Education allowance (£ per annum) (max)	120.00	120.00
<b>WIDOW(ER)S BENEFITS</b>		
Widow(er)s' - other ranks (basic with children) (weekly amount)	151.70	167.00
Widow(er) - Officer higher rate both wars (basic with children) (£ per annum)	8,068.00	8,883.00
Childless widow(er)s' u-40 (other ranks) (weekly amount)	36.34	40.01
Widow(er) - Officer lower rate both wars (£ per annum)	2,802.00	3,085.00
Supplementary Pension	101.49	111.74
Age allowance		
(a) age 65 to 69	17.30	19.05
(b) age 70 to 79	33.25	36.60
(c) age 80 and over	49.35	54.35
Children's allowance		
Increase for first child	23.80	26.20
Increase for subsequent children	26.50	29.20
Orphan's pension		
Increase for first child	27.25	30.00
Increase for subsequent children	29.80	32.80
Unmarried dependant living as spouse (max)	149.35	164.65
Rent allowance (maximum)	57.10	62.85
Adult orphan's pension (maximum)	116.60	128.40

[HCWS573]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: UK Delegation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** Baroness Sater has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of the Earl of Dundee.

[HCWS574]





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