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

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 24 April 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 24 April 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

*The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Order, 19 April, and Standing Order No.3).*

## Deputy Speaker's Statement

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I wish to inform the House that Mr Speaker has received a letter from the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), informing Mr Speaker of his resignation as Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. The Chair is therefore now vacant. Mr Speaker will announce arrangements for the election of a new Chair in due course.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WORK AND PENSIONS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Pre-1997 Non-indexed Occupational Pensions

1. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What support he provides to people whose pre-1997 occupational pensions are not subject to indexation. [904565]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott):** You will notice, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am not the Secretary of State. He sends his apologies as he is currently travelling back from the G7 in Japan, but we will endeavour to do a reasonable job in his absence.

Pre-1997, as the hon. Gentleman knows, occupational pension defined-benefit schemes were not required to be indexed. I emphasise that defined-contribution schemes, which most people are on today, are also, obviously, not required to be indexed.

**Justin Madders:** As we know, inflation is racing ahead at the moment, and more and more pensioners who are members of occupational pension schemes with pre-1997 service that has not been index linked, and those who are part of the Pension Protection Fund, are noticing the difference. Will the Department carry out an audit of how many people are being affected by those rules, and by how much?

**Laura Trott:** Those rules were in place for a large period of the last Labour Government, and if Labour Members were interested in changing them, I suggest they should have done so at the time.

### Social Security Recipients: Employment and Earnings

2. **Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help increase the future employment and earnings potential of people receiving social security benefits. [904566]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** We have comprehensive support in place to help Department for Work and Pensions claimants to secure, stay and succeed in work, including in-work progression, youth hubs and targeted support for people of all ages. In addition, there is a comprehensive package in the Budget to assist each and every one.

**Florence Eshalomi:** I thank the Minister for his response. My constituents in Vauxhall have seen food prices go up by nearly 20%, their household bills go through the roof, and their already high rents going up, in some cases by up to 16.5%. That is while real-terms pay has been falling for 18 months. How does the Minister propose to give workers in Vauxhall, and those on benefits, a real pay rise?

**Guy Opperman:** A whole host of things are being done on in-work progression. More importantly, vacancies have fallen for nine successive quarters, employment is up, the claimant count is down, economic inactivity has fallen, and disability employment is up. All those things are helping the hon. Lady's constituents, and all other constituents up and down the country.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly support the efforts that my hon. Friend is making to boost in-work progression. After all, the original vision behind universal credit was to see more people on benefits earning more and increasing their income over time. Does he agree that one key to the success of this, alongside tailored and relevant training, is better contracts? Research seems to show that a claimant on a permanent contract does significantly better with in-work progression than those on zero-hours or temporary contracts.

**Guy Opperman:** My right hon. Friend makes a number of very good points. He is a former Secretary of State in this Department, and has great wisdom on this issue. The main thing that the Department is doing is providing the in-work progression offer, which assists people who are in work and trying to progress to greater hours and full-time work. We are also fully in support of greater training, whether through sector-based work academies or the skills bootcamps, to allow people to have permanent long-term contracts, and enable them to thrive and survive in a better way.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): The Department's recently published research on sanctions, including those relating to in-work conditionality, show that sanctions have a negative impact on claimant earnings. How will the Minister take account of those findings in setting future sanctions policy?

**Guy Opperman:** We want to encourage claimants to comply with reasonable requirements, which are set and agreed with their work coach in the claimant commitment. That will continue on an ongoing basis, and I see no change to that.

### Disabled People: Benefits System Support

3. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to support disabled people through the benefits system. [904567]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove)**: Our recent White Paper sets out our ambitions to create a better experience for disabled people when applying for, and receiving, health and disability benefits. Our proposals will transform support, so more disabled people can start, stay and succeed in work.

**Theresa Villiers**: A disabled constituent who came to my advice surgery recently described the many hurdles she had to go through to get welfare support. She felt stigmatised by the whole process and was subjected to really frustrating delays, so I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to reform assessments and improve the way the benefits system works to help disabled people get the support they need without it feeling like a battle.

**Tom Pursglove**: I really appreciate my right hon. Friend highlighting the concerns raised with her by her constituent. I know she supports the fundamental change we are determined to bring about, whereby we will focus more on what people can do. We will remove what is a structural barrier to work: the impediment that means people feel prevented from trying work because of the fear that if it does not work out they will lose their entitlement and have to go back through a re-application and reassessment processes. I hope she will welcome the steps we are taking, for example to link expert assessors with particular conditions to help us to get decisions right first time, as well as the commitment we have made to reduce the assessment burden more generally.

**Sir Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): The experiences of the constituent of the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) are, unfortunately, far too common. The assessments disabled people go through often go badly wrong and the great majority of appeals against refusal succeed. It all causes immense and unnecessary anxiety for disabled people. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions recommended that all assessments should be recorded to help put things right. The assessment providers all support that recommendation. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that he will give that recommendation very serious and sympathetic consideration?

**Tom Pursglove**: I am always grateful for the opportunity to hear from the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee. It is important to recognise that both the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), and I are set to appear before the Committee next week. What I will not do this afternoon is make specific commitments, but I can say—I have said this regularly now, including in the many conversations we have had with disabled people and various stakeholders that we want to work constructively to get the reforms right. This is the biggest set of welfare reforms for over a decade, so I am very willing to consider all views about how we can improve processes.

Of course, people are able to make recordings of assessments at the moment, but we should look at that. I am very willing to do that, and to come back to the Committee formally.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I call the shadow Minister.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): On a recent call with stakeholders in the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department revealed that only 11 individuals had so far been included in the severe disability test group, which, as the Minister knows, is aimed at simplifying the application process for those with the most severe disabilities and health conditions. Worryingly, there also appears to be very little clarity about the definition of severe disability. Despite that, the Department signalled that it was preparing to further roll out the group. Can the Minister confirm today whether that number is correct, provide further information on which individuals qualify, and confirm when the Department will start the roll-out?

**Tom Pursglove**: What I am certainly very willing to do is to provide further detail to the shadow Minister, separate from this afternoon's proceedings. I am absolutely clear that the severe disability group has an important role to play, recognising the challenging conditions people have and that, for many, those conditions will not improve. I am keen to reduce the reassessment burden on people wherever we can, streamline processes, and ensure that people feel properly supported and properly cared for during the course of those processes. That is the right step to take. I am determined that we get this right. Exactly as I said just now, I want to work collaboratively and constructively as we move forward with the White Paper reforms. We have made commitments to test and trial various things, and we will get on and do that.

### Pensioners in Poverty

4. **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in poverty. [904568]

19. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of pensioners living in poverty. [904585]

21. **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in poverty. [904588]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott)**: In 2022, there were 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty than in 2010.

**Holly Lynch**: Mr Brooke from my constituency is nearly 70. He contacted me when his application for pension credit was rejected on the basis that he is £2.55 over the threshold, which rules him out of not only pension credit but any other associated benefit. Mr Brooke signed off his letter to me saying:

"I just can't afford to live. Yours, Truly Broken".

What are this Government doing to help people such as Mr Brooke in that incredibly difficult position?

**Laura Trott:** I appreciate the hon. Lady's raising that case. I encourage her—I am sure she has already—to check whether her constituent would be eligible for housing benefit in her constituency. That is not necessarily linked to pension credit, although it automatically passes. We are doing other things to support pensioners in those situations—the pensioner cost of living payment was received by 8 million pensioner households over the winter, and will be repeated this year.

**Patricia Gibson:** The UK already has the lowest state pension as a proportion of pre-retirement wages in north-west Europe. Independent Age has highlighted that 5% of pensioner couples and 19% of single pensioners have no source of income other than state pension or any associated potential benefits. Will the Minister finally take action to address pensioner poverty and shockingly low state pensions relative to most of Europe?

**Laura Trott:** We challenge those figures, as the hon. Lady knows. I point her to the record increase in state pension that we have just introduced—10.1% for both the state pension and pension credit. That will make a real difference to pensioner poverty levels, alongside the cost of living payments that are going out this year—£900 for pensioners on pension credit and £300 for all pensioner households.

**Samantha Dixon:** Two weeks ago I visited West Cheshire Foodbank in my constituency, where volunteers told me that for the first time a couple who were both pensioners had turned up in tears because they could not afford the cost of living and the basics. The Government have failed to fix the issues with pension credit uptake, with over a third of those entitled not claiming. Given that there are 400,000 more pensioners in poverty today than when Labour left office, why should the pensioners be forced to visit the food bank in Chester trust a Government who have repeatedly let them down?

**Laura Trott:** I am sorry to hear about the pensioners involved. If they are eligible for pension credit and not claiming, I assume the hon. Lady is helping them. As a Department we are happy to give any assistance to those individuals. We are doing all we can to boost pension credit uptake. There was a campaign before Christmas, which I am sure she was part of, to get people to claim the cost of living payment, which we will repeat this year. We saw a 177% increase in claims just before Christmas. There will also be the pension credit week of action for the summer on 12 to 16 June, which I hope many hon. Members will take part in.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Ministers agitated for us all to get involved in the campaign to extend the uptake of pension credit. Has the Minister any innovative plans that will make it easier for us to do so, such as toolkits and the like?

**Laura Trott:** Absolutely. I am also looking at what more we can do to use data from housing benefit and from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to make it easier to target people for a claim. Working together, we can make a real difference in the number of pension credit claimants in this country.

### Support into Work: People over 50

5. **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people aged over 50 into work. [904569]

15. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people aged over 50 into work. [904580]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** The Government's 50-plus plan and our offer to help older workers return to work are being rolled out. That includes more intensive tailored support for eligible jobseekers, 37 full-time 50-plus champions, delivery of the mid-life MOT in jobcentres, online and with the private sector pilot project, and multiple older worker job fairs up and down the country.

**Angela Richardson:** I thank the Secretary of State, who I know cannot be here today, for his visit to a mid-life MOT session for the over-50s at the brilliant jobcentre in Guildford. I was incredibly impressed with everyone I saw participating in that session. Will the Minister join me in welcoming this Government's belief that no one is ever too old to retrain and start a new career?

**Guy Opperman:** In common with anybody who is over 40, which I confess to, I think we should support all older workers in whatever shape or form—I certainly want to do so. I particularly recommend the Guildford jobs fair for older workers that is taking place in May, which I know my hon. Friend will try to support and which her constituents should go along to as well.

**Bob Blackman:** I declare an interest in the issue of older workers.

In addition to encouraging people who are 50-plus to get into work, it is also important that employers understand that such people have immense experience and capability to add to their organisations. What more is the Minister going to do to ensure that companies, and all sorts of employers, take the opportunity to employ older workers, as they can provide great benefit to their firms?

**Guy Opperman:** I promised my hon. Friend I would not mention the 6-1 drubbing that his beloved Spurs received from Newcastle United yesterday, albeit that Spurs are obviously looking for a 50-plus manager of quality to go forward.

More seriously, there has been much that employers are doing. I know my hon. Friend's two local jobcentres in Harrow East are working together with Stanmore College and local employers to try to drive forward older workers.

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): Almost 700,000 women over 50 are currently on long-term sick leave. Many are recorded as having depression or anxiety, with no consideration being given to the menopause as the primary factor. What consideration has been given to offering menopause awareness training to occupational health specialists, to enable them to better support women back into work?

**Guy Opperman:** The hon. Lady raises a serious and important point. She will know that the Department has appointed Helen Tomlinson as its first ever menopause employment champion, and we are working on persuading employers to develop menopause-friendly policies. I know the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), is particularly working on this issue and will be delighted to work with the hon. Lady to address this very important point.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Like the Minister, the closest I can get to 40 is No. 40, where I live.

Helping over-50s to get back into some form of employment allows them to boost their savings and increase their quality of life in retirement. I know the Minister is keen to engage with people in Northern Ireland, so what discussions has he had with the Department for Communities at the Northern Ireland Assembly, so that those who have ability, talent and energy can find employment? There are many opportunities to do just that.

**Guy Opperman:** I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman says. He knows I am attempting to visit Northern Ireland on 15 May, subject to Whips and slips and all that fun and games. The point has duly been noted, I am sure. The simple point is that we are engaging with the team in Northern Ireland as much as we possibly can, and trying to roll out the good work we are doing on the mainland as much as possible in Northern Ireland. I will engage with him further, hopefully when I come to see him in May.

**Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con):** Does the Minister agree that this Government are committed to supporting over-50s, including those in Ynys Môn, into work? Will he join me in thanking Tony Potter and the brilliant Anglesey DWP team, who are working with me to host a jobs fair for over-50s in Holyhead town hall soon?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Minister.

**Guy Opperman:** Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend was kind enough to host me in Llangefni only a couple of weeks ago, when I met Mr Potter and all the DWP team working on the island. They are doing a fantastic job. We should be very proud of the work they are doing to address both mainstream employment and older-worker employment. I am sorry I cannot be at the jobs fair for older workers that she is hosting, but I encourage everyone on the island to go along to that.

#### **Personal Independence Payments: Application Process**

6. **Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to simplify the application process for personal independence payments. [904570]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** The health transformation programme is modernising the entire personal independence payments service, including the application process, to improve the claimant experience and ensure the service meets the needs of claimants over the longer term.

**Mark Pawsey:** I thank the Minister for his answer, but my constituent Gary Thacker was diagnosed with autism later in life and, despite the assistance of a friend, it took him many hours to complete his PIP form. I know the Minister has introduced a variety of formal methods of assistance, which are provided by organisations such as Citizens Advice, but Mr Thacker was unaware of those. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to make sure applicants know about the levels of support that are available?

**Tom Pursglove:** It is fair to say that the Department offers support according to ability and according to need. For the very vulnerable and in exceptional cases, we are able to refer claimants not only to visiting officers, but to the forms completion service. If my hon. Friend provides me with more details about his case, I will be happy to take a look, but I hope I can reassure him by saying that we are looking to digitalise the personal independence payment journey. That is currently in testing; it should help to provide greater signposting within the processes and towards other support for which people may be eligible, which I think is really welcome. I hope that he will welcome it, too.

**Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab):** In February, a survey carried out by the charity Mind and Censuswide found that 66% of people with a mental health issue who had experience of the benefits assessment system discovered that it made their mental health worse. The majority of negative decisions that make it to a tribunal are eventually overturned. When does the Minister expect an improvement in decision making and in the impact on people's mental health?

**Tom Pursglove:** I certainly think that journey times are an important factor. We want to provide certainty as quickly as possible in relation to people's claims. Waiting times for PIP claims have come down very considerably, and the PIP journey is certainly shorter than in the pre-pandemic period. As I have said, I genuinely believe that there is a significant opportunity, through the reforms that we are introducing in the White Paper, to focus on quality decision making. Reducing the assessment burden will help us to get decisions right the first time, as will matching people who have particular conditions with assessors with the right expertise.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op):** The Minister's proposal to essentially collapse the work capability assessment into the PIP assessment means that up to 1 million people who have fluctuating health conditions, or who may be recovering from treatment, could lose out on up to £350 a month. That is causing considerable distress, and it will not actually get anyone back to work now. Why does he not adopt instead the policy that we have put forward, which is supported by the Centre for Social Justice: to change the work capability assessment rules and offer an "into work guarantee" for those with no work requirements? Is he content to leave 700,000 sick and disabled people who want to work blocked from journeying into work?

**Tom Pursglove:** No. What this Government are doing is making sure that we support people into work. We are removing the structural impediment to getting into the workplace. We believe that scrapping the work capability assessment is the right thing to do; we have had many debates about the issue in this House over the years, and we think that we are responding properly to the feedback we received on the Green Paper proposals. There was a strong message that people wanted to see that happening, and we will get on and deliver it. We will focus on quality decision making and on making sure that people are transitionally protected. There may, for example, be people not currently claiming the PIP who will be entitled to it; I would always encourage people to access the benefits to which they are entitled.

I must say that it is rather surprising to hear the shadow Secretary of State's comments today, given what one newspaper has written:

"Disability benefits changes: Labour pledges to scrap reforms but shadow minister holds back details".

Where are Labour's plans?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesman.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I can certainly assure the House that SNP Members will not be trumpeting ideas advocated by right-wing think-tanks such as the Centre for Social Justice.

The health and disability White Paper introduces a new universal credit health element, with eligibility through PIP that could be far more restrictive than work capability assessments. Indeed, the Tories' new in-work progression offer will inevitably mean exposure to sanctions for disabled people. Given that the Department's own published report, which it tried to keep under wraps for many years, shows what we knew all along—that sanctions do not work—why will the Minister not finally do the right thing and just scrap them?

**Tom Pursglove:** May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his marathon time yesterday? He put in an impressive effort. I know the training, commitment and dedication that go into running a marathon, so I congratulate him on it.

I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the Centre for Social Justice. I think that these are genuinely common-sense reforms that reflect the feedback that we received from disabled people and from their representative bodies. We will work with them to make sure that we get this right. Replacing the work capability assessment is the right thing to do, recognising that we want to concentrate more on what people can do than on what they cannot do, and doing so on a tailored, individual basis.

Of course we know that more than 20% of disabled people could start work within the next two years, and that they want to do so and, with the right support, would. We think that the right way of dealing with that, and supporting that employment, is to work constructively with them on plans which work, meeting their circumstances and needs. That is what the Budget announcements were all about. There is good practice out there, and we want to extend it.

## Universal Credit Recipients: Food Banks

**7. Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): If his Department will make an assessment of the reasons for which families in receipt of universal credit use food banks. [904571]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** The DWP does not assess the reasons why families may use food banks, but we do understand the pressures that they face as a result of the cost of living, and have therefore increased benefits by 10.1% this month. That is in addition to the increase in the national living wage to £10.42 an hour, and the provision of more than £11 billion in cost of living payments.

**Gerald Jones:** Food banks in my constituency and across the country are struggling to deal with demand. More than 40% of people using them are in work, and they are used by one in six children whose families receive universal credit. Meanwhile, the local housing allowance remains frozen and the five-week wait for universal credit is increasing debt. All those factors contributed to the reason why one of the food banks in my constituency nearly closed its doors last week, namely that it had no food to give out. Can the Minister tell me what else the Government will do to support families? It seems that there is very little understanding of the scale of the problem that the country is facing, let alone a willingness to do something about it.

**Mims Davies:** Let me draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the household support fund, which will provide an additional £50 million to help families in Wales through difficult times. The hon. Gentleman's constituents who are in need will also be pleased to know that the next stage of the cost of living payments will begin tomorrow, with £301 being paid to households between then and 17 May. The DWP will be issuing further communications about those payments.

We have heard today about social tariffs and other ways in which people can obtain support and reduce their bills. The Help for Households website, which I commend to everyone, provides information about assistance with childcare, travel, energy and household costs, and about income support. It will help the hon. Gentleman's constituents and, indeed, all our constituents.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has just said that the DWP did not assess the reasons for which people are using food banks. Perhaps she will go back to her private office after this and ask her officials to look into whether people are using them because the Government cut universal credit by £20 a week, and cut it in real terms last year. Perhaps she could ask her officials whether it is because the DWP is taking deductions from universal credit payments every week. Perhaps she could ask the DWP if it is because earnings are worth less than they were in 2007. Perhaps she could ask the DWP whether it is because the Government have raised the taxes on working people. Perhaps she could ask the DWP whether it is because

the Government crashed the economy and sent mortgages and rents through the roof. Perhaps she could ask the DWP whether more people are using food banks because that is the price of 13 years of economic failure.

**Mims Davies:** May I remind the hon. Gentleman of Labour's 10p tax rate, and the fact that we have doubled tax-free allowances? *[Interruption.]* Food banks are important. They are independent charitable organisations where people in local communities can support each other. *[Interruption.]* This is a great example of the generosity of spirit in our communities. *[Interruption.]* If this mattered to the hon. Gentleman, perhaps he would listen to my response rather than chuntering from the Front Bench.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that we take the issue of food security very seriously. That is why we added the internationally used food security questions to the "Family Resources Survey: financial year 2019 to 2020". The new statistics on usage will help the Government to understand more about the characteristics of the people who are most in need, and we will continue to do what we pledged to do and are proving to do in supporting the most vulnerable.

#### Child Poverty

8. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What steps he is taking to reduce child poverty. [904572]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** This Government believe that work is the best route out of poverty for families and we are supporting parents to progress, to stay in work and to be better off. That was shown in our spring Budget, which will deliver an ambitious package of measures, across Government, to support people to enter into work, increase their working hours and extend their working lives. We have also raised benefits and benefit cap levels by 10.1% and we are providing those further cost of living payments, which commence tomorrow.

**Hywel Williams:** Have the two-child limit and the benefit cap increased child poverty?

**Mims Davies:** The reality of the policy that the hon. Gentleman mentions is about fairness for the taxpayers who support the most vulnerable and making sure that we have a welfare and benefit system that works. We will spend around £276 billion through the welfare system in 2023-24, including £124 billion on people of working age. I would again point people towards the cost of living website and the benefits calculator on gov.uk and I would ask him to note that the benefit cap was raised this year as well.

#### Carers: Health and Disability White Paper

9. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the importance of the role of carers in implementing the health and disability White Paper. [904573]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** Unpaid carers can play a vital role in supporting disabled people to live active lives, including through working when they are able to do so. The White Paper sets out how we will create a better experience

for disabled people, people with health conditions and their carers when applying for and receiving health and disability benefits.

**Dr Evans:** I am grateful for the Minister's answers, because carers are integral to looking after people up and down the country, especially with an ageing population who are living longer and with more frequent and difficult disabilities. Will he make sure that they are at the centre of the White Paper, because if this policy is to succeed, we need to support our unpaid carers.

**Tom Pursglove:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The insight and experience of carers and their feedback were invaluable through the Green Paper process in helping us to come up with our final White Paper proposals. As we move forward into the implementation stage, it is key that we continue to sustain that engagement and focus on meeting the aspirations of carers and the disabled people they care for. I also want to look at this issue from the other end of the telescope, in looking at what more we can do to support those with caring responsibilities to access employment if they want to do so, because from a health and wellbeing perspective, there is real value for them in that too.

#### Job Vacancies: Rother Valley

10. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help fill job vacancies in Rother Valley constituency. [904574]

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** The jobcentres across Rother Valley have been doing some amazing work to fill local vacancies and bring greater employment to the local area. Our Budget package of enhanced care support for working parents and investment in people with disabilities and long-term health conditions will make a massive difference, on top of the sector-based work academies and skills boot camps that are available for further training.

**Alexander Stafford:** I thank the Minister for that answer. Obviously, jobs are one of the most important ways of getting people out of poverty and growing household incomes. That is why I held three job fairs last year and sent a leaflet round to every constituent telling them how to get job opportunities in Rother Valley. Another job fair is coming up next month, aimed at older people and young people coming into employment, and I would be grateful if the Minister could come along. Getting older people over the age of 50 and younger people who are just leaving school into jobs is incredibly important. What further steps are this Government taking to ensure that younger people and older people have great job opportunities?

**Guy Opperman:** I think my hon. Friend has the record for the most job fairs and doing the greatest amount of work I know with the local DWP. He is doing a fantastic job as a doughty champion for Rother Valley and I support the work he is doing. There is no doubt that, whether it is through the youth hubs making a massive difference to younger workers, the older persons' jobs fairs being held up and down the country or the hundreds of jobs fairs that have been held since the Budget last year, we are massively driving things forward to ensure that in Rother Valley and across the wider country we have much greater employment.



**Personal Independence Payments:  
People with Disabilities**

11. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What assessment has his Department made of the adequacy of personal independence payments for people with disabilities. [904576]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove)**: No assessment has been made of the adequacy of PIP for people with disabilities. PIP is intended to provide a contribution towards paying for the additional costs faced by disabled people. Individuals then have a choice and flexibility in prioritising according to their needs.

**Wera Hobhouse**: A report by the Work and Pensions Committee found that people experience “psychological distress” due to the health assessment required as part of the PIP application process. Many of my Bath constituents feel the process does not reflect their needs and are concerned about the lack of support—some of those issues were covered by earlier questions. The Government have promised to trial the use of specialist assessors with knowledge of specific health conditions. Can the Minister please clarify which conditions are covered and how the assessors are being trained?

**Tom Pursglove**: When we are able, we will set out more detail of the relevant conditions and the approach we will take in delivering on this commitment. I raised the issue in my conversations with officials this morning, because I am keen to progress this as quickly as possible. I see real benefit and value in matching assessors with specialisms to people with particular conditions. It is clear from the feedback that people believe this will make a significant difference. Along the lines I set out earlier, we want to reduce PIP journey times as much as feasibly possible, and I want to make sure that we get more decisions right first time and that we focus on quality, which is precisely what the reforms will do. We will share further detail with the House when we are able to do so.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have a bedbound constituent who relies on food banks and is unable to do basic tasks such as getting herself dressed and collecting food. She has two young children who are happy to take on these tasks, yet she has been told that her PIP assessment will take four months. How can the Minister justify families having to rely on food banks while they wait for a PIP assessment? What will he do to change this?

**Tom Pursglove**: Again, I refer to my earlier remarks on the steps we are taking to improve PIP journey times as far as possible. I am keen for the hon. Lady to share the details with me so that I can ask officials to look at this specific case. I want people to have certainty on their PIP claim as quickly as possible, as people require this important help. I would always encourage people to apply for PIP if they believe they might be eligible. If she provides me with those details, I will gladly look at them as a priority.

**Pensioners: Cost of Living**

12. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help pensioners with increases in the cost of living. [904577]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott)**: This month, pensioners received the largest ever cash increase to the state pension and pension credit. In addition, all pensioner households will receive a £300 cost of living payment. The Government are committed to helping pensioners with the cost of living.

**Kevin Foster**: I thank the Minister for her answer. One of the best ways to help pensioners with the cost of living is to ensure that everyone claims the pension credit to which they are entitled. What work is she doing to engage with the high street banks on their more vulnerable customers who are over the state pension age, both to identify those who might be missing out and to facilitate applications for pension credit, which can make a vital difference?

**Laura Trott**: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the vital role that high street banks play in interacting with vulnerable pensioners and vulnerable customers. Organisations such as Virgin Money and HSBC have worked to promote pension credit uptake. I will be working with them and a variety of other stakeholders as we build up to the cost of living payment deadline on 19 May and the inaugural DWP pension credit awareness week on 12 to 16 June.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Pension credit continues to be a serious issue, with £1.7 billion going unclaimed each year. Will the Minister introduce an effective strategy in the coming year, perhaps following some of the initiatives we see in Scotland, to make sure everyone gets what they are entitled to in these very difficult times?

**Laura Trott**: The Department for Work and Pensions is straining every sinew because this is incredibly important to us, and to me. We need to make sure we are doing all we can to reach those vulnerable customers. We have done a nationwide advertising campaign, which the hon. Gentleman may have seen. We are doing a lot in the build-up to 19 May, and I want to work with everyone in the House to make sure we use Members of Parliament as much as possible to reach out to vulnerable pensioners in our constituencies.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I call the shadow Minister.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): The price of food is rising by 30%, yet the Government are continuing to fail pensioners at this very difficult time: nearly 200,000 women in their 80s have been underpaid for years because of errors at the DWP; hundreds of thousands of pensioners are missing out on pension credit, as we have heard; and when pensioners do get their pension credit application in, it can take up to three months for officials in the Department to process a claim. When will the Government finally tackle this appalling pattern of failure?

**Laura Trott:** Labour put up pensions by 75p. We put them up by nearly £20. We are doing all that we can to support pensioners, and they know that we have got their backs.

#### Disabled Jobseekers: Support at Jobcentres

13. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure disabled jobseekers can access specialist support at jobcentres. [904578]

16. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure disabled jobseekers can access specialist support at jobcentres. [904582]

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** Disability employment advisers have expertise on how to help disabled jobseekers into work and build work coach skills to help these claimants. That is in addition to broader support, including our increased work coach support, the Work and Health programme and intensive, personalised employment support.

**Marsha De Cordova:** Successive Tory Governments have failed to reduce the multiple barriers facing disabled people entering work. Research by Sense has found that disabled jobseekers say that they do not have the support and equipment they need to look for work, and it is vital that every jobcentre across this country is accessible and has essential pieces of assistive technology so that disabled people can find and apply for work. If this Government want to finally get serious about reducing the disability employment gap, which remains at about 30%, will they commit today to a jobcentre assistive technology fund to support disabled people to look for work?

**Tom Pursglove:** I categorically reject the initial point made in the hon. Lady's question. The fact is that this Government set a target of getting 1 million more disabled people into work and we met it five years early, but now we must go further. That is precisely why we have brought forward the reforms in the White Paper, which we genuinely believe will remove that structural barrier to work. We will have the packages of support alongside this, which I believe people will want to engage with, because they are aspirational and want to enter the workplace. We will never ask people to do anything that is not appropriate for them. We will work on an individualised, case-by-case basis to support customers. Of course, it is absolutely right that we make sure that our services are as accessible as possible, and that is the whole thrust of the reform. The health model officers are helping us to test what works, and we will continue to work along those lines. I hope she will want to work with me, in the spirit of partnership, to make this a success.

**Nigel Mills:** One frustration for disabled people occurs when they have an assessment that identifies what support or adaptations they need in order to go into work and then that support is never actually available or employers cannot provide it. Is there some source of optimism to be found in the funds and the changes announced in the spring Budget that support will be lined up in advance, so that people can take a job when one is offered to them?

**Tom Pursglove:** It is really welcome that the whole of Government are focused on what more we can do to support disabled people and people with health conditions into work, if that is appropriate for them. That was reflected in the commitments that the Chancellor made on the Work Well programme and on universal support. Of course, we are also introducing additional work coach time into jobcentres, the latest tranche of which will go live this week in another third of jobcentres. Those are really important steps forward. Alongside initiatives such as Access to Work and Disability Confident, we have the opportunity to transform matters in our society to make our workplaces more inclusive and, on a tailored, individualised basis, not only to support people into a role, but to help them retain it.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The DWP uses private company Maximus to assess benefit eligibility for a number of people in the claims process. That includes responsibility for deciding on former mineworkers' entitlement to industrial disablement benefits. What training and qualification requirements are there for Maximus assessors making these potentially life-changing decisions that affect so many of my constituents?

**Tom Pursglove:** Continual quality assurance processes are in place that monitor and keep tabs on the quality of the decisions made by any of the assessment providers that work with the Department. Of course, we always keep that under constant review. If there are specific issues that the hon. Lady is keen for Ministers to look at, I would be very happy to do that. She knows that I am always willing to work collaboratively and constructively along those lines. If there is feedback about areas where she or her constituents feel that improvements could be made, including on responsiveness, I would be happy to look at that. I also go back to the point I made about the reforms earlier, where, for example, the work we are doing to try to match expert assessors with conditions will really help to improve people's confidence in decision making, as well as build capacity and performance.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [904590] **Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Employment (Guy Opperman):** Normally, the Secretary of State would make a statement at this stage, but, on behalf of the whole ministerial team, I will say just two things. First, overall, measures from the Department for Work and Pensions in the Budget represent an investment of £3.5 billion over five years to boost workforce participation. That includes: £2 billion of investment in support for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions on top of the Health and Disability White Paper; £900 million investment in support for parents; £70 million investment in support for the over-50s; and £485 million investment in support for unemployed people and people on universal credit and working fewer than full-time hours.

Secondly, DWP Ministers had the great honour of working with the amazing Len Goodman, who sadly passed away over the weekend. The pension credit video that he filmed with me last summer for the annual

Pension Credit Awareness Day in June was the most successful piece of communications that we have ever done on this issue and massively boosted pension credit applications. I can tell the House that, throughout the day's filming, he was kind, immensely professional, totally polite and a delight to work with, and he still had all the dance moves even at his age. He will be sadly missed by this House and by his many fans around the country. Our thoughts, prayers and condolences go out to his family.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am sure the whole House will join the Minister and others in remembering with fondness Len Goodman and in sending our good wishes to his family and friends.

**Amy Callaghan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. On Thursday, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) visited One Parent Families Scotland. The young single parents we met were outraged and upset about the young parent penalty, as they are receiving less universal credit than older parents. Does the Minister care to explain why he feels that younger parents are worth less than those who are over 25?

**Guy Opperman:** We do not feel that in any way whatsoever. I will write to the hon. Lady setting out the legal and statutory basis behind the policy.

T2. [904591] **Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con):** A key area that we need to consider is people who have a diagnosis and then try to return to work. One way that we can solve this is potentially having DWP or jobcentre workers in primary care to help support people from diagnosis to desk. Is that something that Ministers will consider in the White Paper?

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove):** My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate of the join-up between health and work, and work as a determinant of better health outcomes for people. It is important to note that a number of jobcentres and Health Model Offices have work coaches working with GP surgeries to provide employment support to customers with health conditions. That is a valuable approach, and we are determined that the Work Well partnerships programme that was announced in the Budget will build on this to design an integrated approach to work and health with that proper join-up on the ground reflective and responsive to local needs. I shall take on board his observation as we look to shape that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** We on the Labour Benches join you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the Minister in the tribute to Len Goodman, and we think of all his loved ones today. He was not just a national treasure, but someone who helped to put money in pensioners' pockets, which is where it belongs.

The local elections are next week, so people will be thinking of the fortunes of their towns or cities. In many places, unemployment is not low, as the Minister has said, but high. In Blackpool, for example, one constituency has unemployment at an excruciating 8%. What about that chronic poor performance should be rewarded at the ballot box next week?

**Guy Opperman:** We all know that unemployment is always higher when the Labour party leaves office. The hon. Lady might care to listen to a few key points: vacancies have fallen for nine successive quarters; employment is up; payroll employment is at a record high; claimant count is down; economic inactivity has fallen; disability employment is up by 1.3 million over the past five years; and, as for Blackpool, massive work is being done there. She will be aware of the intervention by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which has been working very hard across Government to transform the fortunes of Blackpool, with record investment—something that definitely did not happen when Labour was in Government.

T3. [904592] **Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con):** A few weeks ago, I visited Tools with a Mission, a 40-year-old charity in Ipswich with 70 or 80 local volunteers. It takes old, disused and discarded tools, the volunteers work incredibly hard to make them as good as new and those tools are sent to developing countries, where they make a tremendous difference—Zambia and Uganda are two examples. But the impact does not stop there; there is a local impact also. Many of the volunteers are of pensionable age or have recently retired; their involvement in the charity gives them a great sense of purpose and community, and the charity's work with many individuals with educational needs has helped them to go on with the skills they have learned at the charity to get full-time jobs elsewhere. Will the Minister join me in applauding that work, and work with me to find funding to enhance what the charity is doing?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):** Local charities play an important role in providing support in our communities. I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend's constituency later this month to see what Combat2Coffee can do to support veterans and their families, and I hope to take a keen interest in Tools with a Mission too, if possible.

**David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP):** When he appeared before the Select Committee in November, the Secretary of State said that,

"the more transparency there is, the better. It informs public debate and allows a feedback loop for the Department. It is all part of holding us to account and that is extremely important".

In light of that and in the spirit of the Department's new approach to transparency, can the Minister provide me with figures on how many DWP staff are themselves reliant on universal credit?

**Mims Davies:** I know the hon. Gentleman takes a particular interest in transparency. I work strongly on the Department's behalf, with the Minister in the Lords, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman with a response.

T4. [904593] **Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con):** I welcome the measures in the Budget to encourage over-50s back into work, harnessing their experience and skills. I also notice that the Department has signed the Age-friendly Employer pledge—I have signed my office up too. What is being done to promote the scheme more widely among employers to encourage them to do the same?

**Guy Opperman:** We are doing huge amounts of work to encourage over-50s employment. My hon. Friend refers to the pledge, and we encourage all employers up and down the country to sign up, to participate in the mid-life MOT, to embrace older workers' fairs and generally to accept that older workers have a great deal to offer.

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): Some 5,260 women in Liverpool, West Derby have been affected by the changes made to the women's state pension age, and many have contacted me about the devastating impact it has had on their lives. What consideration has the Minister given to early-day motion 1040 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth), which calls for an alternative dispute resolution process, including representatives of the 3.8 million women affected, to address the injustices they have been through?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Laura Trott):** The hon. Gentleman will know that state pension age equalisation has been the policy of successive Governments since 1995.

T5. [904594] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): As the Minister will know, the Disability Confident scheme is a great way for employers to support people into work. What is the Minister doing to ensure that local councils such as Torbay Council are setting an example to other employers in their area?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am hugely appreciative of my hon. Friend, who is a passionate advocate of Disability Confident. I would hope that local authorities would want to engage with the scheme and set the example that they would like to see businesses and other organisations in their communities follow. I know he has good conversations on this question with Councillor David Thomas, the leader of the Conservative group, who I hope may be in a position in a few weeks' time to help set the standard in the Torbay area and blaze a trail for Disability Confident at Torbay Council.

T9. [904598] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Do Ministers think it acceptable that thousands of women who have been underpaid their state pensions will be forced to wait until the end of 2024 to see that error addressed?

**Laura Trott:** We have massively increased the number of people working on that at the moment. We are undertaking work against scams, we are prioritising cases in which the recipient is alive, and we will try to get that done by the end of the year. I am accelerating that as much as I can. I am very aware that it is a problem.

T7. [904596] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): This month has seen the uplifting of pensions and benefits by 10.1%, but what more is the Department doing to ensure that people in my constituency and around the country get the maximum that they are entitled to and, therefore, take up pension credit?

**Laura Trott:** I thank my hon. Friend for all that he is doing to encourage pension credit take-up in Crawley. The Government have undertaken a sustained communications

campaign to raise awareness of pension credit and promote its take-up. The latest stats release at the start of the year shows a substantial rise in the number of claims.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): My constituent had a brain injury 20 years ago and was receiving personal independence payment for care and mobility support. A recent review said that there was no change to his condition, but somehow the decision has been made to stop his benefits. The Minister has already indicated that he is considering this matter, but will he meet me to discuss that particular case?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am always very happy to meet colleagues from across the House to discuss such issues, and this circumstance is no different.

T8. [904597] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): We must do more to tackle delinquent parents who do not pay child maintenance. When can we expect the home curfew powers to come into effect, and how many people do we expect to be subject to them?

**Mims Davies:** Enforcement action is used as a last resort when a parent is failing to pay their maintenance payments and other action has failed. Home detention is a powerful deterrent and, as such, we would expect usage to be low—perhaps less than 10 cases a year on average. I know that my hon. Friend focuses on this matter. The Child Maintenance Service continues to explore how existing powers can be used to encourage compliant behaviours and facilitate constructive relationships between parents to ensure that, importantly, financial support reaches the children for whom they are responsible.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): A new Work and Pensions Committee report on the health assessments for disability benefits such as PIP and employment support allowance has found that “issues or errors” in the DWP health assessment system have, in some ways, contributed to the deaths of claimants. What assurances can the Minister give the House that those issues and errors will not continue to kill our disabled constituents?

**Tom Pursglove:** We take those matters incredibly seriously, which is why we have internal process reviews in the Department to look at them. We have serious case panels constituted by senior leaders from within the Department, and the independent case examiner, for example. Where there are issues and learning that must be taken on board, that must always happen. This is structured through that. We will look very carefully and closely at the Select Committee report, and we will, of course, respond appropriately in the normal way. The hon. Gentleman can be absolutely assured that these processes must always be looked at carefully, and that any learning is taken on board and acted on.

T10. [904599] **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The apprenticeship levy can play a significant part in improving economic activity rates, but some employers—particularly small employers—find the process through which they draw down and seek support to be somewhat unwieldy. Although the policy is led by other Departments, it has direct relevance to the Department

for Work and Pensions. Will the Minister agree to engage with the Department for Education and the Treasury on how the apprenticeship levy can be made more relevant to small employers?

**Guy Opperman:** The apprenticeship levy has been a fantastic success, but as Employment Minister, I am conscious that there is widespread concern among small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly smaller businesses, that there should be greater flexibility going forward, building on what we are already doing. I am very happy to meet my right hon. Friend and Ministers in the Departments that control the policy to discuss any improvements.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On 19 April last year, the Equality and Human Rights Commission informed the Government that it was issuing a section 23 agreement against them under the Equality Act 2006, in response to serious concerns regarding discrimination against sick and disabled people. Twelve months on, that agreement still has not been reached. When will it be reached and why has it taken so long?

**Tom Pursglove:** I cannot give the hon. Lady a definitive conclusion date, but what I can say is that we have entered into a phase of advanced discussions with the Equality and Human Rights Commission. We will come forward with further detail as soon as we are able to do that, and the process will be concluded in the proper way.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work to his place. I look forward to working closely with him on the review into autism and employment, which we have embarked upon this very month. What further measures will the Government take to close the appalling gap in employment, such that only two in 10 adults with autism are currently in work?

**Tom Pursglove:** It is fair to say that we have had a good debate this afternoon about the whole host of initiatives that we as a Government are determined to take forward to shift the dial and make meaningful improvements to support more disabled people and people with health conditions into work, and autism is no different. I am delighted that my right hon. and learned Friend has agreed to take on this review on behalf of the Government. I look forward to his bringing forward recommendations, suggested areas for improvement and initiatives that we might want to embark on, focusing on knowledge and responsiveness, seizing the opportunity for workplaces to unlock the talent that undoubtedly exists out there, and helping to improve people's lives for the better.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** For the final topical question, I call Stewart Malcolm McDonald.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The use and abuse of unpaid work trials continues to grow, despite the Government's guidance published a couple of years ago urging employers not to use them. Given that the guidance clearly is not cutting through, will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss what legislation might look like?

**Guy Opperman:** I am not sure I totally accept the premise of the hon. Member's argument, but if he writes to me with the details of what he is asserting, I will certainly consider it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** That concludes questions, so we now come to the urgent question. I will pause for a moment to allow the turmoil of people leaving to settle down, but I would be grateful if Members left quickly and quietly.

## List of Ministers' Interests and Ministerial Code

3.36 pm

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the register of ministerial interests and the ministerial code.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart)**: I am pleased to confirm that the latest list of Ministers' interests was published last week on 19 April by the Prime Minister's independent adviser on Ministers' interests, Sir Laurie Magnus. The list has been deposited in the Library of the House and is also available online on gov.uk.

I note that the hon. Lady's question talks of a register of ministerial interests. I am afraid that I must point out, for the sake of clarity, that that is not an accurate term. It is important that I provide a little explanation about the list, what it contains and the role it performs. The ministerial code makes it clear that

"Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises, or could reasonably be perceived to arise, between their public duties and their private interests, financial or otherwise."

It is their personal responsibility

"to decide whether and what action is needed to avoid a conflict or the perception of a conflict, taking account of advice received from their Permanent Secretary and the Independent Adviser on Ministers' interests."

On appointment, each Minister makes a declaration of all interests. They remain under an obligation to keep that declaration up to date throughout their time in office. Ministers are encouraged to make the fullest possible disclosure relating to themselves, their spouses and partners, and close family members, even where matters may not necessarily be relevant. The information supplied is then reviewed and advised upon by their permanent secretary and also by the independent adviser. Where needed, steps are taken to avoid or mitigate any potential conflicts of interest. That is the process by which Ministers' interests are managed. It is thorough and ongoing, and it provides individual advice to all Ministers that reflects their circumstances and responsibilities.

Twice a year, a list is published, covering those interests that are judged by the independent adviser to be relevant to each Minister's portfolio. The list is not a register. It is designed to be read alongside the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which is maintained by this House, and the register of Members' interests that operates in the other place. For that reason, the list does not generally duplicate the information that is available in the registers.

The independent adviser, Sir Laurie Magnus, makes it clear in his introduction to the list published last week that it would not be appropriate for all the information gathered as part of the ministerial interests process to be made public. He states that such a move would

"represent an excessive degree of intrusion into the private affairs of ministers that would be unreasonable, particularly in respect of"

hon. Members' families. I am sure hon. Members will understand that the system is designed to gather the fullest amount of information, provided in confidence, so that the most effective advice can be given.

All Ministers of the Crown uphold the system that I have described. That is true for all Ministers, from the Prime Minister, who has been clear that all his interests have been declared in the usual way, all the way down to, and including, an assistant Whip. In the latest list, the independent adviser highlights the importance of Ministers and their permanent secretaries remaining alert in the context of their respective portfolios if Ministers' interests change. That is, of course, right. Importantly, though, Sir Laurie Magnus provides his opinion as independent adviser on Ministers' interests that

"any actual, potential and perceived conflicts have been, or are in the process of being, resolved".

**Wendy Chamberlain**: When he was appointed, the Prime Minister promised that he would govern with integrity. He went inside No. 10 and his first act was to appoint Ministers. Of that cohort, three have now departed in controversy, including two in relation to allegations of bullying.

One thing the Prime Minister did not do at that time was publish an updated list of ministerial interests. It was finally released last week, 320 days after the last publication. That list does not include the interests of Ministers from the past year who have either been dismissed or resigned, such as the right hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). That means that, on my count, there are almost 120 missing registrations from that period. Nor is there any setting out of what is referred to by the ethics adviser in his introduction to the list as

"actual, potential and perceived conflicts"

that are

"in the process of being...resolved".

I hope the Minister can give more clarity on that situation.

Will the Minister accept the ethics adviser's statement that a Minister's interests are only clear when reading the ministerial list and the MPs' register together? That is difficult to do, with one being published monthly and the other twice a year, or—as we have found—much less frequently. Members rightly disclose their interests regularly, because transparency is essential. The Leader of the House promised swift action to strengthen the system and agreed to consider more regular reporting. The publication last week suggests that she has failed in that effort to provide more transparency, so will the Government end this undemocratic two-tier system and bring publication forward to every 28 days, and will they publish the missing interests of former Ministers? It is absurd to think that had the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), resigned just three days earlier, we would never have been told what his interests were during his time as Justice Secretary.

Registration of ministerial interests is a key principle of the ministerial code; so, too, are behavioural standards. Last week, the former Deputy Prime Minister was found to have bullied civil servants in line with the definition under the code. According to the independent report, he acted in a way that was "intimidating" and "involved an abuse or misuse of power in a way that undermines or humiliates",

but Ministers have remained silent. Will the Government therefore publish any advice the Prime Minister was given on conduct before appointing the former Deputy

Prime Minister? Is it the view of the Government that the former Deputy Prime Minister did breach the ministerial code? Will the Minister affirm that there is a duty on Ministers under the code to uphold the impartiality of the civil service, and will he accordingly affirm that impartiality today? Finally, does he acknowledge that the Government's silence is deeply damaging and demoralising for hard-working officials?

**Alex Burghart:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware that Sir Laurie Magnus, who took up his post in December, has said that he will return to the regular cycle of publications. This list is his—he has oversight of it. It would be wrong if the Government were to interfere in that process, and we will obviously continue to engage fully with him to make sure that the list is up to date and reflects the ongoing interests of Ministers, so that the system can operate effectively.

On the point that the hon. Lady makes about the former Deputy Prime Minister, she will know from listening to previous statements and debates in this House that no formal allegations were made against my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) before the Prime Minister appointed him. The moment those formal allegations were made, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister agreed that there should be an independent investigation. Adam Tolley KC conducted his investigation, and the Deputy Prime Minister then resigned.

On the hon. Lady's point about civil service impartiality, of course we accept and respect civil service impartiality. It is one of the things that makes government work so effectively in this country.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The Minister will agree that there is much more openness and transparency now than 13 years ago. Through him, can I put it to the Prime Minister that Sir Laurie Magnus should be asked each year whether he would like to write a public letter to the Prime Minister on how the system is working, and any changes or improvements he would like to see made?

**Alex Burghart:** I thank the Father of the House for his long view on these things, and I am sure that Sir Laurie will have heard his remarks.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question. Last week, the Prime Minister saw a third senior Minister resign in disgrace, jumping because he was not pushed. Can the Minister confirm that the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), did break the ministerial code? Did the Government know of or approve his statements blaming the victims, which appeared before the official findings of the report? Can the Minister say whether he agrees with the brave victims who came forward for that report, or with the former Deputy Prime Minister himself, that unacceptable bullying and misconduct took place? Does he think that the former Deputy Prime Minister should apologise to victims?

We also saw the list of ministerial interests miraculously appear just minutes before Prime Minister's questions. Can the Minister say whether the Prime Minister declared his financial interest in Koru Kids as a Minister and as Chancellor before he became Prime Minister? Will the Minister meet his own commitment to more regular updates of the ministerial interests list and put it on the same basis as the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which is published fortnightly while the House is sitting? The Ministers' list seems to be annual. Will the Prime Minister finally introduce an independent adviser with the power to launch their own investigations? Have all the recommendations of the Boardman review been implemented? How many of the recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life report have been implemented? A recent audit by Spotlight on Corruption revealed that, 18 months after both reviews were published, just 7% of the recommendations have been implemented.

While the Government have been preoccupied with yet more Tory psychodrama, working people are still battling the worst cost of living crisis for a generation. Labour is focused on cutting the cost of living, cutting crime and cutting waiting lists with our long-term plan to give Britain its future back. Has not this past week proved beyond doubt that it is time for a Government laser-focused on delivering for Britain, instead of one mired in misconduct?

**Alex Burghart:** I will take the hon. Lady's questions in reverse. This Government are absolutely committed to tackling the cost of living crisis. It is because of that that the Prime Minister's No. 1 preoccupation is ensuring that inflation comes down. Without inflation coming down, we cannot have growth, and without growth we cannot have more money for our public services. The Labour party would do very well to support us in that endeavour, otherwise we will fall into exactly the same trap that it fell into in the 1970s, where unions chase pay, pay chases inflation and the economy cannot grow for 10 years.

On the point that the hon. Lady made about the Prime Minister's declarations, I draw her attention to the remarks made by the previous independent adviser Lord Geidt, who said that the Prime Minister had been "assiduous" in declaring all his relevant ministerial interests in all his roles. The Prime Minister personally asked Lord Geidt to look into that, and Lord Geidt was satisfied, as, it must be said, is Laurie Magnus likewise. On her remarks about the former Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), I draw her attention to the fact that in his letter to the Prime Minister last week, the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"I am genuinely sorry for any stress or offence that officials felt".

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

**Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): It surely cannot be beyond the wit of man, notwithstanding the constitutional differences between Members of Parliament and members of the Government, that some form of co-operation might not be devised by talking to one another. Might I make the suggestion to my hon. Friend, who is one of the ablest Ministers in the Cabinet Office,

that he would be just the person to reach out in such circumstances, so that some degree of co-operation and co-ordination on this issue might be found?

**Alex Burghart:** My hon. Friend is an assiduous student of the constitution, the workings of this place and the Cabinet Office, and he will know that, while it is very important that we have separate lists, it is also within the remit of anybody who wishes to pick up those two separate reports—the list and the register—to compare them and to draw their conclusions, as necessary.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):** We have ministerial declarations—interests list—that are updated not timeously, if they are updated at all. Will the Minister ensure that all ministerial declarations are published, not just those of Ministers who happen to have been sitting in the hot seat when the music stopped? We have Ministers and the Prime Minister announcing policy to the press first on a regular basis. The Prime Minister has lost numerous Ministers as a result of code breaches and there are various investigations ongoing. It seems that Ministers are happy to carry on erring until the point—beyond the point, in fact—that they are caught and until the point that the investigation finally reports and they finally choose to resign. What is the point in having a ministerial code if Ministers do not abide by either the letter or the spirit of that code, and continually breach it?

**Alex Burghart:** I think the hon. Lady is arguing for no due process. The moment that formal allegations were made against the former Deputy Prime Minister, both he and the Prime Minister decided it would be necessary to call an independent investigation into the Deputy Prime Minister's conduct. That was conducted by a leading KC and, following the conclusion, the Deputy Prime Minister resigned. The alternative would have been to have no investigation at all—no independent assessment—and in our opinion that would have been wrong.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** How swiftly will the Government act to reduce the time in which complaints about ministerial behaviour can be made?

**Alex Burghart:** My right hon. Friend is a lover of brevity, and the truth is that he will have seen in the Prime Minister's letter to the former Deputy Prime Minister that it is necessary to make sure any "shortcomings in the historic process" are addressed. He has asked the Cabinet Office to look at that and we intend to do so swiftly.

**Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** But the system that we came into this Parliament with only works if the Prime Minister has integrity and he does not keep ignoring the adviser on ministerial interests and the reports that they come up with into things like bullying by Cabinet Ministers. The fact is that we have had two of those advisers resign because their reports were not followed, and that has led to the ministerial list of interests being unavailable to the public for many, many months and many, many more changes of Government. That is completely unsatisfactory. Does the Minister not therefore agree that we need a much more rigorous,

transparent system that does not rely on the honour of Prime Ministers, which can now no longer be counted upon?

**Alex Burghart:** I hope that the hon. Lady was not suggesting that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was dishonourable, because I think that would have been out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, I am sure she will appreciate that the former independent adviser Lord Geidt said that the Prime Minister had been "assiduous" in his reporting. The report—the list—published by Sir Laurie Magnus just a few days ago suggests that he has been likewise in this return, as have all Ministers, and that wherever any perceived conflicts of interest have been found, they are being dealt with.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I want to just make absolutely certain that nothing has been said that ought not to have been said. I totally trust the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) not to have said anything that she should not have said, but just let me make it clear to the House as a whole that, when we are discussing a sensitive subject such as this in particular, moderation is important and that reputations are important. I am sure the hon. Lady was indeed moderate in her use of words, as the Minister has been. I just want to make sure everybody else is.

**Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con):** The ministerial code is, of course, there to regulate the broader aspects of ministerial behaviour, not just financial interests—that tends to be the issue that the House gets really concerned about, but actually it is the broader behaviours that are more important. Given that we have had such a turbulent 18 months with regard to the code, will my hon. Friend, or the Prime Minister, consider rebooting it and focus on exactly the values that we expect of Ministers? Specifically, could I invite him to clarify that the ministerial code is very important when Ministers are deploying their operational responsibilities?

**Alex Burghart:** The ministerial code is obviously a bedrock of the way the Government operate and, on my hon. Friend's point about operations, she is right. One reason the code exists is in order to give guidance to Ministers in that regard.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Of course the Minister is defending the status quo—that's his job—but I gently suggest that the whole system of the ministerial code is now bust. It does not fit with the parliamentary code of conduct. There are lesser rules for Ministers than there are for ordinary Back-Bench MPs. The new list, which was published only last week, is already an inaccurate list of Ministers, let alone a list of ministerial interests. It seems bizarre that a Minister would declare something to their Department and to the adviser, who would then say, "Oh yes, but we're not going to bother telling the public about that." Surely the time has come to have a new system for the whole ministerial code that is truly independent, so that the Prime Minister does not make the ultimate decision, others make an independent decision on when there has been a breach of the code, and we unite the two codes—the ministerial code and the code of conduct—because all Ministers have to be members of one or other House.



**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Gentleman is a powerful advocate for the approach he has outlined. On his point about examples of declarations of interest that might be made to a permanent secretary that may not be relevant—*[Interruption.]* If he gives me a moment, I will come to an example. For example, a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs may declare that their brother-in-law works in a company producing electric car parts in their declaration of interest form. That will be considered by the permanent secretary and the independent adviser. That may not be included in the published list, on the ground that it would be unlikely to present a conflict in relation to a DEFRA portfolio. It also would not be relevant to the register of the Minister's parliamentary interests. If the Minister then moved to the Department for Transport, the Department for Business and Trade, or the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the interest would become more relevant and would be much more likely to be published in a list. I use that lengthy and exciting example to outline to the hon. Gentleman that the two things are not the same. The list and the register are different and are there for different reasons. They operate in different ways and consequently have different rules pertaining to them.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): If we are serious about supporting and defending the independence and sagacity of our senior civil servants—I certainly am and I know my hon. Friend is—their advice on whether something should be in the public domain or not should surely be enough. Otherwise, it is a direct challenge to the authority of those senior civil servants to whom a Minister is making a declaration. Does the Minister agree with that? Does he also agree that the clue is in the title—a blind trust is just that?

**Alex Burghart:** Absolutely. A blind trust must be a blind trust. On my hon. Friend's point about the integrity of official advice to Ministers, absolutely, our system requires officials to be able to give advice candidly and freely, safe in the knowledge that it will not routinely be disclosed.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): In our Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report into the Greensill affair, we suggested:

“The Government should outline the range of sanctions and indicative examples of breaches to which they might apply. Without this, the suspicion is that the only determinant of the level of sanction will be political expediency.”

In the discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister last week, was he offered a range of sanctions with regard to the breach of the ministerial code before he resigned?

**Alex Burghart:** I was not party to those discussions, so I am unable to say.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The transparency provided by the list is important, which is why I welcome its publication. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the Opposition should follow the Government's lead on transparency, and publish details of all meetings and contacts that they had with senior civil servant Sue Gray before her appointment as Labour party chief of staff?

**Alex Burghart:** Like my hon. Friend, I await that publication.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): When the new, latest Prime Minister took charge, he promised integrity, professionalism and accountability, but after yet more sleaze and scandal was exposed by investigative journalists, and just minutes before Prime Minister's questions, the register of interests was miraculously updated to include shares in Koru Kids which is owned by the Prime Minister's wife, who would end up benefiting significantly from her husband's policy changes. So, does the Minister not agree—*[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I warned Members earlier to be careful about what they say on this sensitive subject. There are certain matters which are sub judice or quasi-sub judice.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab) Under investigation.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** My honourable helper here tells me that they are under investigation. When I said quasi-sub judice, that is what I meant, but I suppose I should not have said it all in Latin. I will say it in English: under investigation. I would be grateful if the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhese) would be general in his question.

**Mr Dhese:** Thank you for that advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the Minister not agree that we now have a Prime Minister who has to be forced—compelled, if not embarrassed—into showing any sort of transparency?

**Alex Burghart:** Absolutely not.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): When Sir Laurie Magnus gave evidence to PACAC on the compliance of Ministers with the ministerial code, he said:

“I think you have to rely on their honesty, their compliance with the seven principles of public life and their recognising that if they are to have the privilege of a ministerial position, they have to comply with the expected standards.”

What can we do in this place when they do not?

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Gentleman, I am sure, as a member of PACAC, will have read Sir Laurie Magnus's list, published last week, in which he outlines that Ministers are doing what they are expected to do and that permanent secretaries are helping them to do so.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): There are so many loopholes in the regulatory system for all the codes of conduct, but in that of the ministerial code in particular. The so-called Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests is anything but independent, and unable to initiate their own investigations or to decide on what sanctions are appropriate. When will the Government adopt my Elected Representatives (Codes of Conduct) Bill, which I introduced at the beginning of the year to close the existing loopholes?

**Alex Burghart:** With all due respect to the hon. Lady, it is completely the case that the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests is independent. He is independent and he conducts his duties accordingly in that role.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The problem the Minister has is that there is a pattern with the Prime Minister: he has already been fined for not wearing a seatbelt and for breaching covid rules, and he is currently being investigated over allegations about his registering of interests. Now, in an unprecedented move, it has been reported that the investigation has been widened because of allegations that it was discussed in public. Can the Minister explain why this Prime Minister, sadly much like his predecessor but one, seems to be—*[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I made it very, very clear in the past five minutes that questions were to be general and not refer to the investigation. I said it loudly and clearly. If the hon. Lady wants to ask a very brief general question, she may do so.

**Patricia Gibson:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I apologise. I tried to make my comments general by simply talking about allegations. I was talking about allegations, not about any investigation.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Let us make this absolutely clear. An allegation made in public in this House is a very serious matter and it has consequences. I will give the hon. Lady one more chance to ask a brief general question.

**Patricia Gibson:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was simply going to ask the Minister if he can explain why he thinks the Prime Minister seems so accident prone when it comes to running his Government?

**Alex Burghart:** The Prime Minister is doing an excellent job of delivering on the people's priorities. Scottish National party Members want to be very careful before picking up rocks in their glasshouse.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): We had the fast track for covid contracts, where people did not have to be a Conservative party member or donor—but it didn't half help—to get a contract. We have had Ministers having to resign over various misconducts. We have had gaps in their declarations of interest, and now we have this investigation into the Prime Minister. That is a fact:

that is happening. Does the Minister not think it is time that we had an independent ethics investigator who could look into these matters? Regardless of who is in government, the public's view is that these things bring down our politics. Should we not all work together to clean it up and make sure that there is an independent investigator with power to independently investigate?

**Alex Burghart:** We have an independent adviser and a ministerial code. This Government are delivering on the Prime Minister's commitment to integrity and professionalism.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The last word, as ever, goes to Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his clarification and the answers that he is trying to deliver. Will he further outline whether clear guidance will be issued on what constitutes a conflict of interest and how far that extends, to ensure that this House does not continue to consider these matters with the current greyness?

**Alex Burghart:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to Sir Laurie Magnus's report and list published last week. The process by which it is decided what conflicts Ministers might have is in conjunction with ministerial declarations, the permanent secretary and the independent adviser.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for what you said earlier. It is important for the Standards Committee and the commissioner to be able to do their work that we do not refer—preferably anywhere but certainly not in the Chamber—to ongoing investigations by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman is right, and I am pleased that he has made that point of order. It requires no answer from me other than to agree. Members ought to act honourably when they speak in the House—and everywhere—and not try to get as close as possible to saying something that they should not say. They ought to have a higher standard than that in the drafting of their questions, speeches and responses.

## Sudan

4.8 pm

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell):** With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make this further statement to the House about the situation in Sudan on behalf of the Government and the Foreign Secretary, who is attending the funeral of a close family member.

Ten days ago, fierce fighting broke out in Khartoum. It has since spread to Omdurman, Darfur and other Sudanese cities. As Members of the House will know, a violent power struggle is ongoing between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

The situation in Sudan is extremely grave. More than 427 people have been killed, including five aid workers, and over 3,700 people have been injured. Before this violence began, the humanitarian situation in Sudan was already deteriorating. We now estimate that approximately 16 million people—a third of the Sudanese population—are in need of humanitarian assistance. These numbers, I regret to inform the House, are likely to rise significantly.

Although the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces announced a 72-hour ceasefire from 0500 hours London time on 21 April to the mark the holy festival of Eid, it did not hold. Given the rapidly deteriorating security situation, the Government took the difficult decision to evacuate all British embassy staff and their dependants to fulfil our duty as their employer to protect our staff. This highly complex operation was completed yesterday. The operation involved more than 1,200 personnel from 16 Air Assault Brigade, the Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force. I know the House will join me in commending the brilliant work of our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, as well as the bravery of our servicemen and women for completing the operation successfully, in extremely dangerous circumstances.

I also pay tribute to our international partners for their ongoing co-operation in aligning our rescue responses, and I express my admiration for the work of the crisis centre in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, where more than 200 officials are working 24/7 and seamlessly across Government to co-ordinate the UK response.

The safety and security of British nationals continues to be our utmost priority. Our ability to support British nationals has not been impacted by the relocation of British embassy staff. The evacuated team will continue to operate from a neighbouring country, alongside the Foreign Office in London, which is working throughout the day and night to support British nationals and push for a ceasefire in Sudan.

We are asking all British nationals in Sudan to register their presence with us. The roughly 2,000 British nationals registered with us already are being sent, sometimes with great difficulty, at least daily updates by text and email. This step helps enable us to remain in contact with them while we find a safe passage from Sudan. Movement around the capital remains extremely dangerous and no evacuation option comes without grave risk to life. Khartoum airport is out of action. Energy supplies are disrupted. Food and water are becoming increasingly scarce. Internet and telephone networks are becoming

difficult to access. We continue to advise all British nationals in Sudan to stay indoors wherever possible. We recognise that circumstances will vary in different locations across Sudan, so we are now asking British nationals to exercise their own judgment about their circumstances, including whether to relocate, but they do so at their own risk.

Ending the violence is the single most important action we can take to guarantee the safety of British nationals and everyone in Sudan. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and I have been in continuous contact with allies and key regional partners since the outbreak of violence to agree a joint approach to both evacuation and de-escalation of violence. Over the weekend, the Prime Minister spoke to his counterparts, including Egyptian President Sisi and the President of Djibouti. The Foreign Secretary was in contact with the Kenyan President, the US Secretary of State and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Sweden, Turkey, Cyprus and the European Union High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. The Defence Secretary engaged with counterparts in Djibouti, the United States, France and Egypt. I have spoken to the African Union and the Prime Minister in exile of Sudan, upon whom so many hopes rested. Further escalation of this conflict, particularly if it spills over into neighbouring countries, would be disastrous. As we continue to make clear, there must be a genuine and lasting ceasefire.

We undertake to keep the House informed as the situation develops. Today, all MPs will receive a second “Dear colleague” letter from the Foreign Secretary and me. This will hopefully help to answer a number of frequently asked questions to assist right hon. and hon. Members in supporting their constituents.

I will continue to be in close contact with the House and provide updates where possible in the coming days. I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the shadow Minister.

4.14 pm

**Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for keeping me informed over the weekend. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), is returning from Kenya this evening; he continues to discuss developments with African leaders there.

I join the Minister in paying tribute to the bravery and professionalism of our armed forces involved in the operation to evacuate British diplomats and their families from Sudan. On behalf of the Labour party, I thank the 1,200 UK personnel involved in that very difficult mission, including those from 16 Air Assault Brigade, the Royal Marines and the RAF.

Our relief at the success of the mission does not alleviate our concern for the several thousand British nationals who are still trapped in Sudan amid growing violence. Many will be frightened and desperate to leave, but uncertain of their next move and of the assistance that the Government will be able to offer. What they need to hear is a clear plan for how and when the Government will support those who are still in danger and communicate with them.

While we maintain the unified international pressure for a permanent ceasefire, we are clear that the Government should be evacuating as many British nationals as possible, as quickly as possible. None of us is any doubt as to the complexity of the task or the difficulty of the situation on the ground, yet we know that our partner countries have evacuated significant numbers of their nationals already: 700 have been evacuated by France and Germany, 500 by Indonesia, 350 by Jordan, 150 each by Italy and Saudi Arabia, and 100 by Spain. African partners, including Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya, are also planning action, and France included UK nationals in its airlift. We thank it for that, but it raises some serious questions.

Can the Minister address why partner countries have been able to evacuate sizeable numbers of their nationals so far, as well as diplomats and their dependants, but the UK has not? Can he confirm whether the Government have evacuated any UK nationals who were not employees of the embassy or their dependants? Can he confirm how many UK nationals have been evacuated by our international partners? Were the embassy staff able to complete a full and proper shutdown, including dealing with any sensitive material? Given the communication difficulties, how can we effectively co-ordinate a second phase of the evacuation?

Naturally, questions will be asked about whether the Government have learned the lessons of the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal. We need to understand why the international community and the UK Government as Security Council penholder were seemingly wrong-footed by a conflict that we know was a clear and recognised risk. Can the Government give us a current assessment of Wagner's role in supporting the RSF?

The immediate priority, however, must be to give our nationals a way to escape violence that is not of their making. We should remember that this conflict is not of the Sudanese people's making, either; the responsibility for it lies squarely with a few generals who are putting personal interests and ambition above the lives of fellow citizens. The resistance committees are organising mutual aid despite terrible risks. People fleeing Khartoum by road are being sheltered and supported in the villages they pass. People who only want peace, justice and democracy are showing again their solidarity and extraordinary resilience.

Will the Minister detail the steps that the UK will be taking with partners to address the looming humanitarian crisis that this conflict is driving? The international community, including all our partners, needs to send a clear and united message. The generals cannot secure any future that they would want through violence. The fighting needs to stop, and it needs to stop now.

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the hon. Lady very much for her comments, particularly about the work of the armed forces. She is entirely right about the bravery with which they executed this operation so well, and about its incredible difficulty.

The hon. Lady asked about the British nationals who are trapped in Khartoum and in Sudan more widely, and I can tell her that we are looking at every single possible option for extracting them. She acknowledged that this had been a complex area, and I can only say to her that it certainly was.

The hon. Lady referred to our partner countries. As we know, when the French were seeking to evacuate their diplomats and some people from the wider French Government platform, to whom she referred, they were shot at as they came out through the embassy gateway, and I understand that a member of their special forces is gravely ill.

The hon. Lady asked why the UK diplomats were evacuated. That was because we believed they were in extreme danger. Fighting was taking place on both sides of the embassy, which was why the Government decided that it was essential to bring them out. We have a duty to all British citizens, of course, but we have a particular duty of care to our own staff and diplomats.

The hon. Lady asked about the destruction of material, and I can tell her that there was time for all the normal procedures to be adopted in that respect. She asked about our role as the penholder at the United Nations. As she will know, we have already called a meeting and will call further meetings as appropriate, and we are discharging our duties as penholder in every possible way.

The hon. Lady mentioned the comparison with Afghanistan, and asked whether we had learned lessons. We most certainly have learned lessons from Afghanistan, but the position in Sudan is completely different. First, in Afghanistan there were British troops on the ground; there are no British troops on the ground in Khartoum, or in Sudan as a whole. Secondly, in Afghanistan the airport was open and working, whereas the airport in Khartoum is entirely out of action. Thirdly, there was a permissive environment in Afghanistan. We had the permission of the Taliban to take people out. There is no such permissive environment in Sudan and its capital city.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about the humanitarian crisis. She is right: humanitarian workers have been shot at, five of them have been killed, and, prudently, those involved in the humanitarian effort are withdrawing their people. This is a total and absolute nightmare of a crisis, in which 60 million people are already short of food and support, and—as the hon. Lady implied—it will only get worse unless there is a ceasefire and the generals lay down their arms and ensure that their troops go back to barracks.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con):** I echo the thanks that have been expressed to the staff from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence who evacuated our diplomats and their families.

The central tenet of the contract between British nationals and their Government, or indeed the nation state, is trust, and at this point trust is being stretched: trust that we will evacuate those people and convey them to a place of safety when they are in need. I recognise the complexity and risk, I recognise that we have thousands of nationals in Sudan while others have just hundreds, and I recognise there is reportedly a military reconnaissance team on the ground—perhaps the Minister can confirm that—but I urge my right hon. Friend, who is very honourable, to get our people home, because that is what the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence train our people to do.

If, however, we are following the United States policy of non-evacuation or limited evacuation, we must have the moral courage to tell our British nationals that that is the case, because they are running out of food, water, electricity and internet signal, and some are killing their pets because they know that they can no longer feed them. We have a duty to empower them with the information that they need in order to make the right decisions for themselves and their families, but I urge the Minister to accept that time is running out and we need to do the evacuation now.

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her comments, and I am grateful to her for thanking the crisis centre, which is working night and day. I can assure her that while the United States made it clear that it was taking its diplomats out in the early operation that both it and we conducted, it has also made it clear that, as things stand, it is not planning to take any of its citizens out. We have not made that clear. Indeed, we made it clear that we are working at all levels to try to ensure that we can do so. We are looking at every single conceivable option, and we will—as my hon. Friend has suggested—do everything we possibly can to help in every way we can.

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** It is very welcome to have our civil servants evacuated, and all credit goes to the men and women in uniform who delivered that operation, but the political decision to evacuate an embassy in these circumstances should be neither complex nor lengthy, so the Government might wish to cease congratulating themselves on that, especially as, in terms of deploying our military professionals to support ordinary citizens trapped in Sudan, the UK is trailing as usual, just as it did at the start of the covid crisis. When other nations stepped up to repatriate their people, as is expected in such circumstances, the UK dithered and mithered.

Can the Minister explain to the House the root cause of this unfathomable inertia? Is there a tension between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence? If so, is the Foreign Office saying go and the MOD saying no, or is it the other way around? The official UK Government advice is that a ceasefire is the answer to this crisis, but what comfort is that to the thousands of UK nationals still on the ground? We might as well tell them to hold their breath while they wait for the food and water to run out.

Meanwhile, this weekend France evacuated 388 citizens, including Dutch citizens; Germany airlifted 101 citizens to Jordan; Italy and Spain have evacuated their citizens and those of Argentina, Colombia, Portugal, Poland, Mexico, Venezuela and Sudan; Turkey has evacuated 640, including people from Azerbaijan, Japan, China, Mexico and Yemen; and Ireland, without a tactical airlifter to its name, has evacuated Irish nationals and is evacuating 140 more today. What it is to have friends in the world. On Radio 4 this morning, the Minister said that UK nationals in Sudan would be frustrated. They are terrified, not frustrated. He also said no fewer than three times that if UK nationals chose to flee independently, they would do so at their own risk, which rather exposes Foreign Office priorities in this crisis. The risk assessment taken by Ministers advises UK nationals to stay put. Did they factor in any assessment of access to food and water, of failing sanitation or of escalating violence making future evacuations even harder?

**Mr Mitchell:** I do not agree with the early part of the hon. Gentleman's comments. This was done because diplomats were specifically being targeted. He will have seen that the European Union representative was held up at gunpoint, and I have already mentioned that the British embassy was caught between the two sides in this. This was extremely dangerous, and I have already mentioned what happened to the French. It was the decision that our diplomats were in extreme jeopardy that led to the operation I have described.

As I said earlier, we of course have a duty of care to all our citizens. That is why we are doing everything possible, within the art of the possible, to bring them home, but we have a specific duty of care to our staff and our diplomats. Because of the extreme danger they were in, the Prime Minister took the decision to launch the operation that was fortunately so successful.

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

**Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con):** I too welcome the statement and pay tribute to our military for executing this evacuation of our embassy personnel, but as has been said, that duty of care must now extend to British passport holders who are still caught up in Sudan, including my constituent Rita Abdel-Raman, who went to visit her father and is now caught up in what is going on. I am grateful for the communication with the Minister over the weekend but I hope he recognises that while the capital, Khartoum, is very dangerous, the rest of that vast country is desolate. If we add together the elite forces of the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, that formidable elite force could mimic what the United Nations is doing in using and protecting a land corridor to get thousands of expats and internationals from the capital to Port Sudan and to safety. When the Minister considers the options, will he consider that as a possibility?

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend is a distinguished former soldier and he understands the difficulties that we face on the ground. I can tell him that there is no reason to regard any of Sudan as safe. He will have seen what is happening, for example, in Darfur, where the RSF is a successor body to the Janjaweed who wrought such havoc in what President George Bush described at the time as a genocide. My right hon. Friend will therefore understand that, when speaking about safety, that is not an easy concept, but the option he mentioned—indeed, every option—is being carefully considered and we will resolve those options and move on them just as soon as we possibly can.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate our armed forces, which have done an amazing job so far, and commend the work of our diplomats. The Minister has said that there are 2,000 British citizens in Sudan, but does he think the number is more like 4,000, as has been cited elsewhere? What is the best figure he can put to the number of British citizens in Sudan?

My memory of the Afghanistan situation is that MPs' communication with Ministers was a complete and utter shambles. Some of us, particularly on the Opposition side of the House, felt that we had a very difficult time trying to get proper advice for our constituents.

Will the Minister make sure that the second letter, which is meant to be coming to all of us, has a clearly identifiable number that we can ring and an email address to which we can send things? Having to communicate with lots of Departments ends up being a complete and utter mess for everybody.

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The number of people who have replied to the Foreign Office's request for information and registered themselves is of the order of 2,000. There is public speculation that there are about 4,000 British nationals and dual nationals—a person with a British passport is effectively in the same category.

I know the hon. Gentleman will expect me to say that lessons have, indeed, been learned from what happened in Afghanistan. The second “Dear colleague” letter, which I hope is in his inbox—if it is not, it will be shortly—sets out exactly how to get hold of the Foreign Office. We hope the word “shambles” will not be applied to our seamless work across Government to make sure we achieve the aims that are common on both sides of the House.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank everyone in the FCDO, the MOD and our armed forces. I have visited Khartoum and absolutely understand how difficult and dangerous any evacuation is and could be. The violent fighting was started by General Hemedti's RSF, which is really worrying, especially considering its historical links with Wagner. I have met General Hemedti, and I will never forget the overwhelming sense of evil. The longer the violence continues, the more that people will face acute shortages of food and water, which could precipitate even more violence. Can my right hon. Friend tell us whether any food is getting into Khartoum?

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She knows Sudan extremely well, and the whole House will have heard what she says about General Hemedti. She is right to fasten on the fact that humanitarian relief is enormously needed but, because humanitarian workers have been attacked and five have been murdered, the whole issue of supply is extremely difficult and, as of now, very little food is getting into Khartoum. We are acutely aware of this, and it is yet another reason why we are pressing with our international and regional friends and partners, through the United Nations and its agencies, for an urgent ceasefire that holds—none of the ceasefires has yet held—so that the humanitarian issues, and all the other issues, can be addressed.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My constituent Jennifer McLellan and her four young children, aged between two and 15, are currently hiding in Khartoum. Yesterday Jennifer reported a significant lull in the fighting just as other foreign nationals were being airlifted out of the city by their Governments. She wants to know whether that lull was coincidental or whether the UK has missed a critical window in which to get its nationals out. She has been back in touch in the last couple of hours, having heard rumours that the Royal Navy could be heading to Port Sudan. She wants to know whether those rumours are true. In the absence of consular staff, how will she and her family, and others, be evacuated from Khartoum to Port Sudan?

**Mr Mitchell:** I cannot comment on rumours about the Royal Navy and Port Sudan. Obviously, the hon. Gentleman's constituent and her family should make sure that they are registered with the Foreign Office. We will keep in touch and everyone should be receiving at least one communication per day. I am advised that today the internet has been only 2% available and so there are real issues with that, but we will do everything we can. He talks about a lull in the fighting yesterday. The Turks had a convoy with three muster points and when they were seeking to congregate their people there, two of those muster points were shot up. So the situation is extremely dangerous and it would not be possible to say that at any point yesterday, or on any of the days since this awful event took place, Khartoum was in any way safe.

**Sir James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): It is always a tricky decision whether to evacuate staff. I have always felt that the Foreign Office has been a little too keen to evacuate staff rather than protect British citizens, but the EU embassy was shot at and it is directly opposite the UK compound, which shows a clear and present danger to our embassy. My question follows on from the one from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). Will the Minister be more specific about numbers, including on the 2,000 figure? How many dual nationals and how many mono nationals are we talking about? Although we will treat the dual nationals equally, will the Sudanese Government treat them similarly? How many of those people actually want to stay? In previous situations, dual nationals have often been safer and have wanted to stay hunkered down with their families and second communities.

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I assure him, having spent quite a lot of time with the men and women who are manning the crisis centre at the Foreign Office, that it would be wrong to suggest that their concern was for evacuating staff and not the wider public. The absolute commitment from the Foreign Office is to do everything we can for all those caught in this way, although, as I have mentioned, we have a special duty in respect of our own staff. He asked me to be more specific about numbers. I think I have been quite specific, but let me say that the published figures are about 400 for mono nationals and about 4,000 for dual citizens. He will appreciate that if someone has a British passport, they would expect to be treated in the same way whichever group they belong to. As for how many people want to leave Sudan, as I said, the Foreign Office has received registered communications from 2,000.

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments made by the Minister and the shadow Minister about the professionalism and bravery of those members of our armed forces who have been involved with this operation? I know from my own time at PJHQ—permanent joint headquarters—that non-combatant evacuation operations can be particularly complex, so well done to everybody who has been involved. As we have heard from the Minister, the situation on the ground is that 2,000 British nationals are registered with the FCDO, potentially out of a total of 4,000. Given that Sudanese telecommunications are collapsing, can the Minister set out a bit more about what his Department is doing to explore contact with those British nationals who do not have access to either a reliable phone signal or the internet?

**Mr Mitchell:** First, I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his comments, which come from very considerable experience. When I say that the published figure for dual nationals is 4,000, we may be talking about more or less than that—I am only giving him the published figure. On how we communicate with people in very difficult circumstances, we are indeed extremely resourceful, but he himself set out the limitations for what is possible. We work within those, but I hope we do so creatively.

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): I, too, congratulate our armed forces on their success thus far. At a more strategic level, given that the removal of Bashir was key to stemming the threat of Islamist extremism in the region, what conversations has my right hon. Friend had with colleagues in like-minded countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to ensure that whatever the political outcome is in Sudan, it does not rekindle the threat of Islamist extremism, which would have an impact on regional security and, potentially, our own?

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend, the former Defence Secretary, is absolutely right in what he says. There is a real danger of the cross-border spread of terrorism that he describes. He asked me specifically about conversations with the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I can assure him that those conversations go on at all levels of Government, and, indeed, went on over the weekend.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): When the Minister came to the House last week, I asked him what reassurance he could give to those Sudanese nationals who are already here in the UK. This morning, I got an email from my constituent, Mohamed, who applied for asylum 16 months ago because he was being persecuted in Sudan. He is still waiting for some kind of decision from the Home Office, so can the Minister speak to his colleagues to offer some reassurance to those who have sought sanctuary here that they will not be returned to a country in conflict?

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. I do indeed recall what she said last week. I will refer the matter that she has raised to the Home Office, but I can assure her that no one will be sent home to Sudan at the moment.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): May I add my thanks to all those involved in this crisis?

Last week, I thought that the Minister rather swerved my question when I asked how much the overseas development assistance budget had been reduced in Sudan, so I looked online and saw that, starting at the beginning of the 2021-22 financial year, it had virtually disappeared. Does the Minister, who was in the same Lobby as me when we voted on 0.7%, continue to believe that spending in these fragile and conflict-afflicted countries is a really powerful way of preventing conflict across the region?

**Mr Mitchell:** I would never purposefully try to swerve my hon. Friend's questions. She and I were indeed in the same Lobby, and I just point out to her that collective responsibility, as I have mentioned to the House previously, is not retrospective. In respect of the funding in Sudan, she will know that the one area of the budget where

there is a degree of flexibility, even in these straitened times, is in the humanitarian area. Clearly, what is happening in Sudan now will inform the decisions that we make in that respect.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): May I, on behalf of the Democratic Unionists, commend our armed forces for their significant efforts in what is a most challenging and complex situation? I invite the Minister to recognise that it may be a stretch to suggest that having no diplomatic or military footprint in Sudan has no effect on our ability to rescue and evacuate British citizens. Having listened to a Northern Ireland resident last Wednesday who was doing an interview ensconced in his basement with his family in Sudan, highlighting that he was having to siphon water from a tap in his neighbour's home and had little recourse to food at that point, how do we assure him that he has not just been left alone?

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the hon. Member for his comments about the armed forces. As I mentioned in the statement, we do not think that our diplomatic reach is diminished in these circumstances by diplomats being withdrawn. That is because, when they were holed up in great jeopardy in Khartoum, they were not able to operate, and most of the work was being done from the crisis centre in London, and that is the position today. I can tell him that our teams in surrounding states are moving to the point where they can help anyone who comes in across the border, and the diplomatic mission that was resident in Khartoum will be relocating shortly to a neighbouring country.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): According to the Ministry of Defence, the Sudanese armed forces have been reasonably helpful on evacuation issues, but surely the best possible protection for any future evacuation would be under the auspices of the United Nations where blue berets still count for a lot. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Government are in the closest contact with the UN to see whether that extra degree of protection can be obtained for any future extraction operation?

**Mr Mitchell:** I can assure my right hon. Friend that not only is the role of the UN under constant examination, to be progressed in any way we possibly can, but that, as Britain holds the pen—in the jargon of these things—at the UN on Sudan, we are leading the efforts to ensure that all possible opportunities through the United Nations are pursued.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): With a large Sudanese community in Westminster, it is no surprise that I have a number of constituents currently trapped, terrified, in Khartoum. I must tell the Minister that at least one of them says that he has registered but has yet to hear anything from the Foreign Office. I appreciate the difficulties with the internet and I recognise that the Minister might not want to be too specific about what the future communications might be as the hours and days unfold. However, can he tell us whether he will be able to advise MPs such as me, and my constituents, that they will receive guidance on how any future evacuation plans will be communicated to them, so they are not left in this interim period worried that the minute the internet goes down, they are totally abandoned?

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Lady is entirely right about the importance of communication. I hope my second “Dear Colleague” letter will be of assistance to her and her office in handling those extremely difficult cases. On the communications difficulties she cited, which I mentioned in response to other hon. Members, we are looking at all possible ways of delivering guidance. I hope we are extremely creative in working out ways of doing so, but she may rest assured that the full intellect and abilities of the Foreign Office are engaged in exactly that.

**Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): There was already a significant humanitarian issue in east Africa, which I know the Government have been working to help to address, but this situation will significantly increase the humanitarian pressures on the region as well as being potentially disastrous for the people of Sudan. Can the Minister set out what resources we already have in east Africa dealing with humanitarian issues, and what ability we have to scale them up to meet the inevitable challenge that will follow this dreadful conflict?

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend is right about the scale of issues that we face in east Africa, with something like 72 million people already in need of substantial help because of them. What is happening in Sudan will make that infinitely worse, not least because there are 16 million people who, before this awful crisis struck, were profoundly food insecure and in need of assistance. We will scale up when there is a ceasefire and we are able to do so, as he will understand. The United Nations agencies, which are extremely good at moving quickly to do that when the opportunity arises, will certainly come into play, with organisations such as the World Food Programme and many others, but he will realise that the indubitable requirement is that there should be a ceasefire so that they can operate on the ground. As I have said, five humanitarian workers have been murdered during the last week.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I add my congratulations to those involved in this NEO, or non-combatant evacuation operation, and I would like to pursue the question from the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) a little further. The British Government have supported many Governments in developing countries over the years with education in the civil oversight of defence, which includes educating senior military personnel in developing countries as part of our programme of defence diplomacy. Last year, a Liberal Democrat question served to find that no training has been provided by the MOD to counterparts in Sudan since 2020 because it would be regarded as military aid. Does the Minister think that education of the civil oversight of defence is worth categorising separately from military aid in those cases where a partner Government might be considering receiving it?

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting case. Of course, through the pooled funding arrangements that we have, often that sort of work with the military can take place. I can tell him why he got that answer about Sudan last year: because all our efforts were bent towards trying to support the peace process and the negotiations that were going on to achieve a return to civilian rule. Sadly, all that is now very much on the

back foot. But the aim, if we can get a ceasefire, is that those political negotiations should start so that there can be a civilian Government in Sudan.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): The Government advise nationals in difficulties to stay indoors, but what if they run out of food, what if there is no power, water or other utilities, or what if there is fire in the local area? What is the advice and message of hope for them then?

**Mr Mitchell:** My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. The only advice that we can give through the Foreign Office—the only advice—is to stay indoors, because of all the reasons that I have given during the statement about the jeopardy on the streets outside. We have changed the advice today to say that although we think that people should undoubtedly remain indoors if they can, if they do not, it is at their own risk. But they must make their decisions on the ground. Of course, there are those who know the situation around where they live extremely well and may well be able to exercise their judgment, but they do so at their own risk.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I also pay tribute to the hard-working staff at the crisis centre. Last night, a constituent’s father, who had been shot at by armed militia in Khartoum, was evacuated thanks to the generosity of the French armed forces. My office spoke to his family this morning, and they are overwhelmed with grief. They said:

“While Dad has managed to get out of the country down to sheer luck, one of our friends remains in his apartment, just three buildings down from where Dad was. The information trickling down from the UK government remains minimal, and the announcement of European countries evacuating citizens makes this even tougher.”

Given reports that more than 4,000 British nationals could be in Sudan facing great danger, will the Minister update us on how many FCDO staff are currently responding to the current crisis, and why does the UK appear to have been slower in helping our citizens who are caught up in this grave danger?

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Lady will know that we were, along with the Americans, the first to intervene in terms of any extraction whatever. She asks how many civil servants are engaged. The crisis centre has 200 staff working there. They are working on shift, but they have been working throughout the night and day, every day, more or less since this started a week ago.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): May I ask a particular question that might have a more general application? My young constituent, aged 24, has taken refuge in a central official building in Khartoum, along with a great many others, but her passport has been locked up in the building of her non-governmental organisation, which is now locked and sealed. Will the Minister therefore ensure that when any evacuation eventually occurs, some kind of official travel documents are available for those who do not have theirs with them?

**Mr Mitchell:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Obviously, it is essential that his constituent does their best to contact the Foreign Office team so that we are able to make a note of what he says. I thank him very much for informing us about that specific problem.



**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The proposition that war and conflict do not happen during high days and holy days is a ridiculous one. Therefore, because of woefully inadequate intelligence on the ground it seems—maybe the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—that the British ambassador to Sudan decided to go on holiday. Can the Minister confirm whether that is true, and if so, who was in charge on the ground?

**Mr Mitchell:** The ambassador is entitled to return to the UK either on diplomatic business or, indeed, on leave if that is appropriate. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the second most senior person in the embassy in Khartoum—the development director—was in post when the disaster struck.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): Given that there can be no guarantee of de-escalation, can my right hon. Friend confirm that Cobra is meeting regularly and urgently to consider all evacuation options and will be prepared to take risks in evacuating, using the strength of the UK armed forces if needed?

**Mr Mitchell:** I can indeed confirm what my hon. Friend asks. Cobra is meeting as we speak. It has met six times so far—five times chaired by the Prime Minister—and that includes one Cobra that we attended at 3.15 am on Saturday.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): May I extend my thanks to the armed forces and everyone involved in trying to resolve this crisis? I am still a little unclear, from what the Minister has said, about what the plan is. I appreciate that he cannot provide operational details that might put people at risk, but will he at least give a step-by-step outline of, for example, what the plan is for international relations on a ceasefire or an evacuation that should be being planned?

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank the hon. Member very much for her comments about the armed forces. She asked me what the plan is; my answer is very clear. There is a wide range of options—I hope fully comprehensive—that are being pursued with vigour, for every possible opportunity and circumstance. As soon as we are able to say more than that, we will of course tell the House.

**Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): May I join other hon. and right hon. Members in congratulating our armed forces on their very successful operation over the weekend? A significant number of NHS doctors come from Sudan, and I understand from a consultant at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in my constituency that around 50 of those doctors from various locations in the country are currently trapped in or near Khartoum. I thank my right hon. Friend for the advice that his staff at the FCDO, and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), provided at the weekend, at the earlier stage of this process, to me and my constituent who works there. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent upon those fighting in Sudan to do all that is necessary to enable those who wish to leave to do so? It is incumbent upon them to call a ceasefire and then to provide safe passage.

**Mr Mitchell:** I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said, particularly about the doctors he mentioned. The position in respect of humanitarian law is extremely clear, and it is clear that humanitarian law is being breached on all occasions in Sudan, so he is right to make that point. I also thank him for what he said about the armed forces. Just because the operation was an outstanding success, we should not forget the brave men and women who put their lives on the line and put themselves in harm's way to protect the British cohort in Khartoum.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I have constituents who are trapped in Khartoum. They are NHS doctors, their colleagues are gravely worried for them, and they are stuck with two very small children. I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said today. He said that there is a grave risk to life, that food and water are scarce, that the internet is sparse, and that people may wish to relocate at their own risk, but that that is very risky and that they have to exercise their own judgment. None of those statements is of any practical help to my constituents, who need concrete support to get them and their children out of this perilously dangerous situation. What more can he tell us about the practical efforts being made to ensure food and water supplies on the ground? What more can he tell us, that our constituents can take some comfort from, about the efforts being made to get people back? Nothing that I have heard today has given me any comfort that my constituents should hope to be back home where they belong any time soon.

**Mr Mitchell:** I completely understand the frustration that the hon. Lady and particularly her constituents will feel at these events. I have to be absolutely frank with the House and ensure that no one is misled: the position is extremely difficult. As I have outlined in both my statement and my answers to questions, we operate within the art of the possible, but she may rest assured that we will do everything we can, and are doing everything we can—and have been doing so since the start of this crisis—to ensure that her constituents get home safely.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Just as it was with the repatriation of British nationals during the covid pandemic, so it seems that once again we are well behind the curve compared with other countries. The thousands of British nationals still stranded in Sudan will now be facing food and water shortages, along with other dangers to their lives, but according to media reports, it is apparent that both the ambassador and the deputy ambassador were out of Sudan as early as 14 April. Can the Minister confirm if that is correct, and if so, why was there no senior leadership present to help the British nationals in Sudan when they most needed them?

**Mr Mitchell:** I do not think there is a particular comparison with the covid pandemic. This is a very different situation; indeed, it is very different from the situation in Afghanistan, as I explained to the House a little earlier.

The hon. Gentleman outlines what he will understand is an exceedingly complex and difficult situation. On the issue of staffing, the ambassador was indeed out of the country, and the deputy head of mission was not the

second most senior person in the embassy; that was the development director, as I explained in answer to an earlier question.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): To echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), I have been contacted by a constituent of mine who is gravely concerned for her family members who are stuck in Khartoum, including her great-grandchildren, the youngest of whom is approaching three years of age. As the Minister said in his statement, food and water are becoming increasingly scarce. I get the complexity of the situation, but what are we doing specifically to get food and water to those people who are doing as they were requested to do and staying in their houses?

**Mr Mitchell:** Once again, I hope that the “Dear colleague” letter will be of assistance in informing the hon. Gentleman’s constituents on these matters. On food and water, the position is deteriorating even more because the humanitarian workers are not able to carry out their normal activities, but the hon. Gentleman will understand that we are operating within the art of the possible. Therefore, what we have to do is to make sure that all options are explored as rapidly as possible, so that we can bring help to those people who are caught up in the dreadful jeopardy that he has so eloquently described.

**Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): The Minister has very kindly set out the arrangements in the crisis centre run by the FCDO. It is clear from listening to colleagues across the House that the FCDO and Members of Parliament are going to be inundated with requests for help, so will the Minister consider stepping up and adding further support to the crisis centre? It clearly seems to be needed.

**Mr Mitchell:** The hon. Lady is right to identify the considerable amount of work that is being done through, and by, the crisis centre. As I mentioned earlier, there are 200 people engaged in that work, working night and day. I assure her unequivocally that if any more people are required, we will provide them.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Minister for his statement.

## Point of Order

5.2 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise that I have not given you notice of this point of order, which follows on from Work and Pensions questions, at which I asked the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work why it has been 12 months since the Equality and Human Rights Commission issued a section 23 agreement to the Department for Work and Pensions for breaches and discrimination against disabled claimants. This shows that the Government have been unlawful, yet we still have not had a reply and an agreement has not been reached. How can I get the Government to produce a reply that complies with the Equality Act 2010 and restores confidence that the Act will be followed by all organisations, including this Government?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. She did not say what response the Minister gave during questions; she might like to do so.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The Minister said exactly the same thing that Ministers, including the Secretary of State, have said to me over the past 12 months: “It is being looked into. We are meeting with them.” There has been no clarity about when that agreement will be completed, which gives licence to any business or organisation—to anyone—to break the law, because the Government are not following their own laws.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification. She is a very experienced Member of this House, and I am sure that she will be aware of the various routes that she can continue to pursue, whether through oral or written questions. In the meantime, she has made clear her disquiet about the amount of time it is taking for this to be responded to. I look to the Treasury Bench; the Whip, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), is nodding his head, so I am sure he is going to feed back the fact that the hon. Lady has raised this issue, and I am sure she will continue to do so. She will, I am sure, have an opportunity later this week to raise it again—in business questions, perhaps—but we will feed back that it has been a matter of some concern.

## Non-Domestic Rating Bill

### *Second Reading*

5.5 pm

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House may have spotted that I am not in as full voice as I normally like to be. I promise that is not because I have been participating in the activities that I understand are going on outside in Parliament Square. I hope the House will understand if I do not take quite the number of interventions that I generally like to when opening a debate.

I believe that all of us across the House recognise how important business rates are to council budgets and the funding of core services. This year alone, business rates are set to raise more than £20 billion to fund vital services, from adult and children's social care to refuse collection. However, business owners have raised concerns about the impact of this tax on their ability to stay competitive. That is why the Government have delivered and will continue to deliver on our commitment to reform business rates.

In the autumn statement, we announced substantial immediate support to help businesses adapt to the 2023 business rates revaluation. Today, we take another major step forward, turning our attention towards longer-term reform with the Non-Domestic Rating Bill. It will ensure a business rates system that is more flexible, transparent and fair.

Before I set out what the Bill delivers, I remind the House of the steps we have already taken to improve the business rates system. From April 2023, we have updated all rateable values for non-domestic properties, reflecting changes in the property market. The revaluation ensured a fairer distribution of bills between online and physical retail. On average, bricks-and-mortar retailers saw decreases of around 20%, but we did not stop there.

In the autumn statement, we announced a support package worth almost £14 billion over the next five years to support businesses. We have frozen the business rates multiplier this year—a £9.3 billion tax cut over the next five years—we have increased the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme from 50% to 75%, supporting around 230,000 properties, and we have removed unpopular downwards caps from the transitional relief scheme, ensuring that businesses immediately see the benefit of falling bills.

Turning to the Bill, business owners have been clear that a more frequent revaluation cycle would be extremely helpful. In place of the current five-yearly cycle, the Bill will implement a three-yearly cycle. The most recent revaluation took effect from this April, so the next will take place in 2026 and it will happen every three years thereafter. I understand that colleagues will ask, "Hang on a minute. Why every three years, rather than annually or every two years?". The reason is that this single measure is a significant shake-up of the business rates system. An initial three-yearly cycle ensures that the Valuation Office Agency has the capacity to deliver these important reforms. I reassure the House that we will of course keep the system under review, with the aim of going even further if we can.

We are implementing a new duty for ratepayers to provide the VOA with information that supports valuation. That will be submitted through a new, simple online service. It brings business rates in line with wider tax practice, and it is a crucial first step towards going further on the frequency of revaluations in the future. We will make the valuation process clearer by increasing the transparency of the VOA's work. The VOA has already delivered some improvements, but the Bill will allow it to go even further and provide more accessible information to ratepayers on how individual valuations have been reached.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): The Minister is speaking about the Valuation Office Agency, which gave evidence to the Treasury Committee last week. It reassured us that it was ready for these changes and on track for its computer system changes. Is that consistent with what she has been told?

**Victoria Atkins:** Yes, it is. Indeed, the VOA is very keen to get moving with this because, while it does a good job under the current system, it understands the difficulties that less frequent revaluations have posed for businesses, particularly given recent history with the pandemic. This is very much part of trying to sew the system together even more tightly, so that the VOA is able to fulfil its obligations to ratepayers.

We are going to clarify what sort of changes or events should lead to changes in rateable values between revaluations, with reforms to material changes of circumstances. Another key reform involves rethinking the way that the two multipliers or tax rates are calculated. We are making the recent practice of uprating the multipliers by the consumer prices index a permanent feature. Defaulting to this lower measure of inflation will help businesses struggling with rising costs. The Bill will also allow the Government to adjust either multiplier to a rate lower than inflation, and to prescribe which properties pay the lower or smaller multiplier, keeping business support adaptable to the fast-moving fiscal environment.

The key driver for all of these changes is to help businesses grow, and in so doing we want to remove barriers to investment and to incentivise growth. We are therefore creating an entirely new 100% relief for ratepayers making eligible improvements to their property. They will not face higher bills as a result of those investments for 12 months. I know that that is something for which businesses, and indeed colleagues, have been asking for some time. We will also enshrine in law the 100% relief for low-carbon heat networks that have their own rates bill. That is something we recently brought in with the support of local authorities, and it has been warmly welcomed by the business community.

The Bill shows that the Government are honouring our promise to British businesses that we will be there for them no matter what, so that they can continue to innovate, expand and thrive in a globally competitive economy. In the last six months, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has announced almost £14 billion of support to the business rates system, and now through the Bill we are going even further. The Bill creates a modern system that can adapt to the ebb and flow of market tides. It delivers a fairer system that provides greater transparency for ratepayers and a business-friendly system that helps, not hinders, growth and rewards companies that invest. I commend it to the House.

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

5.13 pm

**Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab):** There is no getting around it: this has been an incredibly tough time for businesses across the UK. There was the pandemic, of course, but before and after it, they have had this Government's mismanagement of Brexit to contend with, the Government's failure to manage rising energy costs, the highest inflation for a generation and the unforgivable mess of the Government's mini-Budget in October.

With this Bill reaching its Second Reading still inadequate in many areas, business owners are concerned about what further challenges await them. While businesses have welcomed some elements of this legislation, it is clear across the board that supportive measures such as improvement relief are being delivered far too late. The most glaring omission from the Bill continues to be the lack of any substantial improvements to our outdated, dysfunctional business rates system. Labour is committed to scrapping business rates root and branch, but the Government continue to tinker around the edges, buying time with short-term measures, rather than addressing the depth of the problems they have caused.

The last thing businesses need is more short-term sticking-plaster fixes. Maybe they are waiting for a Labour Government in the next 18 months to come and fix it for good. Our proposed reforms to business rates are what small and medium-sized enterprises have spent years lobbying for. All of us will know a high street that was prosperous 15 years ago and is now in miserable decline, along with libraries, nurseries and leisure centres. The Tories' commitment to austerity policies has led to the death of a devastating number of high street businesses. They sat by and watched business after business go bust and the hearts of our high streets gutted. Office for National Statistics figures show that, even at the height of the recession, business deaths under the last Labour Government never rose above 277,000. In stark contrast, this Tory Government oversaw a staggering peak of 331,000 business deaths in 2017—years before the pandemic, before the war and any other factors that they may try to draw on.

While the Tories tread water, Labour has a plan for British business. We will support entrepreneurs to turn their ideas into reality. We will ensure that bricks and mortar businesses stay on our high street by making their tax contributions proportionate. Labour will make online tech giants finally pay their fair share of tax—something the Conservatives have never had the will to do. By raising the digital services tax paid by the likes of Amazon, we will be able to raise the threshold for small business rates relief, helping more homegrown small and medium-sized businesses to thrive in our retail sector. Sadly, among other common-sense reforms suggested by Labour, the Tories have refused to provide short-term support through raising the threshold for small business rates relief this financial year. Our estimates suggest that raising the threshold to £25,000 would save our high streets more than £1 billion. Instead, SMEs will continue to wade through bills and fight for their survival. Corner shops and cash and carries are essential staples of our neighbourhood and many families rely on them to meet daily need.

Although some measures in the Bill have been welcomed by small shop owners, worry continues over the administrative burdens of meeting the new “duty to notify” requirements. The Association of Convenience Stores told me that, despite representations to Ministers, its concerns about clause 13 have not been addressed. Forcing ratepayers to submit taxpayer reference numbers to the Valuation Office Agency will create more work for all retailers, but have a particular impact on convenience store chains. Has the Minister considered the difficulties facing businesses in that situation: those that may need to spend more to safely report sensitive tax information for multiple sites? There are also valid fears that fines will be incurred through small businesses not knowing when or what to update the VOA with regarding changes to their premises. Can the Minister update me on what consultations the Government are conducting to bring clarity to that process?

The Shopkeepers' Campaign rightly notes that the clause allowing fines for retailers to notify the VOA within 60 days represents a “stealth tax”. Surely Ministers do not intend to find new ways to make small businesses worse off. Can they please commit to reviewing that policy?

Many convenience stores are owned and frequented by first, second and third generation migrant communities and those on lower incomes. Have Ministers carried out an equality impact assessment of the unintended consequences that these costs will have on the owners and, therefore, their customers? I would be grateful to know whether any such assessment has also investigated regional differences in the impact of the Bill. Recent analysis by Savills estate agents found strong disparity between the new rateable value for city centre retail units and those in small towns. Surely the Government are not proposing yet more policy that will make a mockery of their central promise to level up.

The hospitality sector was at the sharp end of the pandemic restrictions and slow economic recovery. Most recently, it has suffered a severe workforce shortage due to post-Brexit limitations on migrant workers. UKHospitality has joined other business advocacy groups in questioning the new proposals regarding expanding the VOA's remit and powers. What is the Minister's response to businesses facing extensive administrative time and costs to provide the VOA with more information than it reasonably requires? We welcome the commitment to reevaluate rates more frequently, but every three years is still not enough to keep up with the sudden changes that businesses can experience during economic turmoil. A Labour Government will introduce annual revaluations, delivering the up-to-date monitoring and support that businesses are crying out for.

As I have raised with the Minister before, there is still no explanation from the Government on how they will support local authorities that have the huge task of processing tens of thousands of new business rate forms. Local authorities, as we all know and appreciate, are already understaffed and under-resourced. I do not need to remind the Minister that councils still do not have a long-term sustainable funding model, so each year brings more financial insecurity than the last. With yet another new administrative responsibility dumped on their desks, how does the Minister expect councils to be able to afford the time and staffing to adjust? Have the Government conducted any sort of consultation with local authority leaders to assist with the burden?

We will not be voting against the Bill today. We know some improvements have been made and we will work towards further improvements in the next stages. What will not change between this version of the Bill and the next is that Labour remains the party of business. We are committed to ensuring that every business, every entrepreneur, every high street, every worker and every customer gets what they need from government to live well and see our economy thrive in return.

5.20 pm

**Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I would like to focus my remarks on our retail sector. The last few years have seen an acceleration in shop closures and job losses. The Centre for Retail Research found that more than 17,000 shops closed in 2022, equivalent to 47 a day and the highest total in five years. More than 5% of retail staff lost their jobs last year through insolvencies and store closures arising from rationalisation.

Retail, especially independent shops, is hugely important in beautiful Hastings and Rye, where over 30% of the local economy depends on the hospitality and tourism sectors. I know many local outlets have ceased to trade, and the town centre in Hastings is punctuated with empty or shuttered shop windows. Even key areas such as Robertson Street, which has seen something of a revival since the pandemic, now has prominent outlets closed and empty. Sadly, some businesses we lost were Hastings institutions, such as the fishmongers in Queens Arcade, which had been there for more than half a century. Others include the large Argos near Breeds Place, which remained empty for several years prior to the pandemic, and big names such as Game, in Priory Meadow. Several cafés across the town have also closed.

It would be unfair to say that all those business closures relate to the business rates system. Some are due to an increase in rent, on top of the increase in supply chain and energy costs caused by the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but I have no doubt that business rates is a significant contributory factor to many business closures across the country. The business rates system has become disconnected from the realities of modern retail and retail real estate, which is why I am pleased the Government have decided to modernise it.

There are several positive measures in the Bill which will help our retail sector. A more frequent cycle of three years for revaluations will allow changes in economic conditions to feed through more rapidly into businesses' liabilities. As long-term changes in the economy continue to manifest, accelerated by the aftermath of the pandemic, that will ensure the business rates system is more agile and responsive to change, while also improving fairness for ratepayers. However, it has been argued that annual revaluations would be most ideal, ensuring a highly responsive and up-to-date system. Perhaps the Minister can explain a bit more about that in her response.

The digitalising business rates project will, I hope, modernise the business rates system, improve the targeting of rates relief, generate better data for central Government and local government and help to improve business rates compliance. Measures to support de-carbonisation and investment, including a relief for low-carbon heat networks and a new improvement relief, will ensure that, from April 2024, ratepayers will not see an increase in their rates bill for 12 months from qualifying

improvements made to their property. That is important because businesses that improve their properties should not be penalised for it.

However, I have some concerns that the Bill does not go far enough to help small businesses. The move to the three-yearly valuations has a cost to the ratepayer. The Valuation Office Agency has imposed a corresponding duty to notify, which requires ratepayers to inform it of any changes made to a property within 60 days of the change. This new duty represents a significant administrative burden for businesses, particularly the small ones. Whenever a change is made to the property, the occupier must inform the VOA within 60 days, or be met, it seems, with punitive fines.

The VOA's job is to determine a property's rateable value. It appears that the imposition of the new duty is simply the VOA asking the ratepayer to do its job for it. Many small businesses will struggle with that additional burden. Perhaps most concerning is the lack of a corresponding duty for the VOA to respond to ratepayers' requests. Although the ratepayer must notify the VOA within 60 days—with the threat of financial sanctions—the VOA may respond to the ratepayer at its leisure. That hardly seems fair.

I am concerned that the uniform business rate multiplier has risen to 51p, which is a significant increase from the 34p that it stood at on its introduction in 1990—admittedly, that is quite a long time ago. Although freezing the UBR is welcome, it is temporary and contrary to our promise in the 2019 Conservative manifesto to cut the burden of tax on businesses by reducing business rates. The Bill means there may be annual increases in the UBR by linking it to the consumer prices index. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain a bit more about that. We need to keep in mind that in 2019 voters were promised reduced business rates bills on SMEs. Can the Minister outline what has been done to lower the UBR? Can she explain how linking the UBR to inflation through the consumer prices index will help to reduce the tax burden on businesses?

Overall, the Bill is welcome as a positive step in the right direction. We must do all we can to protect our retail sector. The Conservative party is always the party for small businesses. I would like a business rates system that flexes with profit rather than one based on the value of a property—that would be fairer.

5.27 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): I have been looking forward to this legislation, partly because I am passionate about any measures that will revive the fortunes of the high street in North Shropshire's historic and beautiful market towns, and partly because, from my previous role as an accountant and financial controller, I have first-hand experience of dealing with the business rates system.

Businesses are facing tough conditions. Every ingredient, nut and bolt and widget purchased is more expensive. Many businesses are finding it impossible to pass on those additional costs to consumers. On top of that, energy costs have been historically high. Many businesses were forced to sign up to fixed-price energy contracts when prices were stratospheric. The Government left those businesses facing a cliff edge when support was withdrawn at the beginning of this month. Many pubs, cafés and restaurants have seen a 90% cut in Government

[Helen Morgan]

help. In my constituency, they are reporting to me that they are looking at closure. Businesses have it really tough right now and they need a break. They need a Government who will

“cut the burden of tax on business by reducing business rates... via a fundamental review of the system.”

Those are not my words but the commitment that the Conservatives made in their 2019 manifesto.

The Bill before us today is a disappointment. It tinkers around the edge of an outdated tax that does not work for the modern economy. Our high street shops are competing with online retailers that do not have the same overheads as the physical shops that form the backbone of our communities' common spaces. Business rates increase those costs further, making it even harder to compete. The Treasury Committee's 2019 report, “Impact of business rates on business” confirmed that view.

In market towns such as Oswestry in my constituency, the smaller independent stores benefit from small business rates relief. They are not paying anything, so more frequent revaluations will not help them because they pay nothing in the first place. The opportunity was to make the difference for the larger retailers—the anchor tenants and the drivers of footfall that are needed to bring people back to town centres in person. I think that opportunity has been missed.

Turning to the detail of the Bill, there are some steps in the right direction. The increase in the frequency of revaluations, from every five years to every three years, is clearly welcome. It is also right to enable businesses to use business rates improvement relief to encourage businesses to improve and upgrade their properties. We would hope that the relief might encourage businesses to look towards ways in which they can embrace decarbonisation.

It also seems sensible to link business rates to a unique taxpayer reference. The provisions around notification of completion of works look to be a welcome measure to reduce the possibility of fraud in relation to buildings being removed from the rating list while being refurbished. From experience, that struck me as a potential weak spot for fraud, so that measure is welcome.

However, I want to expand on the onerous nature of placing a responsibility on businesses to keep the Valuation Office Agency informed about market value and changes to the lease or ownership. Businesses already receive a notification to inform the Valuation Office Agency when something material changes at a premises—primarily, ownership or the registration of a lease—and they must provide detailed information to confirm that the rating value is still appropriate. Moving to an annual notification, even in the event of no change, would mean yet another form to fill in for the beleaguered financial controller, with whom I have huge sympathy, who is already bogged down in seemingly endless monthly and quarterly ONS returns, on top of their monthly and quarterly financial reporting requirements. It is estimated that around 700,000 small businesses that currently do not pay rates at all will be included in this annual form-filling exercise, with significant penalties in place if they get it wrong.

Speaking from my own experience, the VOA is not quick to decide and respond when changes are notified. I spent a year persuading the VOA to put a new office

building on the rating register and to record other alternations to a mixed-use site, including inviting the officers on a personal visit to assess the site at first hand. This was after the pandemic restrictions had been removed. Changes in case manager, records lost, confusion, and lack of interaction between the valuation for business rates and council tax meant that it was an administrative nightmare, as well as a business planning nightmare.

Businesses need to know what their rates liability is going to be. Cash-flow planning is critical to staying afloat, particularly at a time when businesses are struggling with soaring energy costs and rocketing inflation. Businesses cannot do that if they do not know what their rates bill will be; we should remember that the rates bill is backdated to the point circumstances change, not to the point that the Valuation Office Agency makes its decision.

I am extremely nervous about imposing a further administrative burden on small and medium-sized businesses, complete with harsh fines and penalties, when there is no acknowledgement of the importance of a swift response from the VOA. Surely some timetable could be put in place, at least for interim assessments, to help businesses to plan. I would be grateful if the Minister could consider corresponding reliefs or an appeals system, with remedies provided, when the VOA has taken an unreasonable amount of time to reach a decision, or got its decision wrong or in a state that requires challenge.

The current business rates system is broken. The Federation of Small Businesses said:

“these changes do not amount to the fundamental overhaul the system needs, to reduce the chilling impact of a regressive tax that you pay before even earning a penny in turnover, let alone profit.” Fundamentally, Liberal Democrats disagree with business rates. They are harmful to high streets and our wider economy, and the current framework is a huge burden for small businesses. They tax productive business investment in structures and equipment, rather than taxing profits and land value.

The Liberal Democrats would abolish the broken business rates system and replace it with a commercial landowner levy. That levy would be paid initially by the landlords of commercial properties, not the businesses occupying them, and it would feature annual revaluations, which Netherlands has proved are possible administratively. It would tax only the land value of commercial sites, not productive investment. Removing buildings, utilities and other physical capital from taxation would boost business investment, in turn increasing productivity and wages.

Liberal Democrat plans would improve our high streets by boosting investment and helping shops that struggle. None of that will be achieved by today's Bill.

5.33 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The Bill is welcome as it was a 2019 Conservative manifesto commitment to carry out a fundamental review of business rates, the final report for which was published alongside the 2021 autumn Budget.

I support the Bill generally, but I have two concerns. First, the Bill should be seen not as the endgame but as the start of the process to radically reform business rates. The ultimate objective should be to reduce the uniform business rate multiplier to something in the

order of 30p in the pound; to carry out annual revaluations; to abolish the multitude of complicated reliefs; and to digitalise the Valuation Office Agency. If we do so, business rates will be reduced to an affordable level, the system will be put on a long-term and more easily understood footing and we shall be able to get on with so-called levelling up—removing barriers that impede regional growth. That will enable businesses to know where they stand and to make long-term investment decisions. The message I continually get from the Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, which carries out quarterly economic surveys, is that the No. 1 concern for businesses in Suffolk is always business rates.

My second worry is that the Bill will increase rather than ease the bureaucratic and administrative burden on businesses. I urge the Government to introduce amendments to prevent that. I shall set out my concerns in more detail later.

Before I came to this place, I was a chartered surveyor; I did not specialise in business rates, but I carried out appeals from time to time. Business rates are a tax with certain inherent advantages for the Treasury: they yield approximately £25 billion per annum, they are relatively easy to collect and they are difficult to avoid. However, if the system is not administered properly, they can have a significant negative impact on businesses generally, on specific sectors—we have heard about the challenges facing hospitality and retail—and on local economies.

Business rates are in effect a tax on existence rather than on profitability, so it is important that they be kept as low as possible. High business rates not only discourage occupation, but disincentivise investment in innovation, improvement and expansion—and if you will forgive a quick commercial interlude while I am on that subject, Madam Deputy Speaker, I must congratulate PCE Automation of Beccles, which has just received the King's award for enterprise in recognition of excellence in innovation.

At a time of high inflation, high utility costs and stubbornly high rents, business rates are a fixed cost that occupiers cannot escape. The Chancellor made some significant and welcome announcements in his autumn statement, including the revaluation that is now coming into effect, the reform of the transitional relief scheme and the freezing of the uniform business rates multiplier. The Bill provides the necessary legislative framework for some of those changes and for others that arise from the Government's review, as well as making some minor legislative adjustments and correcting some anomalies. I shall not go through the Bill's provisions in detail at this stage, but I repeat that I applaud the Chancellor for the undertakings that he made in November, which are much needed in these challenging times. As I say, however, the Bill must be seen as the start, not the conclusion, of the process of radical reform.

It is also necessary to guard against some unintended consequences. As drafted, the Bill will add to the regulatory burden on businesses at a time when we should be seeking to ease and reduce it. The new duty to notify set out in clause 13, which the VOA has justified as necessary to facilitate the move to a review every three years, will result in a mountain of paperwork for ratepayers. Businesses will now have to notify the VOA of any changes to their properties within 60 days, or find themselves facing punitive fines or even imprisonment. It is not right for

us to expect businesses which are already facing an extraordinarily challenging regulatory environment to put up with that.

This obligation was formerly the VOA's, but has now been transferred to the ratepayer. The VOA has no corresponding obligation, and is able to respond to requests for information at its leisure. Ideally, the duty to notify should be removed from the Bill in its entirety, but if the Government wish to impose this new duty, they must do so with the principle of reciprocity in mind. The VOA must have a corresponding duty to respond within 60 days, giving the ratepayers rebates on their business rates bills equivalent to the penalties imposed on them if there is a failure to respond within that time.

My second concern relates to clause 14, which proposes changes in the circumstances in which rateable values may be altered outside the regular cycle of revaluations. I am concerned about the consequences of this clause, and I believe that it should be removed. Let me explain the background. A "material change in circumstances" allows ratepayers recourse to pursue relief on their business rates bills when factors outside their control have an impact on their ability to do business and to operate. To my mind, that is logical natural justice, but the VOA seems to dislike the paperwork associated with these claims, as is evidenced by its mass rejection of 400,000 covid-related appeals. It appears that to prevent the repetition of such circumstances, it is now proposed to exempt any Government legislation as qualifying grounds for a challenge. In practice, this means that the Government would be able to act with impunity and enact policies that could hamper businesses without allowing them the legal recourse to challenge them. That is fundamentally unjust.

As I have mentioned, the move to three-yearly revaluations should not be the endgame, but should be a stepping stone towards annual revaluations. The advantage of that approach is that there would no longer be a need for the current complex system of reliefs; businesses would in effect be paying a tax that moved with the market, and that would lead to greater long-term certainty which would then encourage private sector investment. At first glance, annual revaluations might seem too complicated and challenging, but, as we have heard, such a system operates in the Netherlands, and there is no reason why we should not have it here.

It is regrettable that, for many businesses, discussions and negotiations with the VOA are conducted in accordance with the philosophy of "one rule for us and another for them". The proposed duty to notify embeds this sentiment still further. It must be removed, and the system must become more transparent. The VOA's processes are notoriously opaque, and leave many ratepayers scratching their heads when they receive their revaluation figures. As it stands, a business's only recourse when it comes to understanding its rateable value is to go through the VOA's complex "check, challenge and appeal" process, which many feel is deliberately designed to discourage people from—dare I say it—peering behind the curtain.

The Bill, as currently drafted, does provide the VOA with the power to give more information to ratepayers, but only at its discretion, if it considers it "reasonable to do so". This provision is set out in clause 10, but it is vague and undefined, and some might say that it provides the VOA with the ability to reveal information to no

[Peter Aldous]

one while appearing to be forthcoming. If clause 13 requires businesses to provide reams of information to the VOA, it is only right that it should reciprocate. Ratepayers must be given the option to understand the process that defines the tax that they will be paying for the next three years, and to reasonably expect an answer within 60 days of submitting their request, thereby mirroring the duty to notify.

My final concern relates to another unintended consequence of the duty to notify, as currently drafted in the Bill, which is the wave of predatory, unqualified and unscrupulous rating advisers that I fear it may spawn. The ramifications of financial advice, whether good or bad, can be huge for individuals and businesses. Most financial advisers in most settings require a licence to give advice from a sanctioning body. One therefore has to ask why this does not also apply to rating advisers.

**Helen Morgan:** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. On his point about advice, financial controllers are inundated daily by people cold calling them and offering to challenge their rates bills. They have no idea who they are, yet they take a cut of any saving that might be made. This indicates two things to me: first, that the system is not fit for purpose; and secondly, that the rating values are inadequate in the first place. Does he agree with me on those points?

**Peter Aldous:** I agree with the hon. Lady. This is a specialist area of valuation. When I was practising as a chartered surveyor, I quite often got called in because the client, the business owner, had gone down the line of paying money upfront to someone who had sent them a circular—they may have paid them £1,000 or £2,000—and that person had suddenly disappeared. I often got called in to try to sort out that type of situation.

At the current time, with the publication of the new rating list, thousands of businesses are being flooded by solicitations from charlatan rating advisers who are taking advantage of the confusion created by the complicated rating system. There is a significant risk that many businesses, particularly SMEs, will have neither the understanding nor the capacity to meet the duty to notify. They will increasingly fall prey to such bad advice, and this could have a devastating impact. The Government should therefore consider some sort of licensing to protect businesses from the scourge of cowboys looking to take advantage of the duty to notify.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to hear that I have now reached my conclusion. Taking into account that we have been awaiting legislation on the reform of business rates for the whole of the 13 years that I have been an MP, this legislation is indeed welcome. For too long we have been carrying out reviews and searching for holy grail solutions that involve the abolition of business rates, but my personal view is that those do not exist. As I have said, the Chancellor should be commended for the positive announcements he made in his autumn statement, some of which are included in this Bill. The Bill should be viewed as a step in the right direction. However, as currently drafted, it contains a number of false steps that are likely to have unintended consequences. It is also vital to recognise that this is not

the end of the reform of business rates, but it is the end of the beginning. I am happy to support the Bill this afternoon, but it has defects that need to be addressed as it progresses through this and the other place, and I hope that the Government will take on board the concerns that I and my colleagues across the Chamber have highlighted.

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

5.49 pm

**James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op):** As we have heard today, this Bill makes a number of changes to the system of business rates, with most of these changes arising from the Government's business rates review, which was first announced in March 2020. My colleagues and I will not oppose the Bill today, as any support it offers to businesses is welcome. However, as we know, some business organisations are concerned that the Bill will increase the overall administrative burden on businesses, and I will address that point in a moment.

First, it is worth putting this package of measures in the context of Government promises on businesses rates in recent years. The review that led to many of these measures was first launched by the Prime Minister when he was Chancellor at the Budget of March 2020. He called this project a

“fundamental review...of the long-term future of business rates.”—  
[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 281.]

When the final report was published alongside the autumn Budget of October 2021, however, the verdict was clear. As the British Retail Consortium concluded at the time, it

“falls far short of the truly fundamental reform that is needed and was promised in the government's 2019 manifesto.”

The truth is that the changes before us, now more than three years in the making, miss the opportunity to begin replacing the current system of business rates with one that understands the needs of British businesses and that is fit for the modern day.

What is more, right now, we know that many smaller businesses, particularly those on high streets, that are already struggling after the pandemic and a difficult winter of high energy bills are worried about the impact of the current revaluation, which is why we called for an immediate cut in business rates for small firms this year by raising the threshold for small business rates relief in 2023-24. This would be funded by an increase in the rate of the digital services tax that is charged on the global revenues of global tech giants. We were disappointed that the Government failed to adopt our plans, although we welcome their having heeded our call to ensure that firms are immediately given any discount they are owed through the current revaluation, thanks to the Bill's changes to transitional relief.

It is clear, however, that businesses need a Government who are ready to go further. In the Government's own press release on the Bill, a quote from the British Retail Consortium's chief executive makes it clear that

“the job is not done.”

That is, of course, right, and members of the Government may well accept that the job is not done but, after 13 years in power, how much longer can Conservative



Members get away with the excuse that they have not yet got round to the urgent and fundamental reforms our country needs?

We know that fundamental reform is needed, which is why Labour has said that if we win the next general election, we will replace the business rates system with one that shifts the burden of tax away from the high street and on to online giants, that moves towards annual revaluations and that truly supports entrepreneurship. Businesses across the country want the Government to transform the system of business rates to meet the needs of the modern economy, which is what Labour will do in power.

There are measures in the Bill that we hope will give at least some support to struggling businesses. As I mentioned, we have been calling on the Government to remove downward caps on transitional relief, so we welcome the measures in the Bill to make that so. We are also glad to see the revaluation cycle being moved to every three years, rather than every five years, although we are concerned that the Government have kicked the prospect of annual revaluations far into the long grass.

The importance of annual revaluations was, again, made clear in the Government's own press release on the Bill, in a quote from the chief executive of the British Property Federation, who made it clear that her organisation

"would like to see Government continuing to strive towards even more frequent revaluations in due course."

We are therefore concerned that, in the final report of the business rates review, the Government said only that they will

"consider the case for...annual revaluations...in the longer-term."

We do not have to read between the lines very hard to conclude that annual revaluations are off the table under this Government.

Furthermore, alongside the reservations that many businesses and their representative bodies hold about how the Government's reforms do not go far enough, we know that others, such as the Shopkeepers' Campaign, have raised important concerns that the Bill will increase the overall administrative burden on businesses. As we have heard, the Bill introduces a new legal duty on business rate payers to provide annual confirmation of the information held on their property and to inform the Valuation Office Agency of any changes made to the property within 60 days of the change or face a fine.

The new requirements will have an impact on business rate payers and on the billing authorities—indeed, the impacts are referred to in the information and impact note on the new duty, published by the Treasury and the VOA. I wish to press the Minister on two points in particular on the impact of the new duty. First, the note makes it clear that the average annual cost for each ratepayer will more than double as a result of the new duty and that in the first year the cost for each ratepayer of complying with the new system will be more than three times that of doing so under the current system. Will he confirm whether that is correct? The note goes on to accept that the 309 billing authorities in England with responsibility for business rates will be impacted by the measures too, but it says that the

"costs are yet to be quantified."

Will the Minister confirm when the Government will publish the detail of what those costs are? I look forward to hearing his response to those points in his closing remarks.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), the shadow local government Minister, and I have made clear, we will not be opposing this Bill today. However, although any support for businesses that are struggling may be welcome, it is clear that promises of fundamental reform of the business rates system under this Government are gone. As businesses and their representative bodies have been making clear, even as we debate the Bill, much more needs to be done. Yet it is also clear that after 13 years of economic failure, and with a party now chronically divided by infighting, the Conservatives are incapable of delivering the reform that businesses need. Our country needs a new Government, who are ready to replace business rates with a system fit for the future, ready to work hand in hand with British businesses to succeed, and ready to get our economy growing in every part of the country, making everyone better off.

5.56 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley):** It is a pleasure to close this short but constructive debate on the future of the business rates system. As we have heard, our consumer habits are changing faster than ever before and with that come challenges for high-street businesses. The Government have conducted a review of business rates, as promised, and now, through this Bill, we will continue to reform them to better meet the needs of our economy, while sustaining vital taxpayer subsidy for local government.

In the time available, I wish to address some of today's contributions. I was grateful for the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who raised the important issue of smaller businesses and those in the hospitality and retail sector. I know, as do many of us across the Chamber, that there have been challenges in the past few years. I have seen that in my constituency, as will every Member in their constituency. That is precisely why the combination of what the Government have outlined in the autumn statement and in this Bill seeks to support businesses that are smaller or in those sectors, along with a wider group of businesses from across the economy. We are talking about 75% relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses; the removal of downward caps so that there is immediate relief when business rates reduce; and more than £14 billion-worth of relief. I hope that that goes some way to assuaging her concern.

My hon. Friend also rightly raised the issue of annualised revaluations, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the Opposition Front-Benchers and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). As the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), outlined when opening the debate, we absolutely want to see more frequent revaluations. That is exactly why we have brought forward the proposals to move from a five-year revaluation cycle to a three-year one. We think that is a big step forward in making business rates more effective and closer to the businesses that pay them. We also recognise that this

[Lee Rowley]

will take time and we need to do it in steps. As has been outlined by colleagues, we will continue to look at it and we hope we will be able to make further progress in the years ahead. The British Retail Consortium was mentioned in a number of speeches. Organisations such as the BRC have welcomed this approach, and I hope that Members from across the House will welcome the move to a three-year revaluation cycle.

Hon. Members have raised a point about data. It is always challenging to make the decision about where to request data and where to require it, and how to get the right balance between ensuring that the tax system is effective—we need data in order to make sure of that—and not creating an undue burden on businesses.

The purpose behind the collection of this data is to ensure both that we have the best information possible to make decisions in the future and that we balance proportionately the information that we collect to make sure that the tax is collected in the right way. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney that, with regard to the administrative questions, we are committed to a soft launch of the collection of this data. We will not activate the compliance regime until we are satisfied that it works, and we will be piloting it further with a range of users. We accept that we need to get this right, but the principles behind ensuring that we have the most up-to-date system, which requires data to achieve, are sound. It will be through the pilot and the review process, following the Bill hopefully becoming law, that we will be able to review the changes to make sure that they work for businesses in the best way possible.

Briefly, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney also touched on clause 14, which recognises the particular challenge visible during covid. Of course everybody in this House will have hoped that highly unusual and atypical events such as covid could never happen, but because they have, it is incumbent on us all in this place to make sure that we have considered the situation should—hopefully it will never happen—such atypical events happen again in the future. We are trying through clause 14 to recognise that such things may happen, while hoping that they never will. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his constructive comments. He says that the Bill is a step in the right direction, and we agree. I hope that my comments now have reassured him about those other steps that he is not yet sure about.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire made a number of important points about the burden of business rates, about ensuring that they are proportionate, and about the challenge of taxation in general. She is absolutely right to do so, but it would have made more sense had the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), not been out on the airwaves just a few days ago committing himself to spending more money, which the country does not have, and which taxes such as this have to pay for. There is a consistency problem with the Liberal Democrats. For those of us who are not in the Liberal Democrats, we recognise that consistency is something that they have never shown.

Finally, I welcome the fact that those on the Opposition Front Bench will not be opposing the Bill tonight. I also welcome their generally constructive comments, and

I hope that I have been able to answer them, but—there is always a but with the Opposition Front Bench—the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) suggested that we were waiting for a Labour Government to fix this issue. The question is what the fix would be, because we have put forward a plan that ensures relief for businesses up and down the land. Was she talking about the fix of 2021, when the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) was going to scrap business rates? Is it the fix a few days later, after 2021, when it was to significantly change business rates, but not to scrap them? Or is it the fix of 2022 when business rates were to be modernised but without any clarity as to how that would happen. The Labour party says what it needs to say, but it has no plan on issues such as this.

In front of us today is a Bill that improves and modernises our business rates and makes them more efficient and effective, on top of £14 billion of relief for all businessmen and women and all businesses across the country. It makes sure that those rates are as effective and efficient as they can be and that businesses in this country thrive in the future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

## NON-DOMESTIC RATING BILL (PROGRAMME)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating Bill:

### *Committal*

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

*Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading*

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

### *Other proceedings*

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—  
(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## NON-DOMESTIC RATING BILL (MONEY)

*King's recommendation signified.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—  
(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

**NON-DOMESTIC RATING BILL  
(WAYS AND MEANS)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the payment of sums to the Secretary of State in respect of non-domestic rating,

(2) the payment of those and other sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Andrew Stephenson.*)

*Question agreed to.*

**Public Order Bill**

*Consideration of Lords message*

**Clause 11**

POWERS TO STOP AND SEARCH WITHOUT SUSPICION

6.5 pm

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):**  
I beg to move,

That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 6H and 6J.

The Public Order Bill is about giving the police the tools they need to tackle the highly disruptive protest tactics we have seen in recent months, and indeed today, which have blocked ambulances, delayed passengers making important journeys, prevented children from getting to school and patients from getting to hospital, and at times held the capital city to ransom. I do not wish to detain the House for any longer than necessary, because we have debated this Bill numerous times in recent months and it has undoubtedly been given the scrutiny the British people want and expect. It is time for that delay to end and for this Bill to become law.

The other place has once more voted to amend clause 11, the power to stop and search without suspicion—although it is worth saying that that power can only be used if a police officer reasonably believes that certain protest-related offences will happen in the very near future, so it is not a power that can be used wholly arbitrarily. It is most disappointing to see that vote after this elected Chamber disagreed with their Lordships in their last amendments.

As my noble colleague explained in the other place, it is our view that the changes are unnecessary. First, a legal framework already exists for all stop-and-search powers. Under section 3.8 of Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 code A, the code of practice for powers to stop and search, police officers have to give their name or identification number, the police station to which they are attached and grounds for every single stop and search, essentially replicating the proposal in their Lordships' motion 6H. Those criteria are covered in the GOWISELY mnemonic drilled into every police officer.

Secondly, it is our view that the requirement for police forces to establish a charter on the use of powers would cause unnecessary burdens on police forces and officers, something the Opposition have been concerned about throughout this Bill's passage. Plenty of long-established safeguards already exist for stop-and-search powers. Additionally, we have supported the National Police Chiefs' Council in its publication of national guidance on the use of body-worn video, which includes encouraging forces to share footage with external scrutiny groups to support transparency and reflective practice and learning.

On reporting on the use of stop-and-search powers, I would like to reassure the House that the Home Office already publishes an annual statistical bulletin, which outlines in detail the information gathered during each stop-and-search incident. That reporting will be conducted for the use of the new stop-and-search powers, both suspicion-led and suspicionless.

Finally, on publishing a statement giving reasons for the use of powers, as the Government reiterated in the other place, we recognise that communication on

[Chris Philp]

the use of these powers is a fundamental element of building trust and confidence between a force and the community it serves. The majority of forces, including the Metropolitan Police Service, already communicate their section 60 authorisations, and I know that communities appreciate knowing the details of the geographical area, time limits and justification for the authorisation. Those forces will continue that practice for these new powers.

Nevertheless, as the noble Lord Sharpe of Epsom committed to in the other place, the Government will amend PACE code A to require that, where it is operationally practical to do so, forces must communicate the extent of the area authorised for the suspicionless stop and search, the duration of an order and the reasons for that order. This Government commit to the spirit of what their Lordships are asking for, in their proposed new subsection (9D) of clause 11, through amendments to PACE code A. We will also amend PACE code A to place data collection within the legislative framework. It will include a breakdown of both suspicionless and suspicionless searches cross referenced with protected characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity.

I hope that those clear commitments—made in this House and in the other place, and reiterated here today—will satisfy hon. Members. Making changes to PACE code A is the right way to address those issues. The amendments to PACE code A will ensure consistency across all stop-and-search powers and allow for a full and robust consultation with external stakeholders, providing the right balance between tackling disruptive protesters and protecting the rights of each citizen where the powers are used. For those reasons, I hope that the House will agree with the Home Secretary in respectfully disagreeing with their Lordships' amendments 6H and 6J.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): I rise to speak against the Government's motion to disagree with Lords amendments 6H and 6J, which we support.

The amendments seek to do two things: first, to instruct officers to give their name, badge number and reason for stopping anyone they search under the new suspicionless stop-and-search powers, and secondly, to compel all police forces to set up a charter—which they would have to consult on, publish and independently evaluate—on the use of their suspicionless stop-and-search powers. To be clear, the amendments have nothing to do with patients not getting to hospital; nothing to do with blocking roads; nothing to do with whether stop and search without suspicion actually takes place. They are to do with the manner in which suspicionless stop and search is conducted.

The amendments are direct recommendations from Louise Casey's report—although she would go further and apply them to all stop and searches. Baroness Casey's review of the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service is a 300-page tour de force. The Home secretary welcomed the review and said:

"Accepting Baroness Casey's findings is not incompatible with supporting the institution of policing and the vast majority of brave men and women who uphold the highest professional standards."—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 165.]

The Prime Minister said:

"There needs to be a change in culture and leadership, and I know that the new Metropolitan commissioner will no doubt reflect on the findings of Louise's report, but is already making changes and that's right, because what was happening before is simply shocking and unacceptable."

He is right. Officers right across the Met are desperate to see those improvements put in place and action taken to rebuild the confidence of Londoners.

Labour tabled Lords amendments 6H and 6J to clause 11 to help put into legislation some of the improvements recommended by Baroness Casey, and it is very disappointing and surprising that the Government have tabled a motion to disagree. Clause 11 brings wide-ranging powers for the police to stop and search anyone in the vicinity of a protest, including anyone who happens to be walking through the area. The Government's proposals risk further damaging the delicate relationship between the police and the public by significantly expanding stop-and-search powers to a protest context.

We agree that stop and search is a really important tool. The Minister has said on many occasions that stop and search is important for looking for weapons, and of course, we absolutely support that. We support suspicionless stop and searches—or section 60s—when serious violence, or terrorism, has occurred. But it is important to reflect that we are talking about using the suspicionless stop-and-search power not for terrorism or serious violence, but for protests—it is about searching for glue, a padlock, a microphone or a speaker. That will not have been agreed by the chief superintendent but by an inspector, because the Government rejected our amendment to make that change. Really, clause 11 should have been removed from the Bill, but we are not here to debate whether we should have suspicionless stop and search because that debate has concluded. Today, we are debating sensible, important changes to the Government's clause to insert some safeguards into a wide-ranging power and mitigate some of its potential adverse impacts.

**Chris Philp:** Why do the Opposition object to implementing some of the key elements of the Lords amendments in PACE code A, where most regulations relating to this issue already sit? They can be updated relatively easily if necessary, so is not PACE code A the right place to do this? In relation to Louise Casey's recommendation, she did not specify that these changes should happen in primary legislation. We are doing these things, just in PACE code A.

6.15 pm

**Sarah Jones:** My understanding is that the agreement to include some aspects of the amendments in PACE code A does not go the whole way towards what we are suggesting in this legislation. The attitude from the Government—that plenty of long-established safeguards already exist, as the Minister said at the start of his contribution—is wrong. We have lots of regulations in PACE code A and other places that are clearly not always adhered to. Louise Casey has identified this as a problem, she has made a suggestion and we suggest putting it in the Bill, which I think is a reasonable response.

We know that stop and searches can go wrong when there is a communication failure from the officers carrying out the search. We welcome the changes announced in the Lords, although we do not know exactly what the

changes to PACE code A will be, or how or when they will happen. Our colleagues in the other place tried to add points about communication into the Bill and suggested increasing the seniority of the officer allowing a suspicionless stop and search, but both amendments were rejected. Baroness Casey suggests as a minimum that Met officers should be required to give their name, their shoulder number, the grounds for the stop and a receipt confirming the details of the stop. Lords motion A1 built on Louise Casey's recommendations and attempted to add them to the legislation.

It is worth remembering that a recent report by Crest Advisory examining the experience of black communities nationally of stop and search found that 77% of black adults support the use of stop and search in relation to suspicion of carrying a weapon, but that less than half of those who have been stopped and searched felt that the police had communicated well with them or explained what would happen.

It would be helpful to understand whether the Minister agrees with Baroness Casey's recommendations in full and, if he does not, whether he thinks she is wrong or believes that something else should be done instead. The Casey report was devastating, and Ministers have so far been unable to offer any solutions to make the reforms we need in policing. Here is an opportunity for the Minister to signal the Government's intent to make those reforms. We have heard the warnings from former police officers that some of the powers in the Bill risk diminishing trust in public institutions. The Peel principles on policing by consent said that

“the police are the public and the public are the police”.

The Home Secretary said in her statement to the House on the Casey review:

“When it comes to changing the law or introducing any frameworks that are necessary, we in the Home Office will do that”.—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2023; Vol. 730, c. 167.]

Here is a chance for the Home Secretary to keep her word. It will not change anything in terms of who can be stopped; it will just make the process more transparent and better for everyone. On the 30th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, wouldn't that be a good thing to do? I urge Members across the House to back the Lords amendments and reject the Government's motion tonight.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I find myself, I am afraid, in agreement with the Opposition spokesperson. I also support the Casey recommendations, based as they were on a horrifying report about the behaviour of the Met over the years. Let us be clear: no Government of any persuasion have managed to get the Met to behave—and not just the Met; other police forces, too—in a manner that is acceptable to the public, bearing in mind that there have been Governments of both orientations since Stephen Lawrence.

The second point I would make very quickly is that when the Home Secretary in 2010—my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), for those who do not remember—limited stop and search, she did not do so out of an excess of liberal sympathy. She did so because, at that point in time, stop and search was being used in such a way that it caused serious race relations problems in several parts of the country. That was because stop and search was largely targeted at stopping violence, and at that point—it may well still be true

today—the perpetrators of knife crime and the victims of knife crime mostly came from minority communities. Although minority communities themselves were not happy about the operation of the system, they understood why it was there. That was a different order of magnitude from using suspicionless stop and search to control demonstrations.

Don't get me wrong: I think that we should have some fairly fierce legislation—which we do have now—for dealing with people who deliberately destroy the lives of the public, or uproot and disrupt the lives of the public. I am a great believer in the right of demonstration, but I do not think it should go beyond a certain level. That is why I support the Lords amendment to put this provision on the face of the Bill.

To respond to the Minister's question to the Opposition spokeswoman, we should turn the question on its head: why should it not be on the face of the Bill? After all, that would broadcast in clear terms what we want to happen. We want the police to behave in a respectful and careful manner when they use this power. Indeed, I am slightly surprised that the Lords amendments did not also include making sure that video footage from the body cameras was available, including to the lawyers of the people who were stopped and searched after the event, if need be.

I think this is a worthwhile amendment. As has been said, I think it is very much in line with the Casey report, and we as a Government have to set our minds to ensuring that every recommendation of the Casey report is put in place and to returning the Metropolitan police and other police forces to the level of public respect that we wish they had now.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale)**: I call the SNP spokesman.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I, too, rise to speak in support of the Lords amendments. These are amendments about suspicionless stop and search, and we need to draw a breath and remind ourselves that suspicionless stop and search really is a significant power. It is a hugely invasive, intrusive and arbitrary police tactic that causes incredible inconvenience for those who are impacted, and that is something that has not seemed to register at all with the Government throughout the entire process of discussing clause 11.

From the Casey report, we also know of the hugely significant impact that these powers can have on black and minority ethnic communities in particular, so it is plain wrong to be pressing on when trust has been undermined by a series of horrendous stories, particularly regarding the Metropolitan police, but far from exclusively. Nobody in this Chamber is saying that suspicionless stop and search powers are never, ever appropriate, but there must be serious justifications for them. Of course, there are serious justifications when it comes to terrorism or serious violence, but the powers in the Bill apply in circumstances that do not come remotely close to justifying their use. In some circumstances, we are talking about an inspector having a suspicion that somebody somewhere might commit a public nuisance. That is absolutely no basis for setting up a suspicionless stop and search regime, so this is an appallingly inappropriate expansion of such powers at a time when Casey has called for a reset of practice with regard to them.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

As such, we support these Lords amendments. The arguments in favour of them have been set out comprehensively in the last two speeches that we have heard. If anything, the amendments are very limited and do not go anywhere near far enough, but they are just about better than nothing, and they may provide some reassurance for those who are going to be at the sharp end of such searches. We therefore support them and disagree with the Government motion.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): I return to trust, which is the basis of policing by consent. We need trust in the police, not just so that when people pick up the phone they get assistance, but from an intelligence perspective as well. One concern that I have had consistently throughout the debate on the Bill is that, in eroding that trust, we will fail to get the intelligence that we need in order to prevent some of the offences that the Government are attempting to stop via the Bill.

The Minister has pointed out the additions to the PACE code, but I wonder whether, if those in the other place had not persisted in their course in relation to suspicionless stop and search, we would have got that climbdown from the Government. I agree with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) that we need this provision on the face of the Bill. The reality is that when we look separately at section 60 searches—again, this is from the Casey report—it does not appear that a sudden surge in use had any effect on the underlying trend.

I have deep concerns that if the Government are successful in disagreeing with the Lords amendments today, which I suspect they might be, we will miss the opportunity of the Casey report and, several years from now, we will be standing in this place debating the fact that—we told the House so—stop and search does not work.

**Chris Philp:** I do not want to rehearse at great length points I have made previously, but I reiterate in response to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), that the Government believe that these powers, which are to be used in limited circumstances, are necessary pre-emptively to prevent people who are going equipped to disrupt the day-to-day lives of fellow citizens, whether it is with equipment to allow them to lock on to pieces of critical national infrastructure, to glue themselves to roads or to climb up gantries and attach themselves to equipment over the M25. They go equipped—it is an intentional, planned activity—and there are occasions when it will be necessary for the police to conduct stop and searches where they reasonably believe that a crime may be committed, even when no suspicion attaches to a particular individual.

I reiterate my point that the substance or key points of the amendments either are covered or will be covered by PACE code A. In relation to Lords amendment 6H, as I said, the officer giving their name and their badge number, the details of the stop they consider relevant and the grounds for the search are already covered by paragraph 3.8 of PACE code A. It is in there already, and officers do it already. In relation to issuing a statement giving the reasons for these particular powers, we will

make sure that PACE code A sets that out even more clearly. The amendments have either been implemented already, or we are committed to implementing their substance and spirit using PACE code A.

Why are we using PACE code A, rather than putting the amendments in the Bill? First, it is for consistency. These sorts of conditions are set already in PACE code A, and we want to be consistent with how things operate already. Furthermore, when setting out guidelines, it is generally better to use instruments such as PACE code A or regulations, because where changes or updates are needed, it is much easier to do that by amending secondary legislation, guidelines or codes of practice, rather than by going back and amending primary legislation, which can happen only infrequently.

Those are the reasons we have taken the approach we are taking. There is a good rationale for that, and I therefore urge the House to join the Home Secretary in respectfully disagreeing with their lordships on Lords amendments 6H and 6J.

*Question put,* That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 6H and 6J.

*The House divided:* Ayes 270, Noes 200.

## Division No. 216]

[6.27 pm

### AYES

Afolami, Bim	Chalk, Alex
Afriyie, Adam	Chishti, Rehman
Aiken, Nickie	Churchill, Jo
Aldous, Peter	Clark, rh Greg
Anderson, Lee	Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Anderson, Stuart	Clarke, Theo ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )
Andrew, rh Stuart	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Argar, rh Edward	Clarkson, Chris
Atherton, Sarah	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Atkins, Victoria	Colburn, Elliot
Bacon, Gareth	Collins, Damian
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Costa, Alberto
Bailey, Shaun	Courts, Robert
Baker, Duncan	Coutinho, Claire
Baker, Mr Steve	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Baldwin, Harriett	Crabb, rh Stephen
Barclay, rh Steve	Crosbie, Virginia
Baynes, Simon	Crouch, Tracey
Benton, Scott	Davies, rh David T. C.
Beresford, Sir Paul	Davies, Gareth
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Davies, Mims
Bhatti, Saqib	Davison, Dehenna
Blackman, Bob	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Dines, Miss Sarah
Bowie, Andrew	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bradley, Ben	Docherty, Leo
Brady, Sir Graham	Donelan, rh Michelle ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )
Brereton, Jack	Double, Steve
Brine, Steve	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Bristow, Paul	Drax, Richard
Britcliffe, Sara	Duddridge, Sir James
Browne, Anthony	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Bruce, Fiona	Dunne, rh Philip
Buchan, Felicity	Eastwood, Mark
Burghart, Alex	Edwards, Ruth
Butler, Rob	Ellis, rh Michael
Cairns, rh Alun	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Eustice, rh George
Carter, Andy	Evans, Dr Luke
Cartledge, James	
Cash, Sir William	
Caulfield, Maria	

Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Fell, Simon  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fysh, Mr Marcus  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Grant, Mrs Helen  
 Gray, James  
 Grayling, rh Chris (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Harrison, Trudy  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Howell, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkyns, Andrea  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Keegan, rh Gillian

Knight, Julian (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Lewis, rh Brandon  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 May, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Jason  
 McPartland, rh Stephen  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Miller, rh Dame Maria  
 Milling, rh Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nici, Lia  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Qince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Robinson, Gavin  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Russell, Dean

Rutley, David  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Scully, Paul  
 Seely, Bob  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Sunderland, James  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Ady*)  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan  
 Barker, Paula  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Black, Mhairi  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Bonnar, Steven  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brown, Ms Lyn  
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
 Bryant, Sir Chris  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Carden, Dan  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Cherry, Joanna  
 Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Cowan, Ronnie

Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, Laura  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Villiers, rh Theresa  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warburton, David (*Proxy vote cast by Craig Mackinlay*)  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whately, Helen  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Wiggan, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wood, Mike  
 Young, Jacob  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Robert Largan and**  
**Amanda Solloway**

#### NOES

Coyle, Neil  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cruddas, Jon  
 Cryer, John  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 David, Wayne  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 Davis, rh Mr David  
 Day, Martyn  
 Debbonaire, Thangam  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Doogan, Dave  
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Efford, Clive  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Farron, Tim  
 Farry, Stephen  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Foord, Richard  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Grant, Peter

Green, Sarah  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Haigh, Louise  
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette  
 Hanna, Claire  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast  
 by Chris Elmore*)  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacAskill, Kenny  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mc Nally, John  
 McCabe, Steve

McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
 McDonald, Stuart C.  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote  
 cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 McMahan, Jim  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote  
 cast by Brendan O'Hara*)  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reed, Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz

Shah, Naz  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Alyn  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stone, Jamie  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tarry, Sam  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick

Thomson, Richard  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 West, Catherine  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa  
 Whitley, Mick  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Winter, Beth  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Yasin, Mohammad

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Christian Wakeford and  
 Colleen Fletcher**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Lords amendments 6H and 6J disagreed to.*

*Ordered,* That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 6H and 6J;

That Chris Philp, Scott Mann, James Sunderland, Shaun Bailey, Sarah Jones, Gerald Jones and Stuart C. McDonald be members of the Committee;

That Chris Philp be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—  
*(Andrew Stephenson.)*

*Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.*

#### COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

*Ordered,*

That Ashley Dalton be added to the Committee of Public Accounts.—*(Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)*



## Mental Health Support: Wirral

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

6.45 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Speaker, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise a number of issues relating to mental health care in the Wirral. I thank my constituents, a number of whom have come to see me to share their experience, which is why I requested this debate. I also thank the many community groups across the Wirral that do incredible work to support people with mental health conditions to try to change and improve our borough, to make it a better, more supportive place for all our mental health.

As I said, the need for this debate has arisen because more and more constituents have come to see me in recent years about mental health challenges. I assume that that is common to many of us across the House. More commonly, constituents come to see me about something else, but in the process of the discussion about whatever the problem is—be it social security, education or their life at work—it has come to light that they have an unmet mental health need. I have asked them about the support and care available to them through our NHS, and it has become apparent that the services provided through our NHS in the Wirral—and I am sure across the country—are not sufficient.

It is difficult to unpick this issue sometimes because the shame and stigma that still exist around mental health mean that we are much less likely to hear from our constituents about their mental health problems. Yet if there is a problem with getting through the front door of A&E at Arrowe Park Hospital, I will hear about it almost immediately. If there is a problem with cancer waiting times, or hips and knees treatment, I am convinced that I would know about that. I worry that the problems with mental health treatment services in this country are not brought to our constituency surgeries in the same way. That made me want to have this debate—to shine a light on what is happening.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so early in her speech. I recently met a number of local school leaders in my constituency, who are concerned about children having gone through covid, not having the opportunity to play out, to be with their friends and to have regular schooling in the way that children normally do; not being able to play outside, do homework together and have sleepovers—all those bonding situations that are important in childhood. They are concerned about the mental health of their pupils. Does she agree that we need the Government to step up to the challenge, provide more sports for schools and follow Labour's lead by committing to specialist support for mental health issues in every single school?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for making that point. We could have another Adjournment debate on mental health support services for children and the role that education should play. I will not focus on children and young people today, but I share her concerns and I thank her for putting them on the record.

When trying to find out more about exactly what is going on in the Wirral, it was pretty frustrating and challenging to get clarity on mental health waiting times. That is a big inequality with physical health, partly because our traditional way of measuring waiting times in the NHS is referral to a consultant for treatment. But in mental health, the big focus is on services in which someone, hopefully, will not need to see a consultant. Expanding access to talking therapies, which were previously known as the improving access to psychological therapies service, is not about getting a referral to see a consultant, so I do not think there is the same political eye on mental health waiting times. Will the Minister say what plans the Government have to structurally change that and to try to figure out a way for us to track mental health waiting times more effectively? As constituency MPs, we need to be much more aware of what services are being provided to our constituents and in what timeframe.

I mentioned the NHS focus on talking therapies and the IAPT service. Having prepared for the debate, the Minister may know that unfortunately in the Wirral we have a significant backlog in waiting times for the IAPT service. Through asking questions, I have discovered a significant failure against one of the key measures. As of December 2022, the

“number of individuals accessing IAPT services as a percentage of prevalence in the borough”

was just less than 10%, but the national target is 25%. In my view, that is a big failure. It represents a significant number of people who ought to be accessing talking therapies who are not. What more can the Minister tell me about the oversight that central Government have of that?

The talking therapies staff in the Wirral are brilliant. Having inherited the backlog as a new provider, they have worked incredibly hard to try to get on top of the situation. They are doing significant and important work, but the delays have big consequences for my constituents. Some people who have come to my constituency surgeries have experienced challenging situations but not had the kind of support they needed.

Looking at the figures from NHS Cheshire and Merseyside more closely shows that unfortunately the issues get worse. Within the talking therapies service, the waiting time for the more significant level of counselling support can be up to eight to nine months, and there are nearly 700 people waiting for that counselling support. If I needed counselling and I was told that the waiting time was nine months, I would be really desperate. How is anybody supposed to deal with that wait, when they already know that they need help and support to face a life challenge? That is not fair. If the waiting time related to physical rather than mental health, I think a lot more attention would be paid to it.

Unfortunately, things are even worse in the Wirral. We know that early intervention is important, but the backlog and what was historically going on within our talking therapies service has been mirrored in the community mental health scheme. I have spoken to constituents whose loved ones have experienced significant mental health problems, and they have asked me what is going on with our community mental health team. Unfortunately, there are long waits there, too.

[Alison McGovern]

This is really problematic because those people may have experienced in-patient care and may need support after that. The aim may even be to prevent in-patient care. Those people should be supported in the community, but there is an average wait of 11 weeks. I worry that that situation will escalate. We know that we have real problems across our NHS, whether that is access to A&E or other parts of primary care. If people with a mental health condition are not supported as would be expected and given the care they need to improve their situation, they will end up in crisis. That is just how it is, and it will mean a knock-on for our A&E staff. It is a really frustrating situation, and I ask the Minister what the Government's plans are for resolving it. Do they have a strategy that could support improvement in the Wirral?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) said, we could have the same debate all over again—I will not suggest we do so tonight, because our staff may be hoping for a bit of an early night—about services for children and young people. Waiting times for them in the Wirral and across the rest of the country are really bad. The consequences of not getting support early are often worse for children and young people, who may be realising for the first time that they have a mental health condition. We need a strategy from the Government that includes children and young people, for all the reasons that I am sure the Minister is well aware of.

The gaps in performance and the poor quality of service across the Wirral and, I am sure, across the rest of the country are exacerbating inequality. Somebody who realises how long the wait on the NHS is for talking therapies or counselling, and who is in a well-paid or well-supported job may be able to access support almost immediately through their work plan, particularly if their job comes with an employee assistance programme. That is a good thing, because those people need help, but someone in a less secure job—on a zero-hours contract, perhaps, or on the minimum wage, as many social care staff and other key workers are—cannot access that support, so the situation is exacerbating inequality in our borough. I could say as much again about the structural causes of mental ill health, poor employment, poverty and other things, but I am sure the Minister is as concerned as I am about the exacerbation of structural inequality.

**Margaret Greenwood:** The Royal College of Psychiatrists published a report last year on the number of patients who are receiving support out of area, sometimes hundreds of miles from home. Anecdotally, I have heard about that happening in the Wirral. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about that? May I press the Minister today for an assurance that the Government will tackle the issue as a matter of urgency?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention, which I am sure the Minister has heard and will respond to.

There are three points on which I would really appreciate a response from the Minister. Having met providers of the talking therapies service and having listened to a whole host of professionals and constituents, I have

come to the conclusion that one simple thing is needed to improve our mental health service in the Wirral: we need more staff. We need more people in primary care, especially because it will help to free up our secondary and specialist care. We have to get to people early. At the moment there is a false economy: people cannot be seen when they first present themselves to their GP, so their conditions end up getting worse. We need much more community mental health care in the Wirral. I would love to hear from the Minister what the workforce plan is. How can we get people into counselling and therapeutic roles, so we can get them quickly into a place where they can tackle the problems that people face?

We also need much smarter targets. As I have said to the Minister, I have found it exasperating how hard it is to work out what is going on. I know that targets can sometimes create a perverse culture, and we do not want to impose targets that are unhelpful, but it should be a basic feature of our NHS that people who need care are able to know roughly how long they will wait, and that we as politicians are able to judge whether that is appropriate. That is what we do, as constituency MPs, when it comes to every other aspect of the NHS. I am simply asking the Minister for smarter and more visible targets which will help us to improve the quality of mental health support in the Wirral. As I said earlier, most people do not need to see a consultant, so I do not think that the traditional way of doing things in the NHS works. Can we not have a simpler, basic access-to-service mental health target that will work?

Finally, let me say something about staff targets in respect of treatments and pathways. The Wirral is a very innovative place for mental health care. We are doing great things with social prescribing, which I invite the Minister to investigate if she does not know about them already. We have developed new partnerships with a host of organisations, targeting young people in particular, and considering how we can use the voluntary and community sectors in much better ways. The Minister may be aware of “Open Door”, which has delivered some particularly innovative ways of providing peer-to-peer support. Thinking more about the different kinds of support that are available, how they can help and how they can be delivered in the most cost-efficient way possible is, in my view, an urgent job of analysis for the Department, and I would love to hear more from the Minister about the Government's plans for putting the various different treatments and pathways in place.

Ultimately, it comes down to this simple fact about the Wirral: we are not where we should be when it comes to giving people access to support. We need more counselling, and we need more therapeutic staff. I am keen to work with the Minister to try to deliver that.

7.1 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this important debate. I am always pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the progress that we are making with mental health services, not only locally but throughout England.

Mental health affects us all, and for those of us who experience poor mental health, its impacts can be detrimental to the ability to live well, thrive and achieve

personal goals. That is why improving mental health outcomes, particularly for those who experience worse outcomes than the general population, is a top priority for me and, in particular, for the Government. As the hon. Lady said, mental health still has some way to go before it is put on a par with physical health in terms of expectations, help, support and treatment, but we are making progress, in the Wirral and across the country.

The NHS long-term plan commits an additional £2.3 billion a year to the expansion and transformation of mental health services in England by 2024, which means that that 2 million more people will be able to receive NHS-funded mental health support than were able to receive it in 2018-19. For instance, we will have invested nearly £1 billion every year in community mental health care for adults with severe mental illnesses by the end of the current financial year, which will give 370,000 adults with such illnesses—including older adults—more choice and control over their care and support.

Let us not be under any illusion. We have seen a tsunami of referrals as older adults, children and young people have sought help and asked to be referred. In a way we have been successful in breaking some of the taboos and stereotypes related to mental health, which means that people are willing to come forward and ask for help, but our challenge now is to ensure that the services are able to meet that growing demand.

The hon. Lady mentioned targets as a way of being able to give people an indication of how long they should be waiting. Until fairly recently, mental health did not involve any waiting time standards, but we have introduced targets for children and young people with eating disorders. Let me give an example to illustrate the sheer scale of the current demand. The number of children and young people entering urgent treatment for eating disorders has increased by 11% in the last two years, and in the previous year it increased by 73%. A record number of people now need help, and our challenge is to provide the services that will provide it.

NHS England is currently consulting on the introduction of five new access waiting time standards for mental health services, which we hope will address some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Lady. They include introducing a target for urgent referral to a community-based mental health crisis service that patients across all ages should be seen within 24 hours of referral. For very urgent referrals to a community-based mental health crisis service, a patient should be seen within four hours of referral across all ages. Patients referred from A&E should be seen face to face within one hour by a mental health liaison or equivalent children and young people's service. Children, young people and their families presenting to community-based mental health services should start to receive care within four weeks. Those are the standards we are trying to introduce, and I will commit to updating the House on the progress we are making, because the standards in the Wirral that the hon. Lady has talked about in her speech are the standards that we would like to see across the country.

**Alison McGovern:** All those targets are about emergencies, which is important, but I hope that the Government will also be looking at targets for non-urgent care, because that is the way we prevent people from getting to the urgent bit in the first place.

**Maria Caulfield:** I absolutely agree and I will come on to talk about some of the work we are doing in that space in a moment.

We know that the number of children and young people experiencing mental health problems is rising, and that many of them risk continuing to experience mental health problems throughout their life as a result. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which is why there is a further £79 million to address the impact of covid on children's and young people's mental health. That has allowed around 22,500 more children and young people to access community health services in order to support them as early as possible.

One of the most exciting things we are doing relates to getting in at an earlier stage, as the hon. Lady has just suggested, and talking about mental health rather than just talking about mental illness. This involves our programme of mental health support teams that have been rolled out in schools and colleges. As of spring last year, there were 287 mental health support teams in place in around 4,700 schools and colleges across the country. The type of support they are able to provide to the young people and the teachers in those schools means that children who need help through early intervention can be signposted to it and that those with more complex needs can get into the system a lot quicker.

Our challenge now is to roll that out across all schools, and we are hoping to be able to do that as quickly as possible. In the hon. Lady's patch, there are 25 mental health support teams in place or planned in the area covering Cheshire and Merseyside, four of which are in the Wirral. I am hoping that she will start to see them being rolled out and that she will feel they make a difference. Mental health support teams now cover 26% of pupils a year earlier than originally planned, but we fully recognise that that is still a long way off 100%.

We know that there is more to do in terms of capital investment in mental health services so that local communities can have the infrastructure to see people earlier, rather than waiting until they are in crisis and need to be seen in A&E or in-patient facilities. That is why recently we provided £150 million of capital investment to be rolled over in the next two years via NHS England. From that fund, £408,000 is being invested in improvements in NHS 111 and crisis line infrastructure at the Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, to try to start that process of getting early intervention to people as quickly as possible.

The hon. Lady has pointed out that waiting times for some mental health services are longer than we would like, and I am happy to put my hands up and admit that that is the case. I can assure her that both locally and nationally we are doing all we can to ensure that people are getting the support they need as quickly as possible. Her local foundation trust has implemented a series of measures to help reduce those waiting times, and the number of young people waiting for appointments has been reduced by 68% since March last year. Her trust has also recruited 13.4 whole-time equivalent roles and made provision for additional sessions of consultant psychiatry. Again, there is lots more to do, but we are starting to make inroads into some of those long waits.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

I have already pointed out that NHS England is consulting on five new waiting time standards, and I will update the House as soon I have the information on when they are likely to be rolled out in practice. It is also important to note that many patients with mental health needs also suffer poorer physical health outcomes, which is why we announced in January that mental health will be part of the major conditions strategy so that we deal with both issues for people who are struggling with mental illness.

It is important that we talk about the local issues in Cheshire, Merseyside and the Wirral, and the hon. Lady's local integrated care board is currently undertaking a transformation programme within its mental health services. I understand from NHS England that local services in the Wirral are establishing a community model of mental health as part of their long-term plan ambition, with the aim of removing the gap between primary and secondary mental health services.

We want people to be seen much earlier when they go into crisis. Nationally, we are already seeing fewer people turning up to A&E because crisis teams are able to see them in the community much quicker and much earlier, with better outcomes for managing their symptoms. Talking Together Wirral has achieved the national target of 50% recovering through talking services since January 2023, and the Every Mind Matters website enables people to self-refer to talking therapies. We are doing quite well in getting first appointments, but our challenge is where people need further sessions, which is often where the long waits occur. I reassure the hon. Lady that we want to make it as easy as possible for people to self-refer into the system and, locally, the Wirral is starting to recover the waiting times for such services, but of course I am happy to work with her to see what more can be done.

The hon. Lady mentioned the fantastic, proactive work of her local health system. Cafe Create is a pilot programme launched in April 2022 as a joint commissioning venture between health services and Wirral Borough Council, and it provides an informal place for young people at risk of mental health crisis to drop in and access support from professionals and peers, counselling and drug and alcohol support. We want to support more programmes like that.

The myHappyMind programme is rolling out in the Wirral, reaching 22 primary schools by the end of last year. Plans, including a business case, are now in place

to bring the programme to every primary school in the Wirral by 2024, and I am happy to work with the hon. Lady on that because it is important to establish in every school that mental health is on a par with physical health. We teach young people and children about the importance of a good diet and exercise, and it is equally important to teach them about what mental wellbeing looks like and when to reach out for help.

There is a lot of work to do, and I do not dismiss in any way the hon. Lady's point about the significant number of people who want help and the sometimes long waits to access services, but we are making progress on trying to deal with the large number of cases coming forward and on supporting local communities such as the Wirral to roll out services.

I hope I have been able to reassure the hon. Lady of our commitment to improving mental health services, to introducing some of the standards she mentioned—I take her point that it needs to be about more than just urgent care standards—and to supporting local communities to address crises in the community rather than waiting for a person to need admission, sectioning or in-patient care. I hope we will be able to demonstrate the progress we have made.

Let me touch on one final point about staff. We have an ambition to recruit 27,000 more mental health workers and we are on track to meet that. That covers a wide range of mental health practitioners, from mental health nurses to psychiatrists, counsellors and psychologists. They are working in a wide range of roles, and I wish to reassure the hon. Lady that we are on track to meet that target. It is the key to providing these extra services; without the staff, we will not be able to provide the services we need. I hope I will be able to update the House fairly soon on further work we are doing, not only on recruitment, but on the retention of our fantastic staff, who do a really hard job. When we hear news about the health service being under pressure, we often hear about accident and emergency, intensive care units and hospital beds, but mental health workers do some of the hardest jobs in health and social care, and I pay tribute to them.

I hope that I have reassured the hon. Lady that we are working hard. I absolutely identify with the points she has made and look forward to working with her to improve mental health services in the Wirral.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.14 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Monday 24 April 2023

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

## UK's Exit from the European Union

4.30 pm

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** Before we start, Mr Speaker has asked me to say that Members who are able to bob to indicate that they wish to speak during the debate should do so. Obviously, if you cannot, we will take that into account. I should also say that about 13 Back Benchers are down on the list to speak in the debate. I know we have about three hours, but that probably means we will have to impose a time limit. At the moment, as guidance, Members might want to look to take about seven minutes, or something like that, given there are likely to be some interventions.

**Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 628226, relating to the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union.

It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

The petition, as at 11 am today, had attracted more than 178,000 signatories. The number was changing by the minute, so it will be even higher now. I highlight that it remains open until 18 May and I urge anyone who agrees with its premise to add to the significant support it has already received.

I am delighted to be leading the debate, not least because I wholeheartedly agree with the grounds of the petition and its request:

“The benefits that were promised if the UK exited the European Union have not been delivered, so we call upon the Government to hold a Public Inquiry to assess the impact that Brexit has had on this country and its citizens.

It is time that the people of this country were told the truth about Brexit, good or bad. We deserve to know how Brexit is impacting on trade, the economy, opportunities for young people and how it has affected the rights of individuals. This can only be done by an independent Public Inquiry, free from ideology and the opinions of vested interests.”

Last week, I had the pleasure of meeting Peter Packham, the man who started the petition. An elected member of the European Movement's national council and a manager of one of its local branches, Leeds for Europe, Peter is a passionate pro-European campaigner, and I am delighted that he is able to join us in the Public Gallery today. I thank Peter and Leeds for Europe for their petition urging the UK Government to hold a public inquiry into the impact of Brexit, as well as everyone who signed it, because those actions brought us here for what I am sure will be an informative debate.

Concerns have been expressed that no impact assessment has been carried out to assess the damage that Brexit has created, despite the chairman of the Office for Budget Responsibility saying:

“In the long term, it is the case that Brexit has a bigger impact than the pandemic.”

**Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):** The hon. Member is making a very good start to this important debate. Does he agree that one of the worst-affected sectors is the creative sector? Many musicians across the UK have been in touch with us as their representatives to say how they have been negatively affected by the lack of agreement between countries. I hope that he and others will refer to that in their speeches.

**Martyn Day:** That is a good point well made. The problem we have with the debate is that so many areas have been adversely affected that even with the best part of 20 minutes, I will struggle to touch on them all. I look forward to other Members extrapolating from the points we start with.

A public inquiry has been set up to look into the UK's pandemic response, so it is reasonable—I would suggest sensible—to also hold one on the impact of Brexit. The public have a right to know. Putting aside the fact that support for Brexit is at its lowest since the referendum, the impact of leaving the EU on the UK needs to become common knowledge. We need to know where we are before we can plot our way forward to where we want to be.

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD):** Some of those who felt the impact of Brexit most keenly were not old enough to vote. Children and young people have lost access to schemes such as Erasmus. Schoolchildren were stuck for many hours on coaches at Dover over the Easter holidays, and we had Conservative Ministers telling us that that had absolutely nothing to do with Brexit. Furthermore, the Tourism Alliance tells us that the number of schoolchildren coming from the European Union on school trips has halved because of bureaucracy around group visas and the inability to travel without a passport, whereas it used to be possible to travel on an ID card. Does the hon. Member agree that children and young people have fared the worst and that many people were not aware of that when the decision went through?

**Martyn Day:** I thank the hon. Member for that point. I agree that young people have lost the most, but I hope that we can regain some of that for them in the future.

To put it simply, can we make Brexit work? I very much doubt it, but can we move on without knowing what the foundation is? The UK Government opened its response to petitioners by saying:

“The UK's departure from the EU is the result of a democratic choice”.

For that reason, at the outset of the debate, it would be remiss of me not to point out that 62% of those who voted in Scotland did not want to leave the EU, with every Scottish council returning a remain majority. Just under 56% of those who voted in Northern Ireland did not want to leave the EU either.

**Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab):** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that transparency is the key to all good governance and that, without knowing the impact of leaving the European Union, we will never be able to resolve the issues we have at present?

**Martyn Day:** That is a very good point and one that I will also make.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that, as a citizen of one of those nations, those figures do not seem very democratic to me. It is not my place to comment on the Northern Ireland situation—

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I'll do that. Don't worry.

**Martyn Day:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman will.

It is not my place to comment on the Northern Ireland situation, particularly pertaining to the added complexities of what was the Northern Ireland protocol. However, I can say that the whole Brexit saga lays bare why Westminster is unfit to govern in Scotland's interests. Indeed, not only has the Brexit debacle blown apart the case for Westminster control, but the ensuing debate has shown beyond doubt that the two major Westminster parties are committed to the damage that leaving the EU is having on trade and the economy across the UK, as well as on opportunities for our young people and the rights of individuals.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I apologise for jumping in on the hon. Gentleman quite so quickly, but he is making lots of really important points. Does he agree that one of the most valuable features of a democracy is that it has the potential for error correction? In other words, does he agree that, if people change their minds—as is increasingly the case with Brexit—the only logical thing to do is to change the decision that caused people to change their minds?

**Martyn Day:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point. In a democracy, people always have the right to change their minds and we should bear that in mind at all times.

Before moving on to some of the evidence of the negative impact of Brexit, I want to mention that the UK Government's response also said that "the UK-EU institutions are functioning as intended."

If that is the case, considering that the democratic will of the people of Northern Ireland was not met, it prompts the question of why it took so long for the UK-EU institutions to reach agreement on the Windsor framework. That breakthrough was surely not "intended" to take nearly seven years.

It is disappointing that a similar deal to Northern Ireland's has not been afforded to Scotland, but that is not for this debate. I am sure that we can have fun with that issue in months to come. However, given the length of time it took to negotiate such a critical agreement, can the Minister tell us what progress has been made on negotiating re-entry to European projects that all four nations were removed from, such as Horizon Europe, Copernicus, Euratom, the European arrest warrant, Europol and the Schengen information system? It would be helpful if the Minister could also take the opportunity to explain why both the European Scrutiny Committee and the Lords European Affairs Committee are currently holding inquiries on the new UK-EU relationship. Perhaps he could suggest when those findings will be published to evidence the UK Government's claim that UK-EU institutions are indeed functioning as intended.

Moving on to how Brexit is affecting trade and the economy, the Trade Secretary recently announced that the UK had reached agreement to join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—sometimes referred to under the acronym CPTPP or otherwise known as the Pacific rim trade deal—which will allow zero tariffs for 99% of goods exported to the bloc. Although the agreement has not yet been signed, the Trade Secretary claimed, in her excitement, that it would "open up our economy". Good news, we might think—but, in the course of the announcement, she also said that we should "not keep talking" about Brexit. Well, this debate might disappoint her, as it shows that Brexit remains a live political issue. I align with the opinion of the petitioners that it will continue to be so at least until the facts are known, and probably for some time to come afterwards.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): On the subject of Brexit being on everyone's minds, for my constituents in Battersea it remains an issue and, for them, it has been an unmitigated disaster. Our economy is not growing, our rights and protections are being infringed and, more importantly, Britain's standing in the world is also challenged. I have called on the Government to produce a cumulative impact assessment on the impact of Brexit. Does the hon. Member agree that any public inquiry must look at the cumulative impact of Brexit on our constituents?

**Martyn Day:** I am happy to agree with that. The more I learn, the more I realise that there is no such thing as a good Brexit. I think we are all seeing that clearly.

The Trade Secretary's reason for saying what she did could be that, according to the UK Government's own scoping assessment, the shiny new CPTPP trade bloc deal will bring an increase of only 0.08% in GDP over a lengthy 15 years. The House of Commons Library reports that the economic benefits of CPTPP membership "appear to be small."

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Gentleman mentions the 0.08% boost to GDP promised by access to the CPTPP. Surely, in all honesty, for the sake of our economy the time has come to stop burying our heads in the sand. We cannot just multiply excuses; we have got to face the reality that Brexit is part of the problem. With that, from Plaid Cymru's point of view, we should be looking to move towards rejoining the single market, but the first part is to recognise that there are multiple causes and that Brexit is a critical one of them.

**Martyn Day:** I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. It is fair to say that the economic impact of Brexit falls well short of the benefits that the UK enjoyed with EU membership; the OBR expects our withdrawal from that to reduce the overall trade intensity of the UK economy by 15% in the long term. The OBR's latest Brexit analysis assumes that the trade and co-operation agreement, which sets the terms of the post-Brexit trading relationship between the UK and the EU, will reduce the potential productivity of the UK economy by 4%, largely due to the increase in non-tariff barriers.

In rebutting those figures during the CPTPP announcement, the Trade Secretary pointed out that the OBR's forecasting was speculative. However, the OBR's economic and fiscal outlook last month highlighted

that it had been reviewing and refining its assumptions about the economic impact of Brexit as new evidence arrived and that, two years into the trade and co-operation agreement, the trends on UK trade volumes remained consistent with its assumptions. Additionally, the OBR forecasts stem from out-turn data published by the Office for National Statistics. The latest data from the third quarter of 2022 suggested that UK trade volumes remain 3% below their 2019 level, while there has been an average increase of 5.5% across other G7 countries. Similarly, trade intensity is 2.6% lower than its pre-pandemic level in the UK, yet it is 3.6% higher in the rest of the G7.

A recent study estimates that UK goods trade was 7% lower in June 2022 than it would have been were we still in the EU. All in all, in terms of trading, the Pacific rim trade deal, along with the already-signed agreements with Australia and New Zealand, which have yet to come into force, has limited positive economic impact to compensate for what we have lost due to the UK Government pushing through a hard Brexit deal outside the EU single market and customs union.

In December 2021, the National Audit Office predicted that the macroeconomic benefits of free trade agreement negotiations being carried out by the UK Government at the time would only increase the UK's GDP by between 0.33%, at best, and 0.17%, at worst, after 50 years. From those projections, the USA was the biggest potential FTA partner. However, although negotiations started nearly three years ago, there is no trade agreement with the USA, and neither is one expected any time soon. The relatively modest economic benefits projected from the secured and proposed agreements by the Department for International Trade have therefore further decreased.

Compare that with where we were: part of the second largest and most-integrated world trading blocs, which also happens to lead the way in global standards and regulations. Maybe the Prime Minister's idea about mandatory maths for everyone up to the age of 18 holds some credence after all, as the sums certainly do not add up. The Pacific rim trade deal also has wider negative impacts, such as its inclusion of investor-state dispute settlement clauses, which I am totally against, and environmental costs. For example, the UK Government's own analysis stated that joining CPTPP is estimated to increase the UK's domestic greenhouse gas emissions. How that complies with the UK Government's net zero ambitions escapes me; perhaps the Minister can enlighten us on that point, too.

Like the Pacific rim trade deal, Brexit is causing damage on multiple levels, but I will try to confine my remarks to the specific issues that the petition mentions, and move on to how Brexit is impacting on opportunities for young people and on the rights of individuals. Before doing so, let me point out the obvious: the damaging impact of Brexit on trade and the economy undoubtedly has ripple effects on opportunities and rights. That said, I will start with the removal of the right to free movement—not just for work purposes—which puts barriers in place for both UK and EU citizens and causes workforce shortages in key sectors, including the crucial health and care sector, due to the simple matter of travel, which is now much less straightforward and flexible.

We have only to look back a couple of weeks to see the delays at Dover over the Easter break, which were caused by new passport stamping requirements, and we

can look forward to worse delays to come when the EU's post-Brexit entry-exit system, or EES, comes into effect next year. This new border control for non-EU travellers, which Brexit has made us, has been described as “anticipated chaos”—another Brexit benefit for us all to look forward to. Delays at customs are also a major headache for manufacturers, with 31% predicting that owing to new trading rules, customs delays will be the biggest risk to their company's competitiveness in 2023, and 36% of small and medium-sized businesses are still struggling with the new customs procedures and paperwork.

There are also privacy rights, with the EU's general data protections regulations thus far serving us well in protecting our personal data. To replace them, the Science Secretary has recently put forward the new Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill to supersede its predecessor, which was repeatedly delayed. However, I have serious concerns that the Bill will, first, erode the high standards of data protection rights that UK citizens held as part of the EU GDPR and, secondly, further negatively impact on any review of the UK-EU trade deal if it fails to protect EU citizens. I want to see a commitment to robust data privacy protections and world-beating data protection regulations being maintained. However, on the Bill's Second Reading last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) put on the record that, with regards to how this piece of post-Brexit legislation will affect individuals' rights, the Open Rights Group has said:

“The government has an opportunity to strengthen the UK's data protection regime post Brexit. However, it is instead setting the country on a dangerous path that undermines trust, furthers economic instability, and erodes fundamental rights.”

Back in 2016, the Vote Leave campaign described EU regulations as excessive red tape. Like it or not, regulation is essential not just for the EU single market to function, but to protect workers. The UK Government's Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which was brought forward despite it not being known exactly how many regulations it would affect, will enable the UK Government to abandon vital legislation that has protected people's rights for almost 50 years. In Committee in the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) tabled many amendments that targeted multiple issues in that Bill, including about workers' rights, food standards, consumer safety and the uncertainty facing businesses. It is a disgrace that those concerns were ignored by the UK Government and that all SNP amendments were voted down by Conservative MPs.

On the impact of Brexit on opportunities for young people, it is no exaggeration to say that it has removed their access to a European, if not global, labour market. Instead of prioritising young people, enhancing their opportunities and widening access to positive destinations to ensure that they get the best possible start in life, Brexit has stolen those prospects for success.

**Catherine West:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the particular impact on school trips has been enormous and that that does not just have a knock-on effect on our local economy here in London and across the UK, but tends to narrow the horizons in terms of friendship forming and all those other important and intangible benefits of doing school trips abroad?

**Martyn Day:** I agree wholeheartedly with that. As a person who has benefited from town twinning and sister city deals over the course of my life, I can say that it weakens our soft power and our influence in other countries as well.

On top of all that, removing freedom of movement means that our young people can no longer study in EU countries without a visa, never mind gain experience of travelling or working in Europe. Additionally, there has been the UK Government's decision to leave the Erasmus programme and all its related benefits, which have not been replaced by its UK replacement, the Turing scheme. Likewise, there has been a sharp drop in the number of new EU students enrolling in universities across the UK. Indeed, it was reported in January that the numbers had "more than halved", with Brexit seen as the "primary deterrent". Universities UK said that the increase in students from outside the EU had failed to

"offset the exodus of EU students at undergraduate level, weakening financial stability in some third-level education and reducing diversity across some subject areas."

The head of global mobility policy at Universities UK said that the figures show

"very clearly the impact of the sort of loss of freedom of movement".

This is impacting on research talent for the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) raised concerns just last week in a debate entitled "Research and Development Funding and Horizon Europe", pointing out that since 2014

"Scottish and UK universities have lost almost £1 billion in structural EU funds for research".—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 18 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 105WH.]

The manufacturers' organisation, Make UK, has advised that Horizon Europe is a key area of funding for innovation in the UK manufacturing sector and will be important for growth in areas such as advanced manufacturing and digital processes. Yet, due to discussions still ongoing, UK-based researchers have been unable to access Horizon Europe funds.

I will conclude my opening remarks by saying that nearly seven years on from the Brexit referendum, the UK public are still waiting for the elusive "Brexit benefits" that were promised. It seems to me, having raised just some of the areas where leaving the EU has impacted on the UK, that the benefits of Brexit are pure fantasy. The economic fallout from Brexit is stark and it has been made starker by the current cost of living crisis that is being inflicted on households up and down the country. From my perspective, Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster—politically, economically and socially, for Scotland and the rest of the UK. The UK Government, of course, have a means to refute this. When major events occur, public inquiries can be held into matters of public concern to establish facts, to learn lessons so that mistakes are not repeated, to restore public confidence and to determine accountability. I do not think anyone here can deny that Brexit was a major event, and this petition shows that it is still a matter of public concern and that we will not stop talking about it—despite the Trade Secretary's request. I am sure that I have barely scratched the surface of this matter. I look forward to hearing the other contributions to the debate, particularly the Minister's response to the points that are made. I am

sure we are all interested to hear about how the Government do not believe the UK's departure from the EU is a subject for a public inquiry, which it clearly is.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** Given the number of people who want to speak, we will opt for a time limit, starting with eight minutes. I call Adam Holloway.

4.55 pm

**Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

When 65% of the people in my constituency of Gravesham voted in the 2016 referendum, they cast their votes in favour of leaving the EU. They did so in the expectation that their views would be respected and in the hope that the Government would have the guts to make a success of it. In those ambitions, my constituents have not been well served. Their clear instructions to us here in Parliament were not respected. For years the Government, with the collusion of the civil service, treated Brexit as a gigantic, strategic mistake by the people of the United Kingdom, and they saw their role as one of damage limitation. But in 2019 the electorate had the chance to speak again, returning my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) with a huge majority, and he respected that mandate and was finally able to deliver Brexit.

It is faintly depressing to be here again ostensibly debating whether the benefits of Brexit have been delivered and whether there should be a public inquiry. In reality, we are arguing today about whether we should have voted to leave the EU or whether we should rejoin. For me, the single most important benefit of Brexit has been realised, leaving aside some slightly unhappy compromises in the Windsor framework, because our sovereignty has been repatriated. Many remainers seem to view our desire to govern ourselves as at best an outmoded and abstract concept, and at worst a front for baser impulses.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Adam Holloway:** I will not. I came in here earlier, took one look at all the articulate advocates of remain or rejoin, and I thought that in the interests of my blood pressure, which I tested this morning, I would not give way—[*Interruption.*] I am sure the hon. Lady can address that in her speech: we have heard a lot from her on the subject already.

It is easy to undervalue sovereignty if the areas in which it was surrendered to the EU do not actually impact one's life. It is easy to disdain patriotism if someone is economically and socially mobile and derives their self-worth from a well-paid job, or if their life is made easier by cheap labour as a result of free movement. In my constituency, EU membership has brought social problems, pressures on housing in the social and private sectors, enormous stress on public services and a sense of disenfranchisement. My constituents are not crazed nationalists. They are hard-working people who voted to take back control over the laws that directly affect their quality of life, and to have the right to vote out politicians who make laws that do not work for them. That power is important to them, and it is important to me that we deliver on that promise.



On the economic benefits of Brexit, we should have the courage of our convictions and stop being so cautious. It was encouraging to hear the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), unveil his post-Brexit reform of financial services, which aims to give us a regulatory framework that meets the needs of our financial services industry and can respond effectively to emerging trends. With the freedom to diverge from EU law, we can now make substantial changes in many areas—for example, in the regulation of insurance firms. The risk margin, the capital buffer that insurance companies must hold, will be cut by 65% for life insurers and 30% for general insurers. The eligibility of assets that life insurers can use to match their liabilities will therefore be broadened. That will free up capital for investment in the UK economy and improve the competitiveness of the important financial services industry, bringing benefits to consumers.

The Government must stick to their promise to make substantial legislative progress in this area during 2023. Reform of the financial services regulations is just one area where we now have the freedom to extricate ourselves from a regime that was not designed with our best interests in mind.

There are a host of opportunities we must now seize. We must make progress with the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, and we must take advantage of our freedom from EU control of state aid. We must make sure that our immigration system works for the people of this country. It is a difficult task to disentangle ourselves from a heap of legislation that we did not choose, but it is a vital job. We should be bold and move quickly.

5 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I congratulate those who have made sure this petition has come to this House for debate today. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on his excellent opening speech.

In Bath, 70% of my constituents voted to remain, and we remain proudly pro-European. Bath is an open, welcoming and international city. We understand that in our modern, interconnected world, wanting to just cut ourselves off and float into the Atlantic ocean is entirely unrealistic and, indeed, undesirable. Most of my constituents feel a deep sense of loss at our exit from the European Union, and many in our community are now paying the price.

Discussing Brexit has become a bit of a political taboo, shall we say. An inquiry into Brexit's impact would help us face up to reality and it would give a true picture of the impact on people, business and the whole economy. We need evidence, not Government propaganda. There is now a large amount of data on the damage Brexit is inflicting on our economy, however it needs to be put out into the open, and that is why an inquiry into the impact of Brexit is so important.

We are the only G7 nation with an economy smaller than it was before the pandemic. The OBR has said that leaving the EU will reduce the UK's long-term GDP by about 4%. The OBR assumes that UK imports and exports will both be 15% lower in the long run than had we remained in the EU. It will leave a larger scar on the economy than the pandemic.

We should be making it easier for British small businesses to trade abroad, but instead they are now tangled up in red tape. Supply chains are drying up as EU businesses are voting with their feet. Why bother with the UK when other businesses across the EU are happy to take over? Brexit was always going to restructure our economy. The blunt reality is that fine-tuning and tinkering on the edges of our trading relationship with Europe will not be enough. Without a relationship based on trust and respect, we cannot provide long-term stability for businesses or the economy. That is at the heart of our debate today. Not only do we need an inquiry to show the evidence of the impact of Brexit, but we also need to restore our relationship with the EU.

Brexit has made this Government's hostile environment even more hostile. EU citizens who had built their lives here were made to feel unwelcome. It is no wonder that so many have left. Among those were vital NHS workers, and the Government must face up to their role in forcing out the staff we desperately need. I am a European migrant who became a British citizen in 2007. No Minister can reassure me that Brexit was not meant to make citizens who were born in the EU feel unwelcome. I do feel that. It has had this effect, and it still does, and no amount of reassurance from the Government will change this.

Vital workers in vital professions are leaving. The Nuffield Trust has argued that EU-trained medics now face extra bureaucracy and higher costs. If pre-Brexit recruitment patterns had continued, the NHS would have 165 more psychiatrists, 288 more paediatricians and 394 more anaesthetists.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree, however, that we are seeing that gap appear in employment across the board, because we have lost so many European members of our workforce? Before Brexit, in my city of Edinburgh, 50% of the workforce in hospitality—a vital industry—came from other European countries. Week after week, those same employers tell me that they now cannot fill those jobs. Does she agree that we are suffering that cost?

**Wera Hobhouse:** I am happy to agree. I could fill hours and hours with examples, but we have only a limited amount of time, so I am picking up on the NHS. Yes, absolutely, that is the picture across the board.

Each vacancy is hurting communities, as NHS patients face painful delays and waiting lists. Only one in three adults in Bath has been able to secure an appointment with an NHS dentist, and yet the Government refuse to recognise EU dentists' qualifications.

Brexit is also destroying our cultural links with the European Union—that is one of the most painful things that I can talk about in a city such as Bath, where not only hospitality but entertainment and culture are such vital sectors. The UK music industry is world-renowned, deservedly so, and we should be proud of that, and do everything possible to promote it. That vibrant sector, however, is hamstrung at every step, with both EU and UK artists struggling to tour.

Visa and work-permit rules often vary between EU member states. Musicians are now forced to spend much of their time and money figuring out how to meet

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

different standards for different EU countries. It is a devastating setback for artists who want to perform, not to battle bureaucracy.

Cabotage rules restrict UK hauliers over 3.5 tonnes from going to more than three different EU countries. The Association of British Orchestras says that those rules are increasing tour costs by up to £16,000 per day for orchestras using their own vehicles. That seriously restricts the viability of touring.

Another consequence of Brexit is more complicated customs rules. The ATA carnet required for moving unaccompanied instruments from the UK to the EU costs up to £310 plus VAT, plus a deposit of 30% to 40% of the value of the items. The carnets are also time-consuming to prepare and cause customs delays and concert cancellations.

Such barriers limit our cultural reach and stunt our £5.8 billion music industry. An Encore Musicians survey shows that 76% of musicians agree that it is likely that Brexit travel restrictions will stop them performing in Europe. We must establish exactly what difficulties our arts sector is facing.

I could point out more industries and more difficulties, as I said, but there is no time. Those are the realities that everyone in this country now faces. An inquiry would not be intended to go over old ground from the years of Brexit debates; it should focus on the here and now, without prejudice. The Government want to ignore the many difficulties created by Brexit and concentrate on what they class as our Brexit freedoms, but let us compare what was promised and what has not been delivered. Covering up problems will not make them disappear. We urgently need an inquiry to establish the truth about our exit from the EU. If we are going to solve the problems, we first have to acknowledge that they exist.

5.8 pm

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing this hugely important debate, and Peter Packham for starting the petition and organising it across the country.

More than 180,000 people have signed the petition, including 439 in my constituency. The numbers are rising all the time. That is a clear indication that the public's patience with this Government's botched Brexit deal has evaporated. The public want answers. Last week, an online poll of 1,340 voters by Omnisys showed that 59% thought that an inquiry should probably or definitely be launched, with just 25% against. We know why—because the Government are not giving answers to the questions. It should not take an inquiry to get the answers. Week in, week out, Labour has been raising the issues of the impact of Brexit. I understand the frustration of the public and why an inquiry is being called for.

An inquiry would be hugely expensive and it would take a long time, but people want answers now so that we can mitigate the damage being caused by Brexit. If, as the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) said, it is so wonderful, there has been a Brexit dividend and we are seeing the success, we would love to know where it is. Whatever people think about Brexit—whether they think it has been good for the country or not, and

whether a Brexit dividend may come in time but just not yet—everyone should support an assessment being made of the outcome so far. Brexit has been such a defining political moment of our time and we need answers about what the result has been—importantly, to mitigate any damage being caused.

In December 2021, I called for a debate on the impact of Brexit and a region-by-region report. The then Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), gave me this response:

“We can start Prayers every morning...with a celebration of Brexit. We should have the Brexit prayer and perhaps even the Brexit song...because it has been a triumph for this nation in reasserting its freedom.”

I am not doing a very good impression of his accent. He said that we now have “happy fish” and that across the country

“there is general celebrating and rejoicing”.—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 591.]

That level of delusion, flippancy and not taking the issue seriously is very frustrating for people across the country, and it is why they signed the petition in such large numbers. This cannot be the last word—just writing it off and saying that Brexit has been a success without giving evidence.

We need to know the impact because of the enormous political cost to our country of the Brexit debate. Big promises were made to voters before the referendum. Are those promises being delivered? We need to disentangle the impact of Brexit from that of covid, the energy crisis, the cost of living crisis and Ukraine, so that any problems that we face as a country cannot be written off as consequences of them. We need to find out the cost of Brexit and who is being impacted by region, age and sector. So many different places within our country are impacted—environmental standards, food standards, financial services, agriculture, fishing, the construction industry and the creative industries, including musicians. There is the impact on the workforce, especially in the NHS and health services; on education, educational opportunities, scientific research and school trips; on security and the loss of businesses—all those things are never brought together by the Government, so we cannot see the cumulative impact in all those areas.

Many different think-tanks and researchers are giving us the costs of Brexit, but we are not hearing definitive answers, despite Labour asking for them again and again. Bloomberg says that it costs the UK economy £100 billion a year. The International Monetary Fund forecasts that ours will be the only leading economy to shrink. The Office for Budget Responsibility concludes that Brexit will reduce long-run productivity by 4%. The Centre for European Reform said that by the end of last year the economy was 5%, or £31 billion, smaller than it would have been had we stayed in the EU. Surely with those figures, we need a better, clearer independent assessment of the facts.

The red tape faced by businesses is at a record high. Export declarations that businesses must fill in when moving goods from the UK more than tripled after the UK left the single market and customs union, while import declarations have increased by 50% during this time. Several businesses in my constituency of Putney have reported exactly that. We have lost 300 businesses in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields since 2021.

I would like to know why, what part of it is owing to the impact of Brexit, and how we can course-correct right now to stop the damage.

The music industry has been mentioned already. The failure to secure ease of access for touring bands across the EU is embarrassing and ludicrous. Surely that can be changed. School trips from and to the European Union have been reduced. The School Travel Forum reported a reduction from 13,000 overseas trips in 2019 to just 2,500 in the first eight months of last year. Obviously, part of that is the impact of covid, but a huge part is the change in passport requirements and the increase in visa costs for parents, which has increased the administrative burden. That can also be changed right now.

Then there is the impact on the workforce. Many EU citizens who have left were key workers, and the backbone of our public services. All working people deserve to know the impact on our healthcare facilities. Every healthcare facility I visit tells me that Brexit has a clear impact on recruitment and the delivery of healthcare. Labour keeps asking about and exposing the impact on working people, and the Government must answer our questions.

I hope that the Minister shows more humility in his response to this debate than the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset, who I quoted at the beginning of my speech. The Government cannot run from scrutiny on Brexit forever. The public deserve answers. They deserve honest reflection, hard facts and figures, and a plan to put right some of the worst damage of Brexit. I hope to hear that from the Minister.

5.15 pm

**Amy Callaghan** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. The people of East Dunbartonshire voted overwhelmingly—71.4%, to be precise—to remain in the European Union, as did people right across Scotland. The desire to remain in—now to rejoin—the EU has only risen in the years since Brexit, as each impact has cut deeper. A public inquiry into those impacts is not an unreasonable request; I support it. If the Government truly believe in their Brexit benefits, they should put them to the test with a public inquiry.

The impacts of Brexit—everything that the people of Scotland have lost out on—have not been inflicted in our name, nor apparently under the banner of Brexit. This Government have been taking great pleasure in denying that much of what we are debating today has anything to do with Brexit. In their response to the petition, the Government stated that leaving the EU was a “democratic choice”. Yes, the Government exercised a referendum and put the decision to the people, but leaving the EU was not the democratic will of the people of Scotland. If the democratic will of the people is the Government’s trump card in this debate, why do they continue to deny the people of Scotland the right to hold an independence referendum? This is not a British Government that we voted for. To be clear, the impact of this Government’s policies, from Brexit to austerity, is not representative of the progressive values of the majority of people in Scotland.

Let us think back to all we were promised if the UK left the European Union: increased trade with the whole world, saving £350 million a week to spend on public services, and controlling immigration and our borders. In the years since Brexit, Britain has become far more insular; trade is down across the board, and neither of the Government’s plans to turn that around will have much impact, even by their own assessment. That is all while trade has soared across Europe. England’s public services are a mess, and they are underfunded.

A hostile environment to immigration has left us with significant skills gaps and certain sectors with large-scale recruitment issues. Those include, but are not confined to, the culture sector, the hospitality sector and our public health services across the UK. Others have expounded on some of those issues; I will focus on the NHS. Staff shortages in the NHS are one of the biggest issues we are facing at the moment, due to people from European countries being unable to live and work here with ease. Participation in Erasmus+ was ended when EU membership was not a barrier to that opportunity, and Scotland has certainly not seen any of the money that was going to be saved.

This Government will continue to deny most or all of what we are debating, but the long and short of it is cold, hard facts, with an evidence base that cannot and should not be denied. Take the UK’s economy as an example; it is the slowest growing economy in the G7. The former deputy governor of the Bank of England, Sir Howard Davies, stated that Brexit is

“one of the reasons why we are now at the bottom of the growth table in the major industrialised countries.”

That is on Brexit, and it is on the Tories. The OBR chair, Richard Hughes, has said that the UK’s economy is 4% smaller in GDP terms because of Brexit. The Government deflect and try to blame our shrinking economy on the war in Ukraine. It is shameful to blame that illegal war instead of acknowledging that it is a mess of their own making. Again, that is on Brexit, and on the Tories.

There is now unnecessary red tape when travelling to the EU. Those wanting to visit for 90 days or longer must apply for a full, long-term immigration visa, with associated costs and hassle. UK travellers have lost the automatic right to fast-track passport and customs queues in EU member states, and may be asked for proof of funds and a return ticket when entering an EU country. To what benefit? Again, that is on Brexit and the Tories.

Leaving the European Union is not what Scotland wanted, and the impact of being dragged out shows exactly why. Life is hard enough, and leaving the EU has only made it harder. Life post Brexit has only been made worse by our Government denying what was promised to the people across these four nations who voted to leave in good faith. There is a shrinking economy, understaffed public services and no freedom of movement—stick that on the side of a bus. Where Westminster continues to fail us, the people of Scotland will look ahead to a bright future, one without this place, without austerity and without a Tory Government we did not vote for—we will be an independent nation within the European Union.

[Amy Callaghan]

5.20 pm

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I will make some specific comments in relation to Northern Ireland shortly, but I will first make some common points that apply UK-wide. Before getting to those, outside the Northern Ireland issue, which has been prominent in recent months and years, it is rare that we have a more general debate in this place about Brexit itself. Brexit has fundamentally changed so much in relation to the UK economy and our ability to influence transnational issues, such as crime and the environment. It has diminished the UK's international standing. The UK is not as powerful a voice on the world stage as it was previously, when the European Union served to amplify that voice.

It is useful to drill down into the notion of sovereignty. For me, sovereignty is about the ability to do things, rather than some abstract concept. But even if we look at the abstract concept of sovereignty, that the UK was able to enter the European Union and also leave it proves that the UK had sovereignty all along. It was through pooling that sovereignty within the European Union that we were able to deliver collective outcomes for people right across Europe and, crucially, for people within the UK.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On that point, the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) mentioned that the laws that the EU created were not ones we chose. The fact is that we had MEPs who were on those commissions and the committees that decided those laws. Actually, the British voice was a leading light in many of the changes that were enacted. There were certainly changes that needed to be made in regards to the processes, but we had a seat at the table.

**Stephen Farry**: I agree. We will soon discover that in many respects, by design the UK will have to be a rule taker. It is in the fundamental interest of the UK economy to follow rules that are essentially set at the European level, but we will not have the important say that we had previously.

Like the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and many other colleagues in today's debate, including the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), I sit on the UK Trade and Business Commission. Almost every week we hear evidence from a range of experts and other stakeholders who set out huge concerns about the impact of Brexit on their sectors. It is accurate to say that the UK economy has seen seriously constrained growth as a consequence of Brexit. Of course, there are other issues, but Brexit is by far the major stand-out factor that differentiates the UK from its main competitor nations in the developed world.

The trade deals that are happening around the world will never compensate for the increased trade barriers that we have erected with our closest and biggest external trading partner. It is one thing to say that the European Union is not growing at the same rate in terms of international trade; having a trading partner that represents 30% to 40% of our international market compared with a partner that grows from 0.1% to 0.2%, while maybe a radical change in the level of trade on the surface, does

not amount to the same impact on UK business. Also, we have discovered that freedom of movement applies in two directions. Who knew? Constraints on the ability of others to come here applies to UK citizens seeking to move overseas.

I want to focus on the impact on Northern Ireland. In some ways, I feel slightly humbled in this respect because we have had, at the very least, the benefit of the Windsor framework. I put on the record again my appreciation for those who were involved in reaching that agreement, both on the UK side and in the European Commission. At best, the Windsor framework is a soft landing for Northern Ireland, but Northern Ireland will still suffer many of the same problems that the UK as a whole is facing from Brexit, as well as some further particular challenges that are unique to our own geographical situation on the island of Ireland.

Perhaps the most apparent consequence is seen in our governance. I have no doubt that my colleague, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), will express a different view on this when he speaks, but for me our governance worked based on sharing and interdependence. It relied upon the joint membership of the UK and Ireland within the single market and customs union, and that in turn allowed us to have those interlocking relationships, within Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and within the UK, allowing a balance of different identities to be expressed without that much encumbrance. Brexit—particularly a hard Brexit—will threaten some people's sense of identity and create some degree of economic friction. The Windsor framework has gone a long way to mitigate some of that, but it only applies to goods and not to the other fundamental freedoms around services, capital and the freedom of movement.

**Stella Creasy**: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about how important the Windsor agreement is. Does he therefore agree that one of the egregious things about Brexit is pushing things such as the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which, in and of itself, fundamentally undermines the Windsor agreement by removing all those alignments of laws around goods and indeed services on which the Windsor agreement is based? It just reflects how Brexit has blinded people to what is in the best interests of people, whether in Northern Ireland or the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Stephen Farry**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those comments. I had hoped that wisdom would eventually prevail in relation to that piece of legislation. It is not just pointless but needlessly self-destructive, and it will pose particular problems to Northern Ireland, given that we do currently do not have a functioning Assembly, and if the current sunset clause—at the end of this year—still applies, we do not actually have the space to put in place successor pieces of regulation to cover for all the gaps that may or may not emerge. There is also a very particular challenge to the fundamental freedoms that are set out in the Good Friday agreement, and transposed in terms of article 2 of the protocol, which has now itself become the Windsor framework.

It is important to recognise that we are making these comments today in the context of the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement, which happened earlier this month. Last week, there was a major conference at

Queen's University in Belfast. We had the Prime Minister over there, pledging his ongoing support for the agreement and praising all those who have got us to this particular point, without at the same time recognising that some of the policies that the Government are pursuing in relation to Brexit, including retained EU law, pose a major threat to people's rights in Northern Ireland.

Beyond the issue around the movement of goods, there are issues in terms of access to labour and skills, which are particularly problematic in our economy. Like everywhere else in the UK, services are by far the largest aspect of our economy. The contrast on the island of Ireland is now becoming incredibly stark. Northern Ireland is going through major difficulties, not least due to our lack of a functioning Assembly and Executive. We are also facing into a budget crisis and we have very sluggish economic indicators. By contrast, our friends on the other part of the island are actually expecting a massive surplus, potentially as much as €20 billion, over the next couple of financial years. They have much higher growth than Northern Ireland; their productivity levels are much higher. And that is creating a major tension for an economy that competes in that all-Ireland context as well as in a pan-UK context.

I want to put another point on the record, Mr McCabe. I have no doubt that other Members will wish to pick up the loss of European Union funding, which was so crucial for some of the more marginalised parts of the UK. I appreciate it is a particular factor in Wales, but also in places such as Merseyside and Cornwall. What has replaced it through the shared prosperity fund simply cannot compensate for what has been lost. It is undoing what the Government are notionally trying to do in terms of levelling up because the money simply is not there.

The same applies to research funding. The UK is internationally renowned for the quality of our research and development, our universities and how we innovate. Again, through not being part of Horizon Europe, we are losing opportunities. It is a matter not simply of funding, as important as funding is, but of the international collaboration and the networks. Speak to any scientist—they will say that all this has to happen at scale, and we have to be part of those networks. The UK is going through a process of needlessly marginalising itself. I very much welcome this petition and would embrace an inquiry. It is only through proper discussion of these issues and having an honest conversation that we can begin to undo the damage that has been done over the past few years. I look forward to a mature reflection on what needs to happen to restore the UK's place in the world.

5.31 pm

**Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. For many of us, the impact of our exit from the European Union is painfully clear: business owners have struggled to navigate a new and confusing trade landscape; holidaymakers have been met with queues at Dover; and shoppers have struggled to cobble together the produce to create a salad. Yet the Government continue to deny that these issues have anything to do with their Brexit deal. Their insistence on avoiding the obvious is deeply frustrating, and it is undoubtedly this sense of

frustration that has led so many people to demand the inquiry we are here to discuss today.

I want to focus on areas where there can be little doubt that Brexit has had a negative impact: on businesses, artists and musicians, and the care sector. Business owners are facing additional costs directly because of Brexit. Many have made their feelings on this clear to me, with one expressing his frustration at the amount of time and money he now spends specifically on completing additional paperwork that did not exist prior to our exit from the European Union—and he was not the only one to describe the heavy bureaucratic load imposed on him by Brexit.

The quarterly Buckinghamshire Business Barometer shows that a significant number of businesses in my area are facing these increased costs. One of its reports states that 42% of businesses in Bucks face higher costs as a result of increased red tape, nearly a third are paying extra tariffs or taxes and a quarter are paying the price for changes to their supply chain. For small businesses who cannot afford to outsource or employ someone to deal with the additional red tape, the strain can be immense. More than one small business owner locally told me that they were on the brink.

Chesham and Amersham is also home to a significant number of artists and musicians who previously drew a chunk of their income from touring in Europe. As other Members have alluded to, in sharp contrast to the freedom these artists previously had to tour, they now have to apply for visas and work permits, and the instruments and equipment they need also often require additional paperwork and permissions. One constituent who works for a prominent opera company told me that the extra burden they now face makes it much harder to put on a show—potentially prohibitively so.

I will finish by sharing the experience of a care company that serves my constituents. Its owner told me recently in emotional terms how most days he has to tell someone that he cannot provide the care they are seeking for a loved one because he just cannot find the staff. The loss of skilled workers from the EU is having a direct impact on our ability to care for the sick, elderly and vulnerable. Our health and social care sector needs more staff, and while we should certainly invest in training more workers here in the UK, that will not address the immediate shortages we are facing today.

The impact of our exit from the European Union has been wide-ranging, and the many members of the public it has affected both personally and financially deserve honesty and accountability from the Government. We cannot begin to fix things until we have an honest appraisal of Brexit's impact, which is why we need an independent inquiry.

**Steve McCabe (in the Chair):** I call Jim Shannon.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

5.35 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I am not sure whether everybody on this side of the Chamber will be cheering as much when I am finished, but that is by the way. We hope to have an engaging debate; hopefully, we can agree to disagree on some things. There are probably some outstanding things to mention, but I thank the hon.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing the debate, which he did in a very balanced way. We have some differences of opinion in relation to where we are, but I am a strong believer in democracy and the democratic process. Whatever the process and whatever the outcome, I believe in democracy. It is the foundation that my party, the DUP, was built on, so I wholeheartedly believe in the result of the Brexit vote.

I voted for Brexit and, just for the record, my constituency of Strangford voted 56% to leave and 44% to stay. Over 90% of people in the fishing village of Portavogie endorsed Brexit, so there is a wish in my constituency to see Brexit delivered. I am the first to say that my full support lay with exiting the EU and the repercussions that have come from it. Unfortunately, we are seven years on from the referendum, yet there is still outstanding work to be done on how we can make the best out of the cards we have been dealt.

Why did Portavogie, in my constituency, vote so wholeheartedly for Brexit, as I and many others did? It was because they saw opportunities for a sector that would not be restricted by Brussels when it came to fishing issues. They saw job opportunities and the potential to invest, and they wanted the total allowable catch to be in the hands of Westminster rather than Brussels. All the red tape over the years is an issue that we felt particularly strong about. For that reason, Portavogie and my constituency felt that it was important to move forward.

I am conscious of the time, and I will probably have to curtail some of my speech. The agricultural sector—not just the factories we have, but the farmers who sell their dairy produce—is so important to my constituency of Strangford. An example is Lakeland Dairies, which has somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 workers in factories and on farms. Brexit gave Lakeland Dairies the opportunity to gain other markets across the world. The company has advanced that with zest, enthusiasm and energy, and I am very supportive of it, as I know others are. It has the opportunity to sell its products in the far east, South Africa and South America, and its European markets have still been retained.

I do not think it is possible to have a discussion about the UK's exit from the European Union and not discuss Northern Ireland. We all have different opinions—rightly so—and today we will have to agree to differ about what is best for the UK and, more importantly, for our constituents. I am no stranger to saying how wonderful my Strangford constituency is; I think it is the most beautiful constituency in the world, which is just the way I feel. I will maintain that as long as I can. It is so important to me. I will always work to ensure the best for my constituents, including single-parent families, local dairy farmers, working-class families of four, local business owners and many more.

It became blatantly clear to me and many of my constituents that the many plans and policies that the UK Government had set out for Northern Ireland—whether that devised by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) at Chequers, the Northern Ireland protocol Bill or, indeed, the Windsor framework, which the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) referred to—were simply not going to work. We have a

difference of opinion, but we are still friends. There is no harm in having a difference of opinion.

Northern Ireland is still not where it needs to be. For me and my constituents, that is simply not good enough and there is still work to deliver. When the protocol was introduced in 2021, it meant a significant change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, because article 6 of the Act of Union (Ireland) 1800 was suspended. For me and my constituents, the constitutional position is really important. We may have a difference of opinion on that here, but it is really important for the constituents I represent. It was supposed to protect the integrity of a new regime in Northern Ireland.

The burden on local businesses in my constituency has proven to be instrumentally damaging to them, and it often still feels as if we are no further forward. On paper, the Windsor framework did sort out some of the green lane issues, but it has not sorted out all the outstanding issues. For example, I make the point about the agricultural sector. In my constituency of Strangford, as well in the Mid Down, North Down and South Down, in Stirling across the water and in north-west England, cattle sales are so important, yet we are still subject to some of those rules under the Windsor framework. Indeed, if people do not sell their cattle, they have to put them under quarantine for three months. That is just one example.

The other outstanding issue, which again is not a Brexit issue but is certainly a framework issue, is the legal opinion of the Stormont brake. All the legal opinion that we have gotten back tells us that the Stormont brake is not binding. The legal opinion that others have gotten back—be it the Orange Order individually, the Loyalist Communities Council across the water or even the European Research Group here—is not binding. One classic example of how it is still not good enough was released in the *News Letter* just last weekend. A haulier from Randalstown spoke to *News Letter* on the impacts the so-called green and red lanes are having on Northern Ireland trade. He stated:

“The notion of a red and green lane is very binary. As far as haulage is concerned, there is no green lane between GB and Northern Ireland—none whatsoever. The only green lane is actually between the EU and Northern Ireland via the Republic.”

This is the reality for Northern Ireland, and it must be recognised by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister. The haulier added:

“in many cases, it could mean the business asking ‘can I actually do this work’”

and that

“It could ultimately come to, ‘can I actually survive’”.

That is a question on the lips of Northern Ireland hauliers. They are not seeing the benefits yet.

We have witnessed other impacts, such as on visa holders and on young people, especially regarding UK participation in the Erasmus programme. There is no doubt that constituents from across the entirety of the United Kingdom have felt some impact from Brexit, but, as a Strangford MP, I stand here in defence of my local business owners and constituents who simply say, “It is not good enough.” While the decision of any vote must be respected regardless of the outcome, we must not allow the people who voted to get us here in the first place to be under any kind of pressure, hence my frustration at this process.

I hope these conversations do not end and that reassurance can be provided to our electorate that, no matter what the outcome of a vote is, we will always do right by them. At the moment, Northern Ireland has not had the Brexit that it voted for, and that has to be addressed.

5.42 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): The question in this debate is a simple one: what has been the impact of leaving the European Union? I was much struck reading the Government's response to the petition, which was quite dismissive and defensive. In essence, they said, "It was a democratic decision so there is nothing to look into here. Nothing is happening." Of course, a democratic decision has been made and we remainers—with the exception of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the Minister—lost.

The hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) made the point about sovereignty. I met many people during the campaign who made that argument. Indeed, they said, "I don't care about the economic impact. My sovereignty is more important." I respect people's right to hold that view; I fundamentally disagree with it. But what was unforgivable was to claim that we could have all our sovereignty, keep all the benefits of being a member of the European Union and get further benefits on top of that. It simply was not true, and we now know it was not true. Therefore, those who argued for us to leave the European Union are now in a state of confusion and denial. That is what is going on, particularly around the economic consequences. If we do not understand what those are, how on earth are we going to build a different relationship with our European colleagues over the months and years ahead?

It is interesting that a number of hon. Members present have been on the UK Trade and Business Commission, reference to which has already been made, and I have had the pleasure of serving with them. We felt it was important to ask the question and then let the evidence speak for itself. If people want to come before the commission and say, "It's wonderful—look at these opportunities", I would love to hear from them. Not many have done that.

The truth is that Brexit has had a bad impact on the economy. I was really struck by the statistic that showed that the number of small businesses trading goods with the European Union declined by one third between 2020 and 2021. That is not entirely surprising, because it is small businesses that find it most difficult to cope with the burden of cost, bureaucracy and red tape. Brexit was sold as getting rid of cost, bureaucracy and red tape, but it has dumped the biggest load of those three things on British businesses that we have seen in our lifetime.

We will be the worst-performing large economy in the world this year, and business investment as a percentage of GDP has stalled since the referendum in the UK. It is worth reminding ourselves that the Office for Budget Responsibility said that Brexit

"will result in the UK's trade intensity being 15 per cent lower in the long run than if the UK had remained in the EU. The latest evidence suggests that Brexit has had a significant adverse impact on UK trade, via reducing both overall trade volumes and the number of trading relationships between UK and EU firms"

Ironically, while all these costs have been imposed on British companies exporting, the Government have not yet introduced full checks on goods coming into the United Kingdom from the European Union. Why? Because they are afraid of shortages and delays. So the sovereignty that has been gained is not being used to apply the same checks going one way as we are facing the other way.

The trade deals have been referred to. I was struck when the former Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), described the Australia agreement as being "not actually a very good deal"—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

because we had given far too much away. We all know that is the case. What of the promised trade deal with the United States of America, which was the biggest argument we heard? It is absolutely nowhere to be seen. It is not happening; it is not coming. The fundamental truth is that if we make trade with our biggest trading partner more difficult—that is what we have done—we should not be surprised if it has an adverse effect on the British economy, at a time when we need all the growth we can get to help our constituents.

We have heard about employers finding it hard to get workers. When the commission met people at a fruit farm in Kent, I was struck when the owner said, "Last year, I couldn't pick 8% of my crop because I couldn't find enough workers. Do you know what I am doing this year? I am planting less crop and I am going to import more fruit from the rest of the world." What a wonderful advert for British economic growth if that is the conclusion that farmer came to!

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As I look at these issues as a member of the shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team, it is really ironic that we are finding less UK production and more imported directly from the EU. That is a negative impact of Brexit, rather than a positive impact of us being able to trade out. That is exactly the opposite of the claims made and exactly why we need something like the petition suggests.

**Hilary Benn:** Indeed, that is the case. We want as much export opportunity as possible, but if we make it more difficult for our businesses, we should not be surprised if it damages people.

The other irony about sovereignty is that the Government said, "We will use our sovereignty to introduce a British version of the REACH chemicals regulation," but they have just postponed that for the second time, not least because the British chemical industry has said, "You know it's going to cost us about £2 billion for absolutely no purpose whatsoever—to get us back to where we were when we originally got our chemicals assessed under REACH." The UK conformity assessed mark, which is meant to replace the CE mark that we find on the bottom of many goods, has been postponed by the Government again because a lot of British businesses say, "What is the point of doing this?"

On the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which is an artificial mechanism to try to force through changes to retained EU law, I remain of the view, despite the concerns expressed, that by the end of the year we will still be in alignment with a lot of EU law. That is partly because we argued for a lot of it in the first place—it was not imposed upon us; we were part of

[*Hilary Benn*]

the decision-making process—as well as because a cost comes to the economy from diverging from the rules applied by our biggest trading partners. Every company that exports to Europe will make their goods to the standards set by Europe, whatever the British Government think, because that is what they will do if they want to continue to trade.

It is striking that for those who argued so strongly for the benefits—no “downside”, only “upsides”—all those quotes have come back to haunt them. They find it difficult to know what to say, so they try to blame remainers. It is like all revolutionaries, if I may use the analogy. When the revolution does not quite work out, they say, “But comrade, it was not applied with sufficient vigour and purity”—an argument that some Members in the Chamber might be more familiar with than others.

The truth is, and this is the hard part of the debate, that we cannot simply reverse what has happened. When I look not at the governing party, but at the other major parties represented in the House—with the exception of the SNP, which wants another referendum for another purpose—none of those parties is saying we should have a referendum after the next election to see whether the British people want to change their minds. We know that we cannot reverse it just like that.

The Green party wants to rejoin

“as soon as the political situation is favourable and the right terms are available.”

That is interesting. I understand the Lib Dems want to rejoin the single market once

“the ties of trust and friendship are renewed.”

The truth is that we will have to build a new but different relationship with the European Union, which will take time. Who knows what it will look like or what this country will look like in 10, 20 or 30 years? We have to be honest about the effect that the change has had on our country and our economy. That is why the question needs to be asked.

5.52 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (*Hilary Benn*), who chaired the Brexit Select Committee so effectively when I was a member. As we have heard, 178,000 people signed the petition. I thank each and every one of them, and I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (*Martyn Day*) for presenting the debate.

It appears the UK Government do not believe that Brexit is an appropriate subject for debate. People watching at home will have realised that we are holding the debate in Westminster Hall, not in the main Chamber. We are not holding it in Government time. It seems the Government do not believe that Brexit is a subject for a public inquiry. I appreciate that many Government supporters will want to leave the division of the Brexit years behind. They say, “Brexit is done and dusted, so let us put the tensions of the past few years behind us and get on with reaping the benefits of Brexit.”

I opposed Brexit, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (*Liz Saville Roberts*) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (*Ben Lake*), as well as my party and my constituents. I concede that not everyone in Wales did—we lost by a short head—but

a recent poll by Focaldata shows that people who regret their decision to leave outnumber remaining Brexit supporters in every constituency in Wales. Apparently, every constituency in Wales is now of that opinion.

As to Brexit’s benefits, I would dearly love to see some benefits. They would suit the people of Wales just fine, but as yet the benefits are singularly elusive. The Government face at least two ways on this. They say that Brexit is an event that is over and done with, setting us upon the sunlit uplands, so let us get on with it. Or they say it is an ongoing process, and at some undefined point in future the benefits will appear. Well, they cannot have it both ways. They cannot have a process and an event. It is one or the other and, quite obviously, Brexit is a process that, at the very best, is bogged down and not delivering or, at worst, a process that will deliver nothing but further chaos, decline and poverty.

With trust in the Government at such a low, the Conservatives and their friends continue peddling the patent myth that the UK’s economic malaise is the result of the war in Ukraine or the aftershocks of the pandemic, and so on. The facts of international comparisons on inflation, growth and a host of other measures are against them. As we heard from the hon. Member for Gravesham (*Adam Holloway*), who is now inexplicably absent from his seat, finance is being favoured ahead of other sectors—certainly ahead of manufacturing. A practical example is the decline of the Welsh steel industry, which is being accelerated by a trade policy that deliberately strains supply chains.

At the other end of the scale, in my own constituency the Menai mussel industry, which was thriving—thriving on the basis of exports, mainly to Belgium—has seen its business model wrecked by post-Brexit rules and it has more or less disappeared, in the short term at least. Welsh businesses are struggling to cope with mountains of Brexit red tape just to trade with our nearest neighbours. Many have simply given up.

One example that will interest the House is that of Seiont Nurseries, which I referred to in the Chamber last week. Seiont Nurseries, which is in my constituency, exports live plants to Ireland. In my constituency, and in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd, we can actually see Ireland in the uplands—it is just over there. We can see the lovely green hills of Wicklow, which is where the plants go. However, Neil, who runs Seiont Nurseries, has found that the only practical way of exporting his plants is not directly through Ireland, which is just over there, but rather through England, Belgium and France, down to Normandy or Brittany and over the long sea crossing to Ireland.

I raised that with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade last week, and her eventual response was that Neil could always use the green lanes. Either she does not understand that the green lanes go only to Northern Ireland—perhaps she does not understand the difference between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland—or possibly she had no answer and, in desperation, reached for the first thing that came to mind, which was green lanes. That is completely useless for my friend at Seiont Nurseries. That is just one small, practical example of a small business that is struggling with the effects of Brexit.

[*PETER DOWD in the Chair*]

The first step towards understanding the Brexit debacle and what needs to be done would be an independent



public inquiry into the Brexit campaigns: what was said, what was promised, what was delivered, what will never be delivered, who has benefited and who has lost out—not least, as was referred to earlier, in Wales losing out on EU funding in the universities sector, which is very close to my heart. We have seen only this weekend the problems around rejoining Horizon. The Government are apparently demanding a rebate for the two years when we were unable to join it. Why were we unable to do so? I will allow hon. Members to guess, but apparently we need a rebate for those two years when we were not members of Horizon.

We can reckon up only when we have some answers to those questions. If this Government and their campaigning friends are as confident of the propriety, wisdom and value of Brexit as they seem to be, they have nothing to fear.

5.59 pm

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I congratulate Peter Packham on starting the petition and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on introducing it with such customary eloquence.

My Brighton, Pavilion constituency has the second highest number of signatures to this petition, with 655 of my constituents signing it. I know very well that many more than that support it, so I am pleased to be able to represent them here today. One of that number wrote in an email about the debate:

“I firmly believe that the public were misled systematically by campaigners for Brexit before the referendum. Although it is unlikely that the decision will be reversed, I believe that the record should show the truth, not a fantasy.”

That short, simple message encapsulates many of the important reasons why I think we need an inquiry and why I back the call in the petition. I believe that if a sufficient number of people over time choose it, there is a way back into the European Union. That is the virtue and beauty of democracy.

The referendum campaign and the subsequent narrative about Brexit have been a litany of misinformation and disinformation. The infamous words on the side of the bus are just the tip of the iceberg, but let us start there, with whether £350 million a week has been diverted from the EU to the NHS. As we have heard several times this afternoon, the simple answer is no. The NHS budget in England alone has risen by more than £350 million a week since 2016, but that money has come from taxes, borrowing and squeezing other Departments. It most certainly has not come from savings arising from Brexit, for the simple reason that those savings did not materialise because the overall economic impact has been so severe. If the public hoped for a transformative sum for the NHS post Brexit, they most certainly have not received it.

Turning to the economy, during the Chancellor's recent autumn statement, he spoke for almost an hour without once acknowledging the economic catastrophe of Brexit. There was no reference to the OBR's warning that Brexit will slash productivity by 4% and lead to a 15% drop in trade intensity and an 11% drop in investment, or that it will increase food prices and deliver lower wages, workforce shortages and the highest inflation in the G7.

I, too, am a member of the UK Trade and Business Commission, which is expertly chaired by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). Since July 2021, we have been taking evidence about the impacts of Brexit, and, as the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk has pointed out, we have not heard of the positive impacts that were promised. To the contrary, we have heard time and again all the evidence of pain, particularly for small businesses. We have also been examining why Brexit is seen as the primary reason why we are the only G7 country that is still not reaching post-pandemic levels of growth.

While the Government keep their head firmly in the sand and continue to deny the existence of anything other than positive outcomes, they cannot begin to adapt to and resolve some of the many problems that we are hearing are caused by Brexit. Misleading the public includes wishful thinking. Who can forget the endless conjuring of sunlit uplands, the ignoring of reality, the telling of only half the story, the cherry picking and, frankly, the plain lying? It all happened during the Brexit campaign, and it has been happening since. Independent scrutiny and inquiry would help set the record straight.

The vilification of free movement by the leaders of the Leave campaign was one of the most pernicious examples of disinformation. They wilfully perpetuated a hostile narrative about immigration, deliberately conflating asylum seekers, economic migrants and refugees, and whipping up hatred and racism in the process. This was disinformation at its most destructive. No wonder they are now so afraid of light being shone on those impacts.

That brings me to democracy. In the wake of the referendum, I set up an initiative called Dear Leavers. We went around the country visiting the places that had registered some of the highest numbers of leave votes and listened to people who voted leave. The overwhelming message was that people voted for Brexit because they felt powerless. They felt unheard by a political establishment that had not listened for decades. The tragedy is that the political establishment is still not listening, and people still feel powerless.

Democracy, scrutiny, accountability and responsiveness have all been victims of Brexit. Evidence and experts were derided, Parliament was illegally prorogued and international law was trashed. We had unsettled constitutional questions and opposition to a ratification referendum. There has been an impact on the incredibly precious Good Friday Agreement, and we now have the dangerous Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. Opposing a public inquiry into these matters only adds insult to injury.

To return to my constituent's view that the Brexit decision will probably not be reversed, it is with great sadness that I see that the Labour leadership has capitulated to the tyranny where even to talk about rejoining is somehow judged to be anti-democratic. I want to talk about it. The Green party wants to talk about it. I think the public deserve for us to talk about it. If rejoining the EU is the right thing—for our economy, our environment, workers' rights, young people, our public services, trade and more—we should take that step when the time and conditions are right. We should be preparing for that possibility by taking a step-by-step approach, with steps such as negotiating membership of the customs union now; full engagement with Horizon; regular adjustments

[*Caroline Lucas*]

to the trade and co-operation agreement to ensure that our interests are best supported; a general approach of maintaining alignment with EU regulation—that means seeing the back of the deeply dangerous Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill—and the ongoing rebuilding of diplomacy and, I hope, of our reputation as a trustworthy partner, which has frankly been trashed.

I want to talk also about the status quo in this country, because the leave vote was a howl of rage about legitimate concerns, which have still not been addressed. The social contract remains broken, and the power game remains rigged. We did not leave the EU because of anything that had happened in Brussels or Strasbourg; we left primarily because of what had happened in England, because outside the capital, every single region of England voted to leave the EU. It is meant as no disrespect to Wales—which voted by a majority of only about 80,000 to leave—to say that it was an English vote that drove Brexit.

**Hywel Williams:** It is significant that the highest vote in favour of leaving the European Union was recorded in Blaenau Gwent. Blaenau Gwent is the constituency that received the highest level of European funding, but it is also the poorest constituency in Wales. That reinforces the point that the hon. Member is making: it was a howl of rage against poverty, marginalisation and all the rest of it.

**Caroline Lucas:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman very much. I believe that one reason why there was such a howl of rage in England was that, while devolution has given powers to Scotland and Wales—not enough, but some powers—there are no political institutions that represent England. There is nothing to give political expression to our complex, rich reality, and nothing to bring power to the regions of England. It is no wonder that people voted to take back control, but they want control from Westminster, so that they have the right to make decisions about their own lives here. Rethinking our constitutional settlement more fundamentally is also key to mending some of the divisions in the UK. Brexit was the result of a divided UK, and it threatens to divide us still further unless we build a democratic consensus about changing that, together, for good.

6.7 pm

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to have you join us to chair this afternoon's debate, Mr Dowd. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) is no longer in his place, because in his contribution he embodied the challenge that we face in this debate. Indeed, it might be argued that in what he said, he reflected Oscar Wilde's very famous statement that "patriotism is the virtue of the vicious".

In the absence of the hon. Member, let us correct the record on what he said about insurance and use that as an example of why we need better information in this debate. He said that leaving the European Union would somehow mean that we could deal with the level of risk that insurance companies have to account for. Actually, the European Commission is already looking at and reforming those rules, so we could have done that work with it. As ever with the idea that the benefits of Brexit

will appear, the benefit that he talked about with the matching adjustment is something that those in the financial sector have expressed caution about. Although it may benefit the shareholders of insurance companies and lead to higher fees, those policyholders and pensioners who are dependent on insurance policies may well face higher charges. That in itself embodies the difficulties that we face in this debate—the messy reality of what Brexit is doing.

I have no desire to rerun 2016, when the damage in 2023 is so apparent. The hon. Member for Gravesham talked about parliamentary sovereignty and mentioned the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) will be pleased to hear that I absolutely agree with him about the reality of what will happen to the laws, but I'll be damned if I will take lectures about who is more patriotic! Who is better at standing up for parliamentary sovereignty than those of us who are fighting a piece of legislation that will lead to 5,000 areas of law being transferred not back to this Parliament to make decisions on them, but to the Executive behind closed doors in No. 10?

The truth is that we know what damage Brexit is doing to our country, and we have seen it for years. Members have already talked about many of the impacts, including the shortages of people working in our hospitality industry and in health and social care; the blunt economic damage; the thousands of small businesses in constituencies across this country that have just given up trading—one of the truisms here is that people can fight many battles in life, but they cannot fight geography—because being able to trade just as easily with 500 million consumers on our doorstep does make a difference; the supply chains that have been severed by our leaving the European Union; the wealth of paperwork that so many people now face; and the impact that it has had on the cost of living.

That is the second truth in this debate. The public know when they are being gaslighted. They can see that other countries have experienced the impact of Vladimir Putin but are not facing the same challenges as we are. We have higher food costs because, oddly enough, there are longer queues at the border to get things here. There are problems with production lines, as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) articulated so well. People can see that their kids are sitting in coaches at the border for hours on end and they know that that is not going to stop any time soon.

The London School of Economics estimates that leaving the European Union added £210 to household food bills, costing UK consumers a total of £5.8 billion pounds, so we cannot be a world-beating international leader if we are only doing it in our own backyard. We cannot do competitive trade deals when we are a smaller nation—not part of a bigger conglomerate—negotiating with others. That is why the Americans are not going to put us first in the queue. Every single industry, whether insurance or manufacturing, is facing a choice between following UK regulations or European regulations if it wants to be able to trade with the bigger market.

The damage is clear. People can see the disruption. They can see the disruption in Northern Ireland. That is why I am not surprised that fewer than one in 10 among the British public claim to see a personal benefit to Brexit. When asked what that benefit is, only a third felt

they could actually name something. It is the same for the national interest. We know that this is not going well, and we cannot see how it will get any better. We also know that time is of the essence and that the damage being done grows every day. Jobs that were here are going overseas. Businesses are relocating. They are retraining people in Belgium, Germany and France so that they can continue trading.

Why, then, am I frankly ambivalent about this petition and the idea of a public inquiry? First, there is no formal mechanism for following up on an inquiry. We have seen the track record of this Government when it comes to public inquiries and listening and learning, and it is not great. As of last November, there are 14 open statutory public inquiries, covering everything from covid to Grenfell to the Edinburgh tram system. The inquiry into undercover policing has gone on for eight years and cost £60 million, and we still have no idea when it will make recommendations. For me, politics has always been about priorities. I cannot ask the people in my community, who are struggling with the cost of living rises that have been fuelled by Brexit and can see opportunities slipping from their hands, to wait any longer to see the benefits of Brexit.

I am a patriot. I love my country, and that is why I will fight for its future, for those jobs and for those industries. That means being ruthless about what we spend our time and effort on now, and it means absolutely holding this Government to account for their failure to recognise that Brexit cannot work; it is just a series of problems to be sorted. The sooner they are sorted, the sooner we will stand a chance of offering our kids a future.

How do we do that? We must work out how to get direct access to the single market. We must work out how we deal with the paperwork. Whether as part of the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention or a bespoke customs union, we have got to get on and start talking to the Europeans about it rather than questioning whether they are friends or foes.

We must get on with getting the visa system sorted out, so that the creative and touring industries and our healthcare and hospitality sectors do not fall apart and so that young people do not lose opportunities. Those who work for businesses are being told, "Look, do you have a European passport? If you don't, forget about it; we'll go to someone else in the business."

I will now turn to the importance of the freedom to work to our economy. Brexit will already reduce long-run productivity by 4%, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. The truth is that this country was struggling before Brexit, but Brexit is like going on holiday and setting fire to the hotel room because you realised on the first day that there is no pool in the complex. It is making things fundamentally worse. The honest truth—for those of us who care about the truth and who care about this country—is that we should not let the Government get away with spending hours talking about whether the last seven years have been any good. We have to be focused on what can happen in the next seven years.

I will hold every Government to account for what they are doing to sort out access to those jobs and to that trade, and to help the small businesses that are looking at the pile of paperwork and thinking, "I just cannot cope with it any more." It is too important not to. We can have a public inquiry—we can go down that

alley—but, frankly, I would much rather solve the problems that Brexit has created. The people in this country—those of us who are real patriots—need and deserve nothing less.

6.15 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this issue and for the petition, which has given us the time to do so. This Government may not be interested in the damage that they are causing to so many, but the public clearly are. Unsurprisingly, that includes Oxford West and Abingdon, and it is no great surprise that we were in the top 10 for numbers of signatures—I can fully understand why.

Whichever way we cut it, this Government's botched deal with Europe has been an unmitigated disaster for this country. It has made the cost of living worse for every household in Britain. It is the reason why we are in the relegation zone in the global growth league tables for developed economies, behind Russia. It has made all of us poorer. We see it on our supermarket shelves, which have been empty at points. When I asked the Prime Minister about that he blamed the weather and the war, but he could not answer why they have not had the same problems in the European Union. There is an obvious answer for that. The fisherman and farmers who are tangled in red tape used to only have to complete one step in order to export their produce to the EU. Now, some face 21 stages. We see the effects in the NHS and social care, with doctors, nurses, care workers, and dentists. In Oxfordshire, 10% of our workforce came from the European Union and countless numbers of them have left. That has been repeated around the country.

Above all, it is small businesses that have been affected. I am also a member of the UK Trade and Business Commission—a poor member, as I do not go as often as I would like. Every time I go, or when I read the reports, it is small businesses that are hit the most. It is obvious to see why. The British Chambers of Commerce membership survey shows that more than half of respondents were facing difficulties in adapting to the new rules, because they are complex and changing and businesses do not have the resources to do it.

As important as the economy is—and it is desperately important now—the impacts are not just economic. Brexit has also stopped collaboration. That was what the European Union was always about; it was about pooling our resources, collaborating with others and sharing ideas. Nowhere was that more important than in science—I say that as a former science teacher.

It was never just about the money. Brexit has stopped crucial collaboration with European partners to do the research to beat cancer, for example. That is because the Government did not seek associate membership of the Horizon scheme at the point of the deal. Students are also missing out in that formative exchange year, with the Government's bargain basement replacement being underfunded by more than £20 million when compared with the final year that we were in Erasmus. To the punters who were looking forward to watching German punk band Trigger Cut, I can only apologise. That band was turned away at Calais, thanks to the Government's red tape and not having the right paperwork.

[Layla Moran]

The Government's fingers are in their ears. Despite all the extraordinary damage, this issue has become the elephant in the room of British politics. They do not want to talk about it. That is why a public inquiry is important. No one here is trying to prosecute the arguments of the past. We are where we are—regrettably. If we do not cool-headedly look at what has happened, then how on earth are we going to repair it?

Rather than trying to repair it, this Government seem intent on making it worse. We thought that the Windsor framework was a moment of pragmatism from the Government, which until that point had used Brexit as a stick to revive their dwindling poll ratings, trying to sow division when they should be looking for pragmatic solutions. It gave me some hope that we were moving on and that the Government were leading from the front—well, that seems not to have happened.

Since then, the road to Horizon Europe has been open, but Ministers are now stalling. I sincerely hope that the Minister present addresses the point: why are our Government stalling, when there is no reason at all why we cannot rejoin Horizon Europe? Time is of the essence. I have spoken to researchers who are looking at where we are now and making decisions about the next academic year—it is happening now, and we need answers immediately.

There is also the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which is frankly a monstrous piece of legislation, not only one that threatens comprehensively trash this country's standards on everything from sewage to workers' rights, but one that trashes our reputation on the world stage. I was heartened when the Government delayed the Bill in the Lords, but reportedly it is now back on the agenda. I give notice that the Liberal Democrat peers stand ready and willing to undo as much as possible of the damage that it will cause.

However, why are we still in damage mitigation? It feels like groundhog day. The tragedy is, at a time when we desperately need the economy to grow, Ministers refuse to play our trump card, which is fixing our broken relationship with Europe. That starts with getting real about the downsides.

The Liberal Democrats have a plan. Yes, we do want to seek being at the heart of Europe again. That will surprise no one, but we recognise—as many in the Chamber do—that we are nowhere near that. We have so much work that we need to do before we get to that point. Our plan has four steps. The first is the low-hanging fruit, the immediate action that we need to take. Earlier, we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who made the point about schoolchildren, which has been echoed across the Chamber: why on earth can we not have a bespoke deal for schoolchildren on buses? How many of them will be an issue for either economy? They are just not an issue. Let us get on with the obvious, common-sense things that we need to do, which will start to rebuild our relationship.

Secondly, we need to go further, seeking co-operation agreements and, for example, a full return to Erasmus-plus or an agreement on asylum, which would make a huge difference to one of the Prime Minister's priorities: small boats. Thirdly, we need to negotiate greater access to the single market for our world-leading food and animal products—also known as a veterinary agreement.

We need to secure deals on sector-specific work visas, which would benefit the NHS in particular, and we need to re-establish mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Finally, as mentioned earlier by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), yes, we should be seeking membership of the single market. It might be the single market with its customs union—things will have changed slightly by then, and we would have our own deal—but we need full, unfettered access. That is the only thing that will help our small businesses and our economy in the future.

That is the future that I want to see in this country: working together, slashing red tape, boosting the economy, easing the cost of living crisis, pooling research to beat cancer, tackling international crime and trafficking, and giving young people the opportunity to study where they want. All that is on offer, so I urge the Minister and the Government to take it.

6.23 pm

**John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Historians will write in amazement about Brexit: the swagger of its proponents, the vanity, the false promises and the lies; the salutary sight of focused Brussels negotiators sitting, well briefed, at the negotiating table opposite a series of hapless, unbriefed Tory Ministers; the laughable suggestion that other EU countries would be so envious of Brexit that they would rush to emulate it; the sage advice of our friends ignored; the Brexit enthusiasts, Trump, Farage and Putin, whose malign presence alone should have served as a warning; the campaign tinged with racism and attacks on foreigners; the misplaced triumphalism; the sheer, vulgar philistinism; and the disdain shown for the people of Scotland—if you are in the European Union, you can leave, but if you are in this Union, your voice does not count.

I was on the BBC's "Debate Night" programme recently. I was up against a Scottish Tory MSP and a member of the audience asked her what benefits she thought Brexit had brought. Do you know what she said? She said, "None at all"—full marks for honesty. However, the Scottish Tory press office went into meltdown, of course, and I am not sure that she has been since.

We all know the truth about Brexit, but we do not expect for a moment that the Tory UK Government will do as today's petitioners demand. The embarrassment would be too much even for this apparently unembarrassable Administration. And what of my Labour friends? Alas, they are leaderless and sinking on Europe; they are now a party tethered to the anchor of a failing Brexit. There are honourable exceptions; I am talking about the party leadership.

I know that Brexit leaders have not suffered. Some were rewarded with seats for life in the Lords as unelected legislators. We know that many of them, having searched family histories or exploited the generosity of the Irish Government for passports, can skip past fellow Britons who are queuing for many hours at EU borders.

However, what of our constituents who suffer from Brexit? My constituency, Ochil and South Perthshire, straddles rural and urban areas. Brexit, which was rejected emphatically by the Scottish electorate, has impacted every single part of it. Young people have lost access to the incredible Erasmus scheme. Previously, medical students and young social workers could go on

a long work placement in Germany and bring their experience back. Students from all backgrounds could spend a year in France or Spain or Romania, to improve their language skills and widen their horizons.

The replacement for Erasmus is the so-called “Turing scheme”—poor Alan Turing; how sad that his name should be associated with it. It promised worldwide advantages, but not for my constituent who travelled to Singapore via the Turing scheme. Once he was there, he was told that there was no money left in the pot to fund his continued stay. He was offered no alternatives or assistance—typical, bungling Brexit chaos. My amazing office team had to work with him to find all sorts of odd and unexpected allowances, bursaries and funds that would plug the gap.

I have the oldest distillery in the country, Glenturret, in my constituency. The boss told me last week that pre-Brexit they delivered, without impediment, all across Europe, sharing lorries with other companies for cost and environmental reasons. Now, if any other firm on the shared transport has made the slightest paperwork mistake, all their goods collectively are sent back with export and other duties. One consignment was sent back twice, the first time because the whisky was labelled “From Scotland” and the second time because it was labelled “From Britain”. The rules that we have negotiated mean that neither name is recognised. “Global Britain” is ironic, eh?

According to the distillery boss, now it sometimes takes longer to get whisky to Paris than to Japan. That is not because it is becoming quicker to get to Japan; getting to Paris has simply become a nightmare. Glenturret has now had to design new labels for every single market within the EU—seven different labels, with all the added cost of switching a machine and switching the labels. It has had to abandon smaller markets in the Baltic states and elsewhere—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. There is a Division. We will be back in 15 minutes. Is that okay?

**John Nicolson:** Curses.

6.28 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

6.43 pm

*On resuming—*

**John Nicolson:** If only there was some way of voting electronically, Mr Dowd, that would not require us to dash backwards and forwards. Before I was interrupted, I was talking about a wonderful company in my constituency, the distillery Glenturret, and how it has had to design new labels for every market within the European Union—seven different labels—with all the added cost. It has had to abandon smaller markets in the Baltic states and elsewhere because the added costs wipe out any profits.

Then, there are firms in my constituency crying out for labour. We have heard about this before, with fruit rotting in fields across the country because EU workers cannot get visas. In my constituency, hotels cannot open to full capacity for the very same reason. One owner implored me to hand-deliver a letter to UK Ministers.

“If only they knew what was happening on the ground,” he said, “they would do something!” I said: “They know. They don’t care.” Brexit zealots would have us living in caves if it meant delivering the pure Brexit isolation that so many of them crave.

So, as we wait—perhaps forever—for Brexiter Tories and Labour Front Benchers wearing Brexiter clothes that fit so badly, I suspect we can offer petitioners little hope today of a Brexit apology from Westminster. It is those of us on the SNP Benches who offer the only unambiguous pro-EU vision. We want to rejoin the EU at the first possible opportunity. Scotland, independent and within the European Union, will enjoy excellent access to trade, like our long-term ally and near neighbour, Denmark. Our ancient and modern universities and networks of colleges will reconnect with thousands of institutions across the EU to share research, opportunities and students. Young people will once more be able to live, love and work across the EU, as my generation did. We will thrive as part of a co-operative team of nations, small and large. We know we have friends across the Union—the European Union. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) would say, keep a light on for us. We are coming back soon.

6.45 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I place on record my thanks to constituents in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill who signed e-petition 628226. They did so because Brexit was sold to so many as an opportunity for the UK to “take back control” and become a stronger, more independent state.

However, we are not in a better position in any single area of life in the United Kingdom as a result of leaving the European Union. The economy, trade, fishing, labour force, environmental standards, structural funding, inward investment, immigration, the peace process and much more have all been harmed thanks to the realities of Brexit. The Secretary of State for Business and Trade opined recently that Tory MPs and the media should “not keep talking” about Brexit. Yet here we are, petitioned to debate the matter by a UK public already sick and tired of Brexit and its implications, and their reasons for being so are plentiful.

Scotland’s economy will be hit hardest by Brexit. Estimates suggest that it could result in a loss of £12.7 billion per year by 2030. Exports of goods from Scotland to the EU fell by over 11% in the first quarter of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. The OBR has said that Brexit has had a “significant adverse impact” on UK trade. The latest figures show that, since Brexit, the EU’s trade intensity has increased since Brexit while the UK’s has fallen by 2.8%, and yet the UK Government are so desperately trying to convince themselves that they have the rest of the world to trade with.

The depressing reality is that the reduction in tariffs as part of our UK-Australia deal, for example, will save each UK household a pathetic £1.20. That is not even enough to buy as much as a stick of butter with today’s sky-high food prices, which are largely caused by Brexit itself. Let us remember that our economy was also recklessly decimated by the previous Tory Prime Minister and Chancellor not so long ago. They would also like us to not keep talking about that.

[Steven Bonnar]

Analysis by the University of Sussex's UK Trade Policy Observatory shows that Brexit losses are more than 178 times greater than any of the new trade deal gains. Each one of those losses is felt by communities across the length and breadth of Scotland. What can we do about it? The reality is that only full membership would restore all that we have lost, including our credibility. However, along with the Tories, the Labour party wants no part in that. It is just as committed to a hard Brexit as the Tories in this place, regardless of what a few Back Bench MPs have said in the debate today. The damage that Brexit has caused to Scotland will be long lasting, and it is being endorsed by the UK Labour party.

Most people in Scotland were proud remainers, and we are now proud rejoiners, because Scotland's focus should rightly be on rejoining the European Union. Post independence, Scotland's markets will transform and expand to be able to take advantage of a EU market seven times larger than that of the UK. The UK Labour party does not want that for Scotland. Even though its parliamentarians in Holyrood know it is right, the party leaders here in England say no. Put bluntly, they are willing to throw Scotland under that big, red Brexit bus to get the keys to Downing Street. The people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill do not want the same old Labour—a party that they view as a pale imitation of the Tory party today. They want people who are in touch with public opinion and who understand the impact of Brexit within and on our communities. They want people who will protect and enhance their interests; they do not want people who will barter them off.

In 2014, Labour dragged Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown out of political graves to tell Scotland that independence would threaten our membership of the European Union, imperil people's pensions and cause a currency crisis. Look where we are right now. We are out of the European Union, UK pension plans were on the brink of collapse within hours last year, the NHS has lost a quarter of its workforce, the cost of food is up 18%, 4% has been knocked off our GDP and sterling has lost a third of its value. These are the consequences, and people are paying the price right now. Brexit has only served to decimate our economy and damage our standing on the international stage.

Further hated policies of this Government such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Rwanda policy cause Scottish people great anguish and embarrassment. Remaining in this isolated and insular UK Union is strangling Scotland's ambition and potential. Scotland's home is unquestionably in Europe. To coin a Labour phrase, the only road to Europe now runs through an independent Scotland.

6.51 pm

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate for the SNP. I do feel for our Minister today—he has been the thinnest of blue lines, and I look forward to hearing his response. As much as I do not necessarily have a great deal of hope for the substance of it, I do have much respect for him personally for the position he finds himself in today.

I pay tribute to the organisers of the petition and the 178,000 people who have signed it. My hon. Friends the

Members for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) and for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Marty Day) all made very solid contributions to the debate, as did a number of colleagues from all parts of the House, except perhaps those on the Government Benches, though we look forward to hearing from the Minister.

On brass tacks, the SNP supports this petition. We want to see evidence-based policymaking. If we are to plot a way forward to a solution, it is important to find out how we got here. However, I voice that support with a wee note of caution. I hope I can gently express some reservation over the perspective that the petition's wording reveals. It refers to

“the impact that Brexit has had on this country and its citizens.”

For the avoidance of doubt, my country is Scotland. The United Kingdom is not my country. The United Kingdom is a state. It is a Union comprised of four countries. Perspective is not a synonym for difference of opinion. We see this from a different place. Scotland has a very clear European perspective. My party is the most pro-European party in this Parliament.

I also have a particular neuralgia with the phrase, “this country and its citizens.”

To my mind, the people who were most affected by leaving the EU in the way that we did were EU nationals resident in these islands. They had their lives turned upside down. They had the right to come to these islands to live, work, study and marry into our communities. They had those rights taken away and they did not even get a vote in it. I am deeply proud of my party's ethos that if someone is in Scotland, they are one of us. It is not obligatory but people are very welcome to be one of us if they want to be.

I am deeply proud of the fact that the Scottish Parliament has legislated to ensure that voting eligibility in Scottish elections—the ones we control—is based on residency rather than nationality. That is a queer sort of nationalism in a continental, historical, European sense, but Scotland's tragedy for 250 years was that we exported our people. It was freedom of movement from the European Union that started to get it back up again. I am deeply proud that anyone who lives in Scotland is one of us, as far as the Scottish Government are concerned. That was not the case in the EU referendum.

In the independence referendum of 2014, the Scottish Government quite specifically chose the European franchise for voting entitlement in order to broaden eligibility as much as we legally could at the time. We have since broadened it further. In the EU referendum, however, despite SNP amendments proposing to broaden the franchise, the UK Government chose quite specifically to say to 2.6 million people living in these islands, who are a part of our communities and our families, and who pay taxes here—it is demonstrably true that EU immigrants pay far more in taxes to the UK Exchequer than they take back in services—“The UK had a debate about your place in our community, your position in our economy and your role here, but you're not getting a say in that because you're foreign. You're not one of us.” That is a deeply ugly, exclusive politics, which I hate. I am sure that the petition's wording is unintentional, but I think there should be a wider perspective than “this country and its citizens.”

I would also have liked to have seen mention of the fact that the UK's exit from the European Union has damaged European solidarity. It has damaged sincere co-operation. The arguments for exit were based on the exclusive idea that, somehow, the UK was subjected to EU laws that we had every part in producing. I therefore support the petition, but with some reservations about the wording.

The SNP is the most pro-EU party in Parliament. I am the party's Europe and EU accession spokesperson. Those words were chosen deliberately because it is our mission to get an independent Scotland back into the European Union. We have a clear constitutional agenda and I believe that we will thrive as an independent state in the European Union. I also say to our UK audience and those taking part in pro-European campaigns in every community up and down these islands that the SNP also wants the UK to do well. I do not want to see the UK have a bad time. I believe that the UK should be as close as possible to the EU, if not part of it, with all its programmes and all its forms. I want the UK to have a functioning relationship with the EU that secures peace in Northern Ireland and that secures trade. The UK should also be part of the EU's research intensive industrial policy, but it risks losing out. The UK will be our closest friend and our closest market—and vice versa. I want to see the UK do well. To those who do not believe me, I say that it would make our independence project easier because the EU we seek to join would, I hope, have a deep and relationship with the UK. I am not saying that just for its own sake.

I have been struck by how backward-looking some of today's contributions have been. I do not think that the question how anyone's constituency voted is relevant any more. Of course, Scotland voted massively to remain—that is a matter of fact. The UK as a whole voted to leave—that is also a fact. I think we need to talk about the democratic deficit implicit in the UK right now, which is demonstrated by how Scotland was removed, against our will, from the European Union. That is not about the battles of the past; it is about the discussions of the future. A backward-looking attitude impedes us from finding solutions to the problems that we are now experiencing. I have said repeatedly in debates in this House that I want to see the UK have a close relationship with the EU, and I will work towards that with anyone who wants to do so. The Windsor framework, which I pay tribute to, is a pragmatic step in that sort of direction. Let us, for goodness' sake, see more of that rather than backward-looking attitudes.

For the avoidance of doubt, I am also not interested in rerunning the EU referendum. That was a long time ago; the world has changed. I am not interested in overturning the result. I respect everyone who voted leave, wherever they voted and for whatever reason. People who voted leave were entitled to believe the promises that were made to them. They were entitled to believe the good faith of the politicians and others who made those promises. However, to be frank, the reality is that the promises made have not been delivered. There may be reasons why they have not been delivered, so an inquiry would be useful in ventilating discussion.

Who can forget the greatest hits? We had:

“There will be no downside...only a considerable upside”,

and:

“Nobody is talking about leaving the single market”,  
We were told that we would keep Erasmus and that  
“we hold all the cards”.

In addition to all those things, we heard that the NHS would get £350 million a week. Who would not vote for that? It is remarkable that the numbers were not higher.

That needs to be ventilated, and that is why I support the aims of the petition. The vote was presented essentially as being risk free and consequence free. People were told, “Everything you like, you'll keep. Everything you don't like or don't understand will recede from your life.” The reality has been really very different. I would expand the scope of the inquiry sought by the petition so that it also covers the techniques used by the leave campaign. I am concerned that we have an ongoing vulnerability to such recklessness. I would like to see a proper review of electoral law, data protection, campaign finance—in particular, the role of dark money—and the remarkable lack of a single leave campaign manifesto to hold the leave campaign to account. A variety of promises were made—some in good faith, some perhaps less so—but they have not been delivered. We also need a proper look at the powers of the Electoral Commission, and the role of broadcasters and internet providers in public information in future campaigns, because I think we have an ongoing vulnerability to recklessness.

We support this petition, but I add a word of caution. An inquiry of this sort would deliver a degree of truth, if it happens, and I would have to say that it is at the top end of expectation that it might. However, the people out there need answers, progress and solutions right now. We should establish truth—that is a good thing to do, in and of itself. We should also ensure that we fix any ongoing and future vulnerabilities. But people need answers now and I am not interested in a blame game.

The people struggling in my district, Stirling—an area bigger than Luxembourg that is the heart of Scotland—are suffering right now as a consequence of leaving the European Union. My farmers cannot get their crops planted or harvested, as we have a crippling shortage of agricultural labour; we have a crippling labour shortage in the hospitality industry, which is deeply relevant to my community; the NHS is short of staff; we have a lively music scene, but creative touring people are struggling; and young people on student exchanges are finding the process more difficult, more complicated and more expensive. Let us have specific sectoral visas for freedom of movement in and out of individual sectors to give them solutions to these problems right now.

For universities up and down Scotland and the UK that are suffering from the uncertainty over continued engagement in Horizon Europe, let us join Horizon Europe. It is on the table in Brussels right now. The Windsor framework has gone a way to building trust. Let us build it further, to everyone's mutual advantage. I am not talking about reversing Brexit; I am talking about dealing with the problems that we have right now.

For our food importers and exporters, we need a veterinary agreement to make sure that the flow across the borders is as frictionless as it can be, and for our small and medium-sized enterprises we need single market membership to remove the barriers that have been put up by the recent events that we have suffered.

The SNP supports this petition. We support EU membership for Scotland as an independent state, but

[Alyn Smith]

we also want to see the UK have a close relationship with the EU, because that will go a way towards not apportioning blame for how we got here, but fixing the problems that we are all experiencing. I view that as a common endeavour and will engage with anybody from all points of the compass to see it happen. We support this petition and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

7.2 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, Mr Dowd, to serve under your chairmanship, as it was to have served under Mr McCabe before.

I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for presenting the petition today, and acknowledge the people who have signed it—over 180,000 people in total—including a number in my own constituency.

I am profoundly aware that this is an issue about which there are passionately and sincerely held views. I thank colleagues from across the House for their contributions to the debate, although I note the stark absence of Conservative Members, with one exception; they are clearly not willing to defend their record.

In contrast, we in Labour will not shy away from engaging constructively in debates about the impact of the Government's handling of Brexit on people, communities and businesses across the UK. Many of those effects have rightly been highlighted and exposed today, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

We want to focus on some of the most important tasks today: making our relationship with the EU work; growing our economy; defending our security; and tackling common challenges, from energy to climate change. We will not seek to rejoin the EU, the single market or the customs union, but it is imperative that we make our future relationship with the EU work, fix the holes in the Government's deal, deliver stability, trust and mutual benefit in our relationships with partners across Europe—both in and out of the EU—and make use of new forums, such as the European Political Community. Indeed, I had fruitful discussions today with friends from Norway, as I know the Minister did too.

I must say from the outset that we do not believe that expending scarce financial resources on a public inquiry that would take years to complete would be the right step forward. We already expose the many impacts and failures of the Government's policy in this area on a weekly basis in this place, and this is a topic that should rightly be the focus of robust and democratic parliamentary scrutiny, as we have seen today, whether or not we agree with all the points that have been made. I would far rather see the millions that could be spent on an inquiry being used instead to address practically some of the many flaws and holes that we have been exposed today, but this is not just about cost; it is about bringing people together and looking forward rather than dividing them once again by looking back.

We are now almost seven years on from the referendum, and the world and our country have both changed considerably since the day of that vote. The impact of our departure from the EU is, of course, a contributing factor to where we stand today. Indeed, there is consensus among economists that the Government's poorly negotiated deal with the EU, compounded by 13 years of economic stagnation, has contributed to the UK lagging behind the rest of the G7, as we have heard today.

For seven years, we have watched the Government pick fights with our closest European allies, allowing dogma to override pragmatism. All the while, we have seen investment down, growth sluggish, 45% of businesses saying they have difficulties trading with the EU, and, as we have heard, exports down by a third. We have seen an approach that has often left us isolated, less secure and stuck in the binaries of the past at a time when co-operation was needed more than ever: on security when we face war in Europe; on energy when we face an energy price crisis and the challenge of climate change; and on economic co-operation as we face inflation, the cost of living crisis and the challenge of responding to geopolitical competition and threats to the resilience of our supply chains.

We would completely change the tone and tenor of our relationship with the EU and form the basis for an ambitious partnership based on common interests and mutual respect—clear about our position outside the EU but optimistic about what we can do together in a critical strategic partnership. Fundamentally, that is something the Conservatives are inherently incapable of delivering. Let us take the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill as an example. The Conservatives are doubling down to appease the hard-line fringes by introducing an irresponsible piece of legislation that will only prolong uncertainty for businesses nationwide. The Bill is opposed by business organisations, trade unions and environmental groups, and it undermines the proper role of Parliament by handing Ministers, as we have heard, yet more unaccountable powers, placing hard-won rights at work, environmental standards and consumer protections at the whim of power-hungry Ministers. Frankly, we do not need an inquiry to tell us that this is a grave error or to expose the wider impacts of Tory Brexit policy.

Across the country today, the questions people are asking are, "How do I pay the bills?", "How do I secure cheaper and greener energy?", "How do I put food on the table when prices are going up?", "What jobs and opportunities are there for my children?" and "How do we keep our country safe?" We do not need an inquiry to answer those questions; we need a Labour UK Government. Labour has a clear plan to make our relationship with Europe work and to address the broader concerns that have been raised in the context of the petition. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has set out a clear plan to secure this: securing a deal on the Northern Ireland protocol, which we called for and then supported; tearing down unnecessary trade barriers; supporting world-leading services and scientists; keeping Britain safe; and investing in Britain. Looking forward not back, let me touch on some of those points and address some issues that have been raised in the debate.

Starting with trade, let me be frank: this Government have no clear trade strategy. It is little wonder that the



OBR forecasts that UK exports are due to fall by 6.6% this year, which is a more than £51 billion hit to the UK economy. The Government's last manifesto promised that by the end of 2022, 80% of UK trade would be covered by free trade agreements, including an agreement with the US, but the reality is that these deals are far from complete. Indeed, the UK's trade deficit with the EU widened to a record high in the final quarter of 2022 as imports from the bloc jumped. The shortfall in the balance of trade and goods ballooned to £32.9 billion in the three months to December—the largest gap since records began in 1997.

The trade barriers put in place by the Tory Brexit deal are accentuating the economic burden being shouldered by our businesses and constituents, and toning them down would be a priority for a Labour Government. Outside of the single market and the customs union, we need to be candid and frank that we will not be able to deliver completely frictionless trade with the EU, but there are things we could do to make trade easier, and we have heard many of them today.

We should build on the positive elements in the Windsor framework. We would expand agrifood and veterinary agreements to cover all of the UK, seeking to build on agreements and mechanisms already in place between the EU and other countries. We would negotiate a long-term deal for UK hauliers to ease the supply chain problems that are holding us back. We would put forward a supply chain working group within the G7 and use the 2025 TCA review to increase the UK's prosperity. We would seek to agree mutual recognition of conformity assessments across specified sectors so that our producers no longer need to complete two sets of tests or two processes of certification. We would seek mutual recognition of professional qualifications to bolster our world-leading services industry and would sort out data adequacy to allow our digital services companies to properly compete.

Although we do not support the return of freedom of movement, we will seek to find flexible labour mobility arrangements for those making short-term work trips and, as has been mentioned by a number of colleagues, musicians and artists seeking short-term visas to tour within the EU.

On science and research, I want to discuss the opportunity that has been squandered by the Tory Government, about which we heard time and again during the debate. Many of our constituents feel that departure from the EU has restricted them from pursuing education and employment opportunities to which they otherwise would have had access. Of course, departure from the EU did not need to mean an end to Erasmus+ or, indeed, to Horizon. I recently met representatives from Universities Wales who told me of a triple whammy: the end of Horizon and European structural funds and the failure to replace Horizon has meant that 1,000 jobs are now at risk in crucial high-tech, high-skilled jobs across Wales.

The Conservatives made a manifesto promise that they would associate with Horizon. They have repeated that 50 times since, but we have seen instead years of delay and uncertainty, with jobs, projects and inward investment lost, and still no deal, despite the resolution of issues around the Northern Ireland protocol. We would unblock the UK's participation in Horizon and bring about the co-operation that we need when it

comes to science, technology, education and skills across the UK—in key regions and of course our nations.

Let me turn to security. Strong and smart British foreign policy has always started with secure alliances in Europe, but since 2016 our relations with Europe have been characterised by bluster, bombast and brinkmanship by the Conservative party at a time when the security of our country has faced some of its most severe threats. We would negotiate a UK-EU security pact, predicated on the defence of democracy and ensuring, with NATO as our bedrock, that we also see close co-operation and co-ordination with our European allies on foreign, defence, development and security policy, whether on sanctions, our energy resilience, our support for Ukraine, our co-ordination on cross-border crime, our efforts against terrorism, our response to instability on our own continent and near neighbourhood, or indeed our approach to China. We could have had a security pact when we left the EU, but the Tories failed to agree one. We would seek arrangements to share data, intelligence where appropriate, and best practice with our closest allies.

I understand calls from the many petitioners for a rigorous assessment into the Government's failings when it comes to the Brexit deal that they secured and the impact that it has had on this country. The Labour party will not shirk from addressing those failings or denying their existence, but relitigating old arguments does not build a plan on which to base the future or set a new course for an ambitious partnership with our closest neighbours and allies. We have a plan to move the country forward, resetting our relationship with the European Union, and taking common-sense and practical steps to redefine that relationship to withstand the challenges of the present and the years and decades to come.

7.12 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for presenting this debate, and to all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. It has been an interesting and thought-provoking debate, and I will seek to cover the main points raised.

The UK and the EU are still hugely important allies. We are trading partners and old friends. We have left the European Union but not Europe. We want our friends to thrive, and I know—from my personal visits and many ministerial visits—that they wish the same for us. We must respect the democratic decision of our own people. The UK's departure from the EU was a result, as has been described today, of a democratic choice by people across the nation to restore our sovereignty; and I pay tribute to the eloquent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway).

In 2015 the Government were elected with a mandate to hold a referendum. In that referendum, the British public voted to leave the EU. We must remember that the Government have since been re-elected twice with a clear mandate to pass the necessary legislation to leave the EU and negotiate a trade agreement. The resounding endorsement of that proposition in 2019, with a significant majority, is a case in point.

[*Leo Docherty*]

Parliament approved the withdrawal agreement—the terms for the UK's withdrawal from the EU—in January 2020 and the trade and co-operation agreement in December of the same year. The Government's policies on our new relationship with the EU are therefore subject to robust parliamentary scrutiny. We have agreed arrangements with the European Scrutiny Committee, the European Affairs Committee and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland Sub-Committee. We have regular and extensive correspondence with those Committees, with which I am personally familiar. Under the terms of the arrangement, Ministers must regularly appear before them. Indeed, I appeared before the European Affairs Committee on 7 March, and the Foreign Secretary will appear before the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland Sub-Committee on 10 May.

Of course, we are grateful to those Committees for their ongoing scrutiny. Both the European Scrutiny Committee and the European Affairs Committee are holding inquiries into the new UK-EU relationship, to which the Government have provided evidence that can be read online. The inquiries will be published in due course. For all those reasons, the Government do not believe that it would be appropriate to hold an inquiry into the impact of Brexit.

Let me dwell on the theme of seizing the opportunities of Brexit, which has been raised this afternoon. Restoring our sovereignty was just the start of what the British public voted for in the referendum. Britain left the EU to do things differently and make our own laws, but this was not just political theory: our laws and tax framework and the way we spend our money all make a real difference to people's lives. The Government are committed to capitalising on the opportunities of Brexit, which is why we intend to end retained EU law as a legal category by December 2023, which will ensure that the UK's rules and regulations best serve the interests of our country as a whole and support workers and businesses to build a thriving economy.

**Stella Creasy:** The Minister talks very passionately about parliamentary sovereignty and raises the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. Whatever the whys and wherefores of how we thought the European Union listened to the UK public through its democratic processes, can the Minister explain how transferring direct power over 5,000 areas of legislation not to this place but to Ministers through the use of statutory instruments—or Henry VIII powers, as we might call them—is taking back control? I see the opposition to those measures from those who supported Brexit in the other place or this place. It does not look to me like this did what it said on the side of the bus.

**Leo Docherty:** The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill will be yet another expression of our renewed democratic sovereignty. The hon. Lady's constituents should be reassured by that, because colleagues in this House will decide which laws stand, which are absorbed and which are repealed. The hon. Lady should be reassured by this more direct expression of our democratic sovereignty.

A range of major reforms are therefore already under way, including to data protection, artificial intelligence and life sciences regimes. We are capitalising on our

new-found freedoms outside the EU to attract investment, drive innovation and boost growth and recently announced the Edinburgh reforms to drive growth and competitiveness in the financial services sector. However, laws will not be abolished for the sake of it. We will not jeopardise our strong record on workers' rights, for example, which is among the best in the world, nor will we roll back maternity rights or threaten the high environmental standards we maintain.

Turning to trade, it is worth remembering that the trade and co-operation agreement agreed in 2020 is the world's largest zero-tariff, zero-quota deal. It is the first time the EU has ever agreed access like this in a free trade agreement. The TCA also guards the rights of both the EU and the UK to determine their own policies while not regressing in ways that affect trade between the two sides. The UK remains committed to being a global leader in those areas.

As the Office for National Statistics has previously noted, there are a number of factors beyond Brexit that have influenced global trading patterns, including the war in Ukraine, most recently, global economic forces and continued strain on supply chains. Despite this, we must remember that the UK remains an attractive place to invest and grow a business as a low-tax, high-skilled economy.

**Layla Moran:** The Minister has referred yet again to the pandemic and the war, but can he explain why we are languishing at the bottom of the league table of growing economies for developed countries, behind Russia? All those countries are facing the same things, yet we are at the bottom. Why could that be?

**Leo Docherty:** The hon. Lady should take encouragement from looking to foreign direct investment. FDI stock in the UK increased from \$2.2 trillion in 2020 to \$2.6 trillion in 2021. That is the highest foreign direct investment stock in Europe and the second highest in the world, behind only the United States, up from our ranking in 2020. That is just one measure of the expression of confidence in the future. Of course, there have been headwinds, but taken in the round the economic future of the UK is one of terrific dynamism and confidence. The hon. Lady should share that confidence, and be confident in the future prospects of the British economy.

Outside the EU, we are creating the best regulatory environment to drive economic growth and develop a competitive advantage in new and future technologies, where terrific growth lies. From artificial intelligence and gene editing to the future of transport and data protection, we are building a pro-growth, high-standards framework that gives business the capacity and the confidence to innovate, invest and create jobs.

**Stephen Doughty:** The Minister is talking about innovation and future technologies. He will have heard Members from both sides of the House raise concerns about the lack of funding outside Horizon. Even if a new deal is agreed, that will not be for a significant period. Does the Minister think that the challenges being faced by the university sector will boost growth, innovation and investment, or reduce them?

**Leo Docherty:** I foresee a future where we have a very dynamic innovation sector, supported by the Government but working in partnership with our European friends.

I will not give a running commentary on our negotiations on the Horizon programme, but colleagues will know that they are under way. Our approach is one of buoyant confidence about the benefits of future co-operation—that is all I will say. I hope the hon. Member shares my confidence.

To give another example, we must also remember that the Chancellor's work on financial services will see more than 30 regulatory reforms unlock investment and turbocharge growth across the UK. A new approach to regulation will make meaningful change for the British public, with, for example, faster access to new medical treatments.

**Fleur Anderson:** On the subject of the confidence expressed in the business environment created by Brexit, it has been reported today that the number of UK chief executives quitting their jobs has more than doubled as bosses battle sluggish growth and a nightmare of EU red tape. The number of chief executives who have left their role jumped by 111%. Would the Minister agree that the business environment created by Brexit has not been entirely jubilant?

**Leo Docherty:** Of course, there have been choppy waters in recent times—I have not denied that. My proposition is that, taken in the round, the future growth of this country is clear to see, and the hon. Lady should share our confidence in the UK's ability to be an agile, global and extremely dynamic economy, which no doubt we will be.

Let me make some comments on immigration, because Brexit has allowed us to move to a much fairer immigration system. The Government have introduced a points-based system to attract top talent from around the world, while at the same time activating the enormous potential of the UK workforce. The global points-based immigration system is focused on talent and skills, not where someone comes from, and makes it easier for the brightest and best to live and work in the UK. We have already introduced a comprehensive suite of new work routes and we continue to welcome and retain thousands of valuable and talented workers—scientists, researchers, doctors, nurses, engineers, bricklayers and plumbers. The points-based system is attracting worldwide talent and skills, including from EU member states, and we are grateful for it.

Turning to EU-UK cultural exchanges, colleagues will agree that Brexit was never about the UK stepping away from our proud and historic role in Europe. We continue to support cultural exchanges between the UK and the EU, such as the Turing scheme, which allows UK educational organisations to fund life-changing experiences around the world, and we will do everything that we can to facilitate a high flow rate of schoolchildren in both directions.

On our relationship with the EU, the Government are fully focused on implementing the trade and co-operation agreement, and the newly agreed Windsor framework. Both the withdrawal agreement and the TCA are functioning as intended. We look forward to entering a new phase in our post-Brexit relationships in Europe.

As we set out in our recent refresh of the integrated review, the UK is committed to upholding the stability, security and prosperity of our continent and of the Euro-Atlantic as a whole.

It is our ambition to build even stronger relationships with our European partners based on values, reciprocity and co-operation across our shared interests, and we will provide leadership where we are best placed to do so. We will continue to work very closely in areas of mutual benefit, as we have in our response to Ukraine, and we are much looking forward to hosting partners from across Europe, including EU member states, at the European Political Community meeting in the UK in July 2024.

Once again, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate. The Government will continue to seize the benefits of Brexit, delivering on our manifesto commitments to the British people, and we will work closely with our European neighbours, both in the EU and beyond, to uphold our shared values of inclusion, freedom, prosperity and democracy.

7.26 pm

**Martyn Day:** On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I extend my gratitude to all Members who gave up their time to take part in today's lively and informed, albeit rather one-sided, debate, which has emphasised the strength of feeling. An Omnisis poll that was mentioned earlier suggests that 59% of the public agree that there should be an inquiry. Why should there not be an inquiry into what has been the largest constitutional change that the country has seen in my lifetime, with the biggest economic impact? Clearly, it cries out for one.

I said that Brexit has been an unmitigated disaster, and I have heard nothing today to change my mind; however, it is worth pointing out that the petitioners' call is for a public inquiry, not immediately to rejoin the European Union. Personally, I want to be back in Europe as quickly as possible. I would like to see the UK back in Europe, but I know that Scotland has an alternate route to get there, through independence. I would be happy to grab that route as quickly as possible.

The data that we have heard paints a very bleak picture. There is simply no such thing as a good Brexit. The public increasingly can see that. It makes me wonder whether Ministers are hiding behind the democratic mandate because they know that, and because a public inquiry would highlight the tissue of falsehoods and misinformation that the whole Brexit project was built on. It still requires a public inquiry. Since we have been debating, the number of signatures has risen rapidly. Now more than 184,000 people have signed the petition, and it is still growing.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 628226, relating to the impact of the UK's exit from the European Union.

7.28 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statement

*Monday 24 April 2023*

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Evaluation of the Culture Recovery Fund and Publication of Management Data

**The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Julia Lopez):** I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made on 21 April 2023 in the other place by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my noble Friend Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay:

*Publication of the Culture Recovery Fund Evaluation and release of management data*

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has today published a report evaluating the impact and delivery of the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF). I will place a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses. The report can also be found online. DCMS has also today released aggregated management data from CRF applications and awards. I will place a copy of this release in the Libraries of both Houses. This information can also be found online. As Sir Damon Buffini, chairman of the Culture Recovery Board, says in his foreword to the evaluation, the Culture Recovery Fund has played a vital role in ensuring the long-term success of the sector, and this evaluation details how the fund has supported the sector.

### *The Culture Recovery Fund*

The resilience, adaptability, and creativity of the cultural sectors undoubtedly helped get them through the pandemic. This was bolstered by the unwavering support provided by the Government through the Culture Recovery Fund. This was an unprecedented package of measures encompassing loans, grants, and support for capital works to provide full-spectrum support for organisations in these sectors, and one which we hope will never again be needed.

This evaluation report provides clear evidence that the CRF worked—supporting around 5,000 organisations and protecting thousands of jobs.

The report concludes that CRF met its overall objectives, was efficiently implemented and demonstrated value for money. It strengthened the financial health of organisations awarded funding, improved their resilience, and raised their future survival prospects to a degree that could not have been achieved by just relying on the broader package of Government support.

### *Looking forward*

DCMS and its Ministers regularly meet organisations and individuals in the cultural sectors, and appreciate how important it is not just that they survived the pandemic, but that they are able to meet the challenges of the future. The evidence detailed in this report demonstrates that the CRF has made its recipients better able to face those challenges head on. As set out in recent Budget, and backed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the creative industries are one of this Government's five strategically important high growth sectors, and I am pleased that the Culture Recovery Fund has played such an important part in setting up the sector for its next chapter, as well as ensuring that it is still there to enrich our lives in so many other ways for decades to come.

[HCWS733]



# Ministerial Correction

*Monday 24 April 2023*

## PRIME MINISTER

### Engagements

*The following is an extract from Questions to the Prime Minister on 19 April 2023.*

**Keir Starmer:** He is living in another world to the rest of us. People waiting more than two days for an ambulance because they broke the NHS. Only one in 100 rapists going to court because they broke the criminal justice system. A record number of small boats crossing the channel because they broke the asylum system. People can't afford their bills, can't get the police to investigate crimes, can't get a doctor's appointment. Does that really sound like pretty good shape to him?

**The Prime Minister:** What is the record since 2010? Since 2010, crime is down by 50% under the Conservative Government. There are 20,000 more police officers, we have given them more powers, and we have toughened up sentencing—all opposed by Sir Softie over there.

*[Official Report, 19 April 2023, Vol. 731, c. 237.]*

*Letter of correction from the Prime Minister.*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer).

The correct response should have been:

**The Prime Minister:** What is the record since 2010? Since 2010, crime is down by 50% under the Conservative Government. **We are confident that we will have had 20,000 more police officers by the end of March**, we have given them more powers, and we have toughened up sentencing—all opposed by Sir Softie over there.





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Monday 1 May 2023**

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