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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 22 June 2023

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Public Spending: Value for Money

1. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure value for money in public spending. [905531]

10. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): What recent steps he has taken with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure value for money in public spending. [905543]

14. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent steps he has taken with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure value for money in public spending. [905552]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Government continue to deliver on our commitment to get maximum value for taxpayers' money in public spending. The Cabinet Office is one of the engines of efficiency in government. In the most recent financial year for which we have the data, the Cabinet Office, working with colleagues across Whitehall and the cross-Government functions, saved the British taxpayer £3.4 billion, a record we are proud of.

Richard Burgon: It is not just the lies by the former Prime Minister that have damaged trust in our politics; the contracts handed out to Tory friends and donors through VIP lanes did great damage too, yet the Government last week voted down attempts to shut down VIP lanes for good. No doubt Tory donors are rubbing their hands with glee, but with polls showing three quarters of the public are worried about corruption in Government, does the Minister not agree that the refusal to shut down VIP lanes for good will simply add to these grave concerns?

Alex Burghart: Last week we debated the Procurement Bill. I was very sorry not to see the hon. Gentleman in his place at the time, but if he had been present on that day he would have heard us say that the Bill prevents VIP lanes.

Scott Benton: I am sure the Minister is aware of the recent report stating that up to £7 billion of taxpayers' money is squandered on so-called woke projects, including an Arts Council programme on unlearning whiteness. My constituents would argue that this money is far better spent on frontline services such as our NHS. I am sure the Minister agrees, so will he update the House on what steps he is taking to eliminate such appalling waste and to ensure every penny of taxpayer money is well spent?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the need for us to ensure every pound of taxpayers' money is spent appropriately, and he will have heard or read the Health Secretary's comments in March, when he wrote to the health community saying:

"I would ask that you, as a member of the wider health family, now review whether your organisation is getting value for money from your diversity and inclusion memberships and, if not, consider any steps that you could take to address that".

Andrew Selous: Central London is a very expensive place in which to employ civil servants, and it is expensive for them to live in central London, so what are we doing to allow all parts of the United Kingdom to have the civil service based in their areas, particularly smaller towns, not just large ones, and across the UK—not just in the north, but across the whole of the UK?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are the Government who committed to relocating 22,000 civil servants from London to the regions by 2030, and we are making excellent progress on that. We have already achieved half that number, and the other day I was pleased to be in Sheffield opening our new policy unit, which brings people together, and not just entry-level civil servants, but the senior managers and decision makers who are going to inform the decisions that drive government in the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister been looking at the evidence given by George Osborne and Oliver Letwin? I think they were here briefly on an old Etonian work experience scheme, but the evidence they have been giving is a great revelation about what went on in Cabinet and at the highest levels of Government Departments. Will he look and learn?

Alex Burghart: I certainly will.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Are you standing, Jim, or not?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Am I standing? My goodness, does the Pope wear red socks?

On value for money, what recent discussions have there been with our European counterparts to ease the cost of living by removing the costly Northern Ireland protocol measures on admin and accountancy for small and medium-sized business, and will the hon. Gentleman undertake to resume discussions if they are not ongoing?

Alex Burghart: The Windsor framework made significant progress and took a substantial burden off businesses, but I believe conversations are ongoing and if the hon.

Gentleman has any particular questions he would like to bring to my attention, I will be very happy to have a conversation with him.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow the Secretary of State.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Thank you; good morning, Mr Speaker.

I frequently stand at this Dispatch Box and ask the Minister about value for taxpayers' money, because his Department is responsible for making sure that every penny is treated with the respect it deserves, especially during the cost of living crisis. With that in mind, can he give us an official estimate of the total cost of fraud to the UK across all sectors in 2022?

Alex Burghart: We are engaged in a constant battle against fraud. We do so with colleagues across Whitehall, and particularly in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury. I look forward to the right hon. Lady's next question.

Angela Rayner: I thank the Minister for that non-answer, but the public deserve to know. While he ducks and dives the question, I have discovered the answer. At a conference in Portsmouth last week, the UK fraud costs measurement committee distributed hard copies of its new report with a fresh new estimate: £219 billion is lost each year as a result of fraud. That is equivalent to this year's entire central Government running costs budget for health, defence and policing put together. The figure does not even include covid fraud. Can he tell me how much of that money he has clawed back?

Alex Burghart: We have established the Public Sector Fraud Authority to clamp down on fraud. As a former DWP Minister, I assure the right hon. Lady that this Government go after fraud wherever it is found. Every time we find new opportunities for fraud, we come forward with new means of clamping down on them. We are a Government committed to efficiency, which we are delivering. As the right hon. Lady will have heard me say in answer to the first question this morning, the Cabinet Office, in the most recent financial year for which figures are available, delivered £3.4 billion-worth of savings to the British taxpayer. That is work we will continue to do.

Honours Nominations

2. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to assess people who are nominated for honours. [905533]

7. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's processes for scrutinising nominations for honours. [905540]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): Nominations are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) will know, taken on merit. The criteria that we use are regularly reported to Government, with our most recent report on the operation of the honours system published last month. We are

confident that the process for honours selection, including adequate probity and propriety checks, is proportionate and robust and that all due process is followed.

John Penrose: Does the Minister agree that as proven by recent controversies, the system must be transparently meritocratic, so that it is crystal clear that everybody receiving an honour legitimately deserves it? Now that we have introduced a points-based immigration system to choose the best and the brightest from around the world to live here in Britain, should we consider a similar points-based system to choose this country's brightest and best to receive honours in future, too?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend is too modest to mention that he came up with this idea some time ago, and it is one that we have considered, but it is not one that we will be taking forward at this moment in time. We go to great lengths to ensure that the process remains transparent, and he can read the most recent report, which was published last month. It is essential that we ensure that the committees that make the considerations around the honours system can do so and can report to this place and to the public. While I am aware that he would like us to go further, we do not believe it necessary to uproot the entire system. We want to ensure that the honours system represents people from the length and breadth of the country.

Kerry McCarthy: The Prime Minister insists that he was only following convention when he waved through Boris Johnson's honours list. It should be obvious to anyone that this former dishonourable Member—a man who will not even be allowed back on to the estate without an escort—should not be doling out honours. Would a stronger, more principled Prime Minister not have recognised that any convention that allows such a man to install his discredited cronies as peers might need changing, rather than blindly following?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady knows that there is a long-standing convention from 1895 that outgoing Prime Ministers have a resignation honours list. To put it in plain language for her, just because that gentleman has been found against in this House, it does not mean that the people who were put forward in his resignation honours list are without merit.

Nuclear Test Veterans: Recognition

3. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to recognise the contribution of nuclear test veterans. [905534]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Nuclear test veterans played a valuable role in developing a nuclear deterrent that has ultimately kept Britain safe for decades. The Office for Veterans' Affairs has opened the £200,000 nuclear test veteran community fund and a £250,000 oral history project to ensure that the veterans of Britain's nuclear testing programme are never forgotten.

David Duguid: British nuclear test veterans, such as my constituent Colin Moir, welcomed the news earlier this year that they would finally be awarded a

commemorative medal. Given that Mr Moir applied for his medal at the soonest opportunity and unfortunately has not received it in time for this Armed Forces Week, what assurances can my right hon. Friend give that medals will be received in time for Remembrance Sunday?

Johnny Mercer: I recognise that the medallic recognition has taken a long time to achieve. The Government, for the first time in 60 years, have delivered on that medallic recognition. I want to ensure that those medals are in the hands of veterans who deserve them. I recognise the concerns around delays. I will be extremely disappointed if medals are not on the chests of nuclear test veterans at Remembrance Day this year.

Resignation Honours Lists: Impact

4. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the publication of the resignation honours lists of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk and the former right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip on public trust in (a) politicians and (b) political institutions. [905535]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): My Cabinet colleagues and I have frequent conversations about a range of issues, with a range of colleagues. To the question that the hon. Lady is pushing on, she will have heard me say that there is a long-standing convention, under successive Governments, that outgoing Prime Ministers can draw up a resignation list.

Marion Fellows: I can now say this without being told off, as was the case a year ago this month: the disgraced, dishonest and serial-lying Boris Johnson should categorically not be given any resignation honours list—period. What steps is the Minister taking to rescind this democratic outrage? If he is not taking any, does he agree with Parliament's judgment on Monday, given that he chose to abstain on the vote?

Alex Burghart: The list is not being rescinded. It has gone to the sovereign and has been approved.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The failed London mayoral candidate Shaun Bailey has been given a life peerage in Boris Johnson's list, despite his "Jingle and Mingle" 2020 Christmas party. Does the Minister agree that someone who has failed to be elected on three occasions and flouted the laws that the rest of us stuck to during lockdown should not be offered a life peerage?

Alex Burghart: The honourable gentleman in question, as the hon. Lady will know, was also a very long-standing member of the London Assembly, and was successfully elected on a number of occasions to fill that role. Obviously, reports of the party in question are unacceptable. We condemn that event, but as she will have heard me say to her colleague, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), the list has gone to the sovereign and been approved.

Kirsty Blackman: There is a bit of unedifying silliness in the Chamber this morning. We are absolutely beside ourselves that we seemingly cannot do anything about this, and the Government are not taking any responsibility. Just because something has been convention since 1985 does not mean that we should continue doing it. If the antics of the dishonourable member for the Chiltern hundreds were not bad enough, convention now dictates that the 49-day former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who crashed the economy, which directly contributed to the mortgage rate rises that people are struggling with, will also get to make nominations. Why is even more power and privilege being awarded to those who have caused untold misery and hardship?

Alex Burghart: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave a few moments ago.

Covid-19 Inquiry

5. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to co-operate with the UK covid-19 inquiry. [905538]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): We remain committed to providing all relevant material to the inquiry, and will continue to comply with requests so that we can learn the lessons from the pandemic. To date, the Cabinet Office alone has submitted 55,000 documents to the inquiry.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer, but far from co-operating the Cabinet Office is taking the inquiry to court to block access to information, and the Government are set to spend in excess of £50 million of taxpayers' money on solicitors to protect current and former Ministers. What do they have to hide?

Jeremy Quin: The Government are committed to getting to the truth on covid. There will be a lot of lessons to learn. We are following a process, and it is incredibly important for the country and the future Governments of the UK that we learn the lessons. We have nothing to hide from the inquiry, but there is one specific technical difference between us and the inquiry and it is right that those things are sorted out in the law courts, as is normal in such circumstances. We want to provide all relevant material to the covid inquiry; we continue to do so and we support its work.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): We must learn the lessons from the covid inquiry. It was "ludicrous in retrospect", a "relatively small part" of the brief, "wildly under-resilient" and a "disaster for the country"—not my words but those used by the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster at the covid inquiry this week to describe the Government's approach to resilience and preparedness for the past 13 years. He also said it was a huge error not to have a senior Minister solely devoted to resilience. Will the Secretary of State finally listen to Labour and appoint a dedicated Minister for resilience?

Jeremy Quin: There is a resilience Minister in the sense that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster maintains oversight of resilience. That is one of a

number of responsibilities shared with the devolved Administrations—resilience is important in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. I look forward to meeting my colleagues from those Administrations next week in Edinburgh to discuss these issues. We take resilience extraordinarily seriously. We undertake exercises to ensure that we understand the pressures that may come to bear. We always take resilience seriously and we will look at the lessons coming out of the inquiry about how to do better as a country.

Fleur Anderson: We will keep asking. I am glad that the Paymaster General mentioned emergency response exercises, which are essential for learning the lessons from covid and for being ready for whatever disaster comes next. As the senior Minister for resilience, among many other things, will the Paymaster General tell us how many exercises have been carried out locally and nationally in the last year? Is he ensuring that lessons are learned, changes are made and good practice is shared to make all our communities safe?

Jeremy Quin: Exercises take place locally and nationally. The exercise involving the use of the emergency alert system for the first time ever, to ensure that we have that important pillar in our response, illustrates how seriously we take these issues. We will continue to undertake exercises to ensure that we are as prepared as anyone ever can be for the circumstances that we can plan for and try to project. But clearly, we never know the disaster that might hit us. That is why we take these things seriously.

Government Projects: Cost

6. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the cost to the public purse of Government projects. [905539]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The Infrastructure and Projects Authority's standards, tools and training for Government projects and its expert advice and cost estimation guidance helps to ensure that Government projects are set up for success. I am pleased to announce that the IPA is launching its benchmarking data service later this year, which will significantly improve the pricing of Government projects through access to a detailed dataset of realised unit costs, delivering much more confidence to cost estimation.

Greg Smith: In reducing costs, the challenge for my right hon. Friend is the way that Government projects are set up in the first place. They blow their budgets because the people set up to deliver them always know that the taxpayer will bail them out. Will he look at introducing a new private sector viability test for Government projects, where a lack of private sector interest would be the warning light that the project is wrong? For example, the total lack of interest from any private sector investor should have been the flashing red beacon for the financial catastrophe that is High Speed 2?

Jeremy Quin: We take infrastructure challenges seriously. It is incredibly important to bear down on inflation for a whole range of reasons, including the impact on our capital projects. Clearly, inflation has had a dramatic impact over the last 18 months. The IPA is a force for challenge in Government projects. It supports HS2

delivery through advice and assurance, particularly through the annual assurance updates, which help to provide external challenge to the Department when it makes its regular reports to Parliament, which it will do this month.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of course, no one knows what the cost to the public purse of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Bill will be, because the Government are refusing to publish their economic impact assessment. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Home Office to get that economic impact assessment published, not least because if it will not do that, it will face freedom of information requests and complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office, which themselves are going to cost the taxpayer more money?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his normal way and I am certain it will be picked up by my colleagues in the Home Office.

Veterans: Well-paid Employment

8. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help veterans access well-paid employment. [905541]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Veterans employment in this country is strong, with 87% of veterans securing employment within six months after service, helping to deliver on the Government's priority to grow the economy.

Chi Onwurah: As we celebrate Armed Forces Week, let us celebrate the skills of our armed forces personnel and their value in civilian life. The Army's life skills policy and holistic approach to transition do just that. Nevertheless, the number of veterans claiming universal credit has risen by 50% in the last year and the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers tells me that over half its welfare cases are about employment and finance issues. In these difficult circumstances, why have the Government chosen to halve the number of armed forces employment champions in jobcentres?

Johnny Mercer: On armed forces employment champions in jobcentres, we have gone away from that being a part-time role to having full-time Department for Work and Pensions armed forces champions who cover different areas. They are proving hugely successful in getting people into work. I was concerned about the reports on universal credit and I explored that this week. There is now a different method of accounting and I have asked for more detail on that. The truth is that veteran employment is higher than it has ever been before, but I share those concerns and I will continue to explore the data.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): As it is Armed Forces Week, may I first take the opportunity to thank our armed forces, veterans, reservists and family members for their service to our country and today, on Windrush 75, particularly those from Commonwealth countries who serve?

We have heard that the latest Government data shows that the number of veterans claiming universal credit has increased every month in the last year, representing a 50% rise in the last 12 months. I heard what the Minister said, but our heroes should not be relying on benefits and charitable support to get by. Amid the current cost of living crisis, can the Minister elaborate a bit more to the House how his Department has been helping veterans to find well-paid employment?

Johnny Mercer: I would be delighted to. What we are creating are clear, defined pathways into different sectors across the UK economy—sector initiatives, whether in renewables, finance or construction. We are designing clear pathways that deliver an equity of access across the United Kingdom, so it is not just who you know or relying on charities; everyone can access them. Having a job remains the No. 1 factor in improving life chances for veterans across the country. We are delighted to see employment at 87%, but we always want to do more and will continue to drive away at that.

Rachel Hopkins: I heard what the Minister said, but is what the Government are doing on employment support sufficient when we have heard that the number of armed forces champions in jobcentres has halved? That is less capacity across the country. In contrast, the Labour party is ready to deliver across Government the support our veterans deserve with our plan to fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law. Will the Minister do the same: yes or no?

Johnny Mercer: I am so sorry. I desperately want to be challenged in this space, but that is incredibly feeble. I would never try and do maths with anybody in this place, but if we have part-time armed forces covenant champions in jobcentres replaced with full-time champions in the regions, we will have more coverage, which is what we have delivered across the country. On incorporating the armed forces covenant into law, I was the first Minister to do that, in my role as the Minister for Defence People and Veterans. Look, we can always do more, but we need to make sure we are not doing down where we are with veterans. How it feels to be a veteran has changed fundamentally. I look forward to proposals from the Labour party going into the election that are realistic, deliverable and will improve what it means to be a veteran.

Mr Speaker: Let us come to a parliamentary veteran, Sir Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Less of the veteran, Sir. *[Laughter.]*

Industrial Action: Maintaining Public Services

9. **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to maintain public services during industrial action; and if he will make a statement. [905542]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): The Cabinet Office's Cobra unit continues to support Departments to develop their contingency plans. At the same time, we are co-ordinating preparedness across Government to minimise the impact on public services wherever possible. However, the only

way to truly avoid disruption is by union leaders returning to the negotiating table and working constructively to reach a fair and reasonable deal.

Michael Fabricant: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. I am sure that he can imagine the difficulty that my constituents and those in Burntwood and other parts of the west midlands face because of industrial action. Does he agree that organisations should be free to employ anyone who is best able to do a job, regardless of whether they happen to be a member of a militant trade union?

Oliver Dowden: As ever, my hon. Friend is right. Indeed, the people of Lichfield deserve better and less industrial action. They are superbly represented by their Member of Parliament, who will continue to ensure that they get better than industrial action. I stand foursquare with him.

Civil Service: External Consultants

11. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the reasons for which external consultants are used by the civil service. [905545]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): My focus is on ensuring that the civil service has enhanced skills to provide all forms of advice where appropriate. However, there is also a role, as there is in other Governments around the world and in the private sector, for specialist expertise. Where that represents good value for money in delivering for the taxpayer, we will use it.

Mr Dhese: Instead of increasing the resilience of our civil service, this Conservative Government rely increasingly on expensive external contracts to fill gaps. The UK public sector awarded £2.8 billion-worth of consulting contracts in 2022—up 75% from 2019—while poor Government leadership led to a huge waste of taxpayers' money. Staggeringly, the Government have brought to an end limits on Whitehall spending on external contracts. Will the Minister explain how, when millions, including my constituents, are struggling to pay their bills, the purse strings can simply be untied when it comes to hiring outside consultants?

Jeremy Quin: It is absolutely not the case that there are no limits on consultancy fees. Every Department is responsible for its own finances and is under pressure to deliver effectively for the taxpayer. Any decision to issue contracts is closely scrutinised in the contracting Department. The largest contracts come to the Cabinet Office as well, but the key issue is to ensure that Departments spend their money wisely. There is a role for specialist expertise. There are occasions—I had experience of this in the Ministry of Defence—when consultants are the best value for money in providing a service to the taxpayer.

Extreme Heat Preparedness

13. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of the Government's preparedness for extreme heat. [905550]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): Keeping the British people safe is the Government's first duty and that includes from risks such as extreme heat. Central and local government have contingency plans that are ready to be implemented when we receive UK Health Security Agency heat health alerts or Met Office severe weather warnings. The Cabinet Office plays a critical role in supporting those plans. For example, the National Situation Centre has been working with Departments to ensure that relevant data can be captured during a heatwave to support timely decision making.

Mr Speaker: I call Martyn Day—sorry, Bob Blackman.

Bob Blackman: Maybe the heat is getting to you, Mr Speaker.

I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. He will remember last summer, when the temperature reached 42°, and that was just in Committee Room 14, where we were holding the leadership contest. The good news is that the Met forecast shows that we will not get such extreme heat this summer, but people are already suffering because of the heat. What action is my right hon. Friend taking right now to ensure that people are safe during very hot weather, and that they are prepared for what may come?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the matter. The situation is precisely why we rolled out the new heat health alerting service in conjunction with the Met Office on 1 June. As climate change continues, we are developing cross-Government working to ensure that we are resilient to the new challenges.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is not just red-headed, fair-skinned folk like me who suffer during the UK's increasing heatwaves. I note with envy that, across Europe, many countries have introduced maximum workplace temperatures, and I wonder whether this country could do the same. Will the Minister look at implementing such a scheme?

Oliver Dowden: I am very sceptical about adding further regulatory burdens to business. I think most businesses are incentivised to make sure their employees have a safe and appropriately cooled place to work, which is the appropriate way to proceed. However, we are working across Government, and through things such as local resilience fora, to make sure businesses are properly advised on the appropriate steps to take.

Government Agency Helplines: Response Times

15. **Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** If he will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to improve response times to calls made to the customer helplines of Government agencies. [905554]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): We know the frustration that my hon. Friend's constituents, and indeed all constituents, feel when they are kept waiting on helplines. Departmental helplines are not managed or run centrally, and therefore each Department is responsible for its own helplines and for response times and waiting times. However, I know His Majesty's

Revenue and Customs, for instance, has recognised that its customer services have not been good enough recently and is taking steps to improve them.

Mr Hollobone: With two thirds of HMRC staff working from home, and with HMRC taking more than 20 minutes, on average, to answer the phone, HMRC has now shut down the busy self-assessment helpline over the summer. Will my hon. Friend take action, together with His Majesty's Treasury, to address the presently appalling level of customer service at HMRC?

Alex Burghart: I am sure my colleagues in HMRC will have heard my hon. Friend's comments.

Veterans' Affairs: Best Practice

16. **Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con):** What steps he is taking to share best practice on veterans' affairs with his international counterparts. [905555]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): In recent months, I have met international counterparts, including from Canada and Korea, to share best practice, and I went to the veteran games in Israel. We collaborate with our Five Eyes partners, and this afternoon I am meeting the Ukrainian Minister to understand how we can help Ukraine to shape veterans and recovery processes.

Anna Firth: My constituent Godfrey Hunt was a civilian scientist in the UK's nuclear testing programme in the 1950s. He has long campaigned for a medal for nuclear veterans, and he was delighted to hear the Government's commitment, three months ago, that we would finally issue these medals. I heard the Minister's comments earlier, but will he take this opportunity, once again, to confirm the timetable for getting that medal on to the chest of Godfrey Hunt and all other nuclear veterans?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to Godfrey and all those who served in that programme. I recognise the frustration with this process. It has taken 60 years to get to this point. I want to see those medals on chests on Remembrance Day, and getting these things through Government and so on is not easy. I have made it very clear to officials, and I make it very clear to them again today, that I expect those medals to be on veterans' chests on Remembrance Sunday this year. I will strain every sinew in Government to make sure that happens.

Topical Questions

T1. [905562] **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): We continue to strengthen the country's overall resilience, which is why last week we published a new biological security strategy that will help to protect us from a whole host of threats, from diseases to bio-weapons and antimicrobial resistance. The strategy includes a new bio-threats radar to monitor hazards as and when they emerge.

This week I will travel to Indonesia and Singapore to strengthen our partnerships on cyber-security and data protection, and to build on the UK's leadership on one of the most important issues of our time: artificial intelligence.

Liz Twist: We know from answers to previous questions that the taxpayer is still being billed £700,000 a day, which is £5 million a week or £21.4 million a month, to store personal protective equipment, much of which is of too poor quality to be used. What will the Secretary of State do to make sure such reckless procurement never happens again?

Oliver Dowden: I do not recall a time during the covid crisis when the Labour party said we should not be purchasing PPE but, on wider procurement, that is precisely why we are taking the Procurement Bill through this House, which seizes the opportunities of Brexit to ensure we have an efficient procurement system.

T3. [905565] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Cabinet Office does a really good job, thanks in part to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and others, in looking after veterans' affairs across the whole of government. However, I would like another group in the armed forces community, armed forces families, to have parity of esteem with veterans. We still have spouses and partners whose careers and jobs are trashed as they move around, with employers not doing enough; we have children who have studied the Romans six times and never get on to the Egyptians; and we have health appointments that do not catch up on moves. We need the Cabinet Office to chivvy this cross-departmentally. Will he do that?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): That is a good question, and I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend for his work over the years; he did the "Living in our Shoes" report when I was in a previous role. Veterans' affairs are outside the Ministry of Defence because veterans are civilians, not serving personnel, and they require all those aspects of government to work for veterans as civilians. He is talking about armed forces families, and responsibility for them remains with the MOD and the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families. I am sure he will have heard those remarks and I stand ready to assist in any way I can.

T2. [905564] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): This afternoon, we will have a debate on the infected blood inquiry. Representatives from Haemophilia Scotland met colleagues last week in Parliament and it has called for an independent arm's length body to be established, as recommended by that infected blood inquiry. Can the Paymaster General confirm that it is the Government's intention to do that?

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I welcome the fact that the House will have the opportunity to debate the infected blood inquiry this afternoon. I look forward to the debate and I hope other Members will be able to be present for it. The Government have not yet set out their final deliberation on the arm's length body; an awful lot of work is ongoing. A detailed study was undertaken by Sir Robert Francis and we had a fine

second interim report from Sir Brian Langstaff. We are still working through the implications of that and we continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I say to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs that we are grateful for the work he does. Can he ask those in his private office whether they will show him the message I sent him yesterday about the secretary to a governor in Afghanistan, who is in hiding and whose grandfather has been killed trying to protect him, to see whether there is anything the British Government can do to allow him to come out of Afghanistan?

Johnny Mercer: I recognise the ongoing concerns about those who remain in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister has asked me to do what I can to get the Afghans who are currently in hotels into long-term accommodation in the UK. That will allow us to turn back on those flights out of Afghanistan. I recognise that there are still people there who should be in the UK, and I will, of course, look at the case my hon. Friend raises later today. That process of bringing people out of Afghanistan remains with the MOD, but it will have heard his comments and I will do everything I can to help him.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I return to the issue of nominations into the other place. Is the Minister aware that 27 members of the Lords donated £50 million to his party and that one in 10 Tory peers have given more than £100,000 to his party? Is that all just an unfortunate coincidence, or are we seeing a return to cash for honours? Would it not be simple just to say that nobody who makes donations to political parties can receive an honour in the future? Would that not be the simplest way of dealing with this utter scandal?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): We all remember the cash for honours scandal that happened under the hon. Gentleman's party's tenure, and we all know how many union barons are barons.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps are the Government taking to improve the co-ordination and collaboration between different Departments on addressing the mental health needs of our veterans?

Johnny Mercer: This Prime Minister made the conscious decision to take veterans out of the MOD and set up the Office for Veterans' Affairs in the Cabinet Office, with a Cabinet Minister responsible for this. For the first time, that aligned us with our Five Eyes allies. That has allowed us to produce things such as Op Courage, the UK's first dedicated mental healthcare pathway for veterans. It costs £22 million a year, with that rising every year. We had 19,000 referrals in its first year and a massive unmet need in this country is now being met by government. We are very proud of that and we look to do more in the future.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Each year, thousands of young people leave local authority care, yet many of them struggle to be able to afford their first home or to get their first job.

As local councils are corporate parents, could the Government be a corporate grandparent and have a cross-government care leavers' strategy, encouraging more Government Departments to employ care leavers to give them a good shot at life?

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Prime Minister has asked me to look at the issue. There are about 92,000 care leavers aged between 18 and 25 in the United Kingdom. They require and deserve pathways similar to those that we have created in the veterans space. I look forward to launching that strategy and speaking further to the House, before the summer recess, about the issue of children in care.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I noted, with interest, the update to the civil service headquarters occupancy data for June on the Cabinet Office website this morning. It shows a pleasing trend of more civil servants coming back to their desks, but with some Departments, such as His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, still below 50%, what is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that more civil servants get to their desks?

Jeremy Quin: We are encouraging people to go back. That is an ongoing trend, and my hon. Friend is right about what he alludes to in the numbers. There are benefits in civil servants working together, as there are for those in other areas of the economy, in terms of innovation, teamwork and being able to bring on new members of a team. I welcome the fact that people are returning to the office and that they are working collaboratively in Government buildings across the country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Opportunity has been squandered in the way the Government are disposing of public land. Bootham Park Hospital closed seven and half years ago, but it is still vacant despite developers coming and going, meaning that opportunities for creatives and businesses, as well as for residential use for local people, are being denied. Will the Government undertake a cross-governmental look at public land to ensure that it is used for public good, not profit?

Alex Burghart: I cannot comment on the specifics of the case that the hon. Lady raises, but I can tell her that the Government Property Agency, which is based in the Cabinet Office, delivers enormous efficiencies for taxpayers by rationalising the estate and using some of the savings to create modern working environments, which create greater productivity among our civil servants.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): May I take a slightly contrary view about working from home to the one we heard from the Front Bench just now? While I fully recognise that working with other people in an office is constructive from a teamwork and creative point of view, working from home has advantages, including saving travel time and, on occasion, enabling people to concentrate more on the job. Will my right hon. and hon. Friends not take too prescriptive a view of working from home, and encourage TWATism? A TWAT, Mr Speaker, is somebody who works in the office on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Mr Speaker: Thank goodness that was clarified.

Jeremy Quin: Mr Speaker, we are all better informed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The policy is not doctrinaire. As my hon. Friend says, there are occasions when that is the right approach, but the default position should be working together in the office space. We believe that means we get more out of employees, there is better productivity and it is a better experience for those working together in that team environment.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Following the question asked by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), may I press Ministers in relation to HMRC and Department for Work and Pensions phone services? I have constituents who are waiting over an hour to speak to DWP call centre staff, who are then cut off. The pressure is partly caused by more and more people relying on DWP and HMRC services. Having been cut off, they subsequently receive letters saying their benefits have been revoked or they are expected to repay taxes, without having been able to talk to any officials in those call centres. It cannot be right for the Minister to say that it is for those Departments to deal with the problem. The Cabinet Office needs to have a co-ordinating role to resolve these ongoing problems. It is simply not good enough.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say already that it is a matter for those Departments. It is their responsibility, but I know they are taking those responsibilities very seriously. DWP and HMRC are working hard to get the waiting times down.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As the Procurement Bill goes through Parliament, what steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that hostile nations are not installing equipment in our networks and other facilities?

Alex Burghart: We were delighted to announce last week, during Report stage of the Procurement Bill, the creation of a new security unit within the Cabinet Office. It will identify high-risk vendors, who will be prevented from supplying things like surveillance equipment to certain parts of the public estate. I am very proud of our record in this space.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We have now passed midsummer's day, the longest day of the year, and still the children are at school. What is the impact on our civil service and our services of an outdated system where children in this country go on holiday when half the summer—very often the best part of it—is over? Can we have a change and look at how we time our summer holidays for children?

Mr Speaker: Who wants the question?

Oliver Dowden: I suspect the question is a matter for the Department for Education. I think the reasoning is that it tends to be warmer in August, but I am happy to take up the matter with my ministerial colleagues.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps is the Cabinet Office taking to honour the Conservative party's manifesto commitment to protect Northern Ireland veterans from vexatious litigation?

Johnny Mercer: I can tell my hon. Friend and the House that we are nearly at the summit of that mountain. The Bill is continuing to go through the Lords. It will

come back to this House and become law by the summer recess. We will have delivered on a manifesto commitment to protect those who served us in Northern Ireland, of whom we are deeply proud, from the vexatious nature of investigations and litigation, while providing a better opportunity for all victims of that conflict to find out what happened and to focus on reconciliation and the future.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The continuous briefing against our civil servants by Ministers and Conservative MPs is having a disastrous impact on morale in our civil service. Do the Government not realise that damaging morale in our civil service hinders us in conducting Government business and retaining that expertise in-house, and makes us ever more reliant on expensive external consultants?

Jeremy Quin: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I totally refute his contention. That is not the experience of this ministerial team. That is not what we do. I very much value the work of our civil servants. I make that clear to their union representatives and to civil servants themselves. They do a very valuable job for our country and they will always have the support of this Government in attempting to do their utmost, as they do, to support and benefit the prosperity of the whole country.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Where is the surplus personal protective equipment being stored? What is it costing and what are the plans for its disposal?

Mr Speaker: Who wants that one?

Jeremy Quin: The benefit of having a long set of topicals is that we cover many Departments through the course of it. I am not totally aware of any answer to that question without consulting my colleagues in, I suspect, the Department of Health and Social Care. I am afraid that I am not able to give an answer to my right hon. Friend on that point.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Last year, the then Prime Minister, now the Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Chiltern Hundreds, announced the creation of the Office of the Prime Minister. It was going to be

very exciting—like something out of “The West Wing”, which, of course, was a work of fiction, much like a lot of Boris Johnson’s premiership. In the words of a character from “The West Wing”, is the Office of the Prime Minister still “a thing”?

Oliver Dowden: Within the hierarchy of Whitehall, Downing Street sits within the Cabinet Office. I have found that the way it works best—I think that this is the Prime Minister’s view as well—is that the Cabinet Office supports Downing Street in the performance of its functions, so I do not think there is a need to create a separate Office of the Prime Minister beyond the existing Downing Street capabilities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past week, I have had the opportunity to engage with a veteran who is coming to the end of 24 years’ service in July. He has to leave the Palace barracks in Holywood and move out because his tenure has come to an end. He has no idea how to get housing and job opportunities, due to changes in his personal circumstances. What steps are being taken to ensure that no long-serving soldier is left in such a precarious position or feeling so vulnerable? I know the Minister will answer positively, but I think we need to know that.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his long-time advocacy for this cohort, particularly those who served in Northern Ireland. While I recognise that the politics may change out there, he should be under no illusion that this Government’s pride in those who served in the armed forces in Northern Ireland remains completely undimmed. When it comes to housing provision and employment, it is true that opportunities are better now than they ever have been in the history of this nation, but I recognise that there is more to do and we need to ensure that people do not fall through the cracks. I am more than happy to meet him to talk about this individual specifically so that we can load him on to one of the programmes we have designed.

10.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Sudan: Atrocities

10.30 am

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement regarding the rapid acceleration of atrocities in Sudan.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): The UK strongly condemns the heinous attacks on civilians across Sudan, including, in particular, in Darfur. All parties involved are accountable for the crimes they commit. Our immediate objective is to stop the violence, ensure that civilians are protected, and bring about immediate safe and unfettered humanitarian access. Civilians and critical infrastructure must be protected in line with international humanitarian law, and communities must have access to critical care and basic services.

On 16 June, the Minister for Development and Africa called publicly for atrocities to stop and for humanitarian access to be granted. The UK is stepping up enhanced observation of human rights in Sudan through a remote risk-monitoring capability. We have provided funding to organisations that are, with input from local partners, collecting, verifying and preserving digital content from the conflict, including instances of significant abuses. That will play a vital role in amplifying the voices of those who are being targeted, and will be permissible in future accountability mechanisms, should they be established.

The UK is pursuing all diplomatic avenues, including ministerial engagement with regional counterparts, to end the violence and de-escalate tensions in Sudan. The UK-drafted resolution, passed at the United Nations Human Rights Council on 11 May, condemns the human rights violations and abuses taking place in Sudan. It is the strongest resolution that the council has passed on Sudan in over a decade.

We continue to be hugely invested in Sudan. Over the past five years, we have invested £250 million-worth of humanitarian aid, and that, combined with our diplomacy, will continue, we hope, moving Sudan towards the path of peace.

Vicky Ford: A systemic ethnic cleansing is happening in Darfur right now. Last Sunday, 100 members of the Darfur diaspora in the UK met. Every person had lost several members of their family in the last few weeks owing to a campaign by the Rapid Support Forces/Janjaweed to change the DNA in Darfur. That means targeting non-Arabs. Boys over 10 are being murdered; girls over 12 are being raped. Civil leaders are being targeted and murdered, including the Governor of West Darfur.

A quarter of a million people live in El Geneina, which has been under siege for two months. The RSF/Janjaweed has destroyed the water sources, hospitals, pharmacies and food stores. We have no idea of the true scale of the casualties, but an eyewitness has estimated that the number is already in the thousands. The Sudanese armed forces are doing nothing to protect people. The city is just 28 km from the border with Chad at Adré, where French troops have been seen recently and UK aid is waiting, but people are being shot when they try to flee the violence. El Geneina is a strategic gateway for

arms and mercenaries entering Sudan. Furthermore, the RSF has a vast gold smuggling network in Darfur and is connected with Russia's Wagner Group.

Given that the UK is the penholder at the UN, what action are we taking to stop the violence? What pressure is being put on the warring generals to end the conflict? Has the UK called for an urgent debate at the UN Security Council? Could the nearby French troops, backed by the international community, work to provide a safe corridor for those in El Geneina? Why has the UK not sanctioned the commercial wings of the RSF and the SAF, as the US has? Why has the UK still not proscribed the Wagner Group as terrorists? What pressure is being put on the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia given that many RSF and SAF commercial entities are registered there?

Lastly, will the Minister meet urgently with representatives of the Darfur diaspora here? Will he ensure that the voices of civil society and marginalised ethnic groups are heard so that a comprehensive solution to the problems at the heart of the terrible Sudan conflict can be delivered?

Leo Docherty: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for her sustained personal interest in this issue. She comes at this with a great deal of relevant experience, as the most recent UK Minister to have done travelled in the region. The House is grateful for her sustained personal interest and her questions today.

What action is being taken to prevent the violence? We are exerting all diplomatic effort, in concert with the USA and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We hope that the warring generals will see sense. Our diplomatic effort is steered through our membership of the UK core group and will promote the efforts of the African Union. We hope that, through diplomacy, we can progress this measure. We have called for a debate in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and I am pleased to say that we will have closed consultations in the Security Council in New York in the coming days.

My right hon. Friend asked an interesting question about the potential role of French troops. I cannot comment on that specifically, but I know that our diplomats and officials will be liaising with our allies to see what humanitarian work might be expedited by the significant French presence in the region.

Of course, I cannot comment from the Dispatch Box about future UK sanctions. All options continue to be on the table, and we will keep these issues under review. Through our diplomacy and our strong relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, we hope that we might influence both sides in this terrible conflict, and we think that our diplomacy with our Gulf partners has huge possibility.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Development and Africa will engage with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford and any civil society members she thinks are relevant to meet. We do care about Sudanese civil society. Our ambassador, Giles Lever, continues to meet where he can with members of Sudanese civil society, including youth, women and Darfuris. That reflects the scale of our long-term investment in civil society in Sudan, with humanitarian investment of some quarter of a billion pounds in the last five years.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for securing this urgent question. She is an effective and committed chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan.

The reports from Darfur are horrifying. The Sudan Doctors Union says that 1,100 people have already been killed just in the small city of El Geneina. Unarmed men and boys are being murdered because of their ethnicity. Women and girls are being mass raped. One rapist was reported as saying that they want to “change the DNA of this place”.

The provincial governor was assassinated after stating that this was a genocide. Hundreds of thousands possibly remain trapped in El Geneina, shot as they tried to flee.

We knew long before April that racist mass violence and groups armed along ethnic lines were common in Darfur. We knew that the RSF grew out of the Janjaweed, which bears heavy responsibility for acts of genocide 20 years ago. The risk of atrocity crimes was clear. We are the penholder for Sudan on the Security Council. Why did we not better anticipate and prepare? What does it say about our atrocity prevention strategy and the priority that we place on raising the alarm early?

What assessment have we made of the Wagner Group’s role in supplying weapons, and what are we doing now? Why have the Government not even mirrored the United States’ sanctions on economic entities funding the conflict? What can we do at the UN and the African Union to ensure rapid civilian protection now in Darfur? We know that some are determined to block action, regardless of human cost. Can we not expose their role in enabling this horror? Surely we need to bring our partners together now and act.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady raises a number of pertinent questions. When it comes to anticipating the upsurge in violence, we have confidence in our diplomats. It has long been a volatile situation, and I want to clearly express confidence in our diplomatic representatives, our diplomacy and our deep understanding of the region. Of course, they are not able to predict every last event, but we do have a deep reserve of regional expertise built up over many years, and we should be proud of that.

The hon. Lady asked a question about the Wagner Group. Clearly, we keep all options under review, but I agree with her assessment of the hugely damaging, detrimental and pernicious effect of the Wagner Group. That is a regional trend—it reflects the profound diminishing of Russian influence on the European continent—and we keep its activities under close watch. She also made a very good point about protection of civilians. Clearly, all our efforts are focused on pushing for a diplomatic path towards peace, because it is peace that will allow civilians to be protected and the humanitarian aid to flow.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who has been a steadfast advocate for the people of Sudan, for securing this urgent question. There is no question that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated in El Geneina and across Darfur. At the Foreign Affairs

Committee on Tuesday, we held a session specifically on the crisis, and we heard that the fear is that diplomats are putting their trust in the men with guns rather than civilians. Given that we are the UN Security Council penholder, why are we not leading work to secure a commission of inquiry on Sudan by the Human Rights Council? That is something meaningful we could do that would make a real difference.

Secondly, please can we get a grip on our chaotic approach to dealing with the Wagner Group? We need to bring in sanctions. Can we also look at putting up balloons with allies that would provide internet access to Darfur, so that the voices that are being silenced and massacred can get out and the true scale of what is happening can be known around the world?

Leo Docherty: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for her pertinent questions. She made a very good point about alleged war crimes. We entirely agree that accountability is hugely important—it is an instrument of deterrence. That is why a lot of our work on a daily basis is about ensuring that there is institutional capacity for recording atrocities so that those responsible can be held to account.

My hon. Friend made a good point about civil society, although we have engaged and will continue to engage. On the UN route to further expedite our interest in human rights, the next step is the closed session of the Security Council, but all options are on the table with regard to the Human Rights Council. She referred to the Wagner Group, and I agree with her assessment of the threat, although not her characterisation of our policy. Of course, we keep its activities under review, and that is reflected in robust and deep institutional thinking and policymaking.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford): she is absolutely right to bring this matter before the House today while this violence, which we all condemn, escalates. It would be the understatement of the century to say that Sudan is no stranger to identity-based violence. The Minister said that the UK Government have a deep understanding and regional expertise. It is therefore deeply concerning to hear from academics, policy experts and non-governmental organisations on the ground in Sudan that time and time again, the UK has failed to listen to the advice, the warnings and the pleading to follow an atrocity prevention approach to Sudan.

This week, as we have heard, the Foreign Affairs Committee heard from witnesses across Sudanese and western agencies that the UK Government have ignored repeated warnings. Indeed, a letter from the UK Civil Society Atrocity Prevention Working Group says that

“As violence broke out in April, the Sudan team had in place no expertise on the dynamics of atrocity violence; no system of urgent alarm raising”

and no guidance, and had undertaken no training to address these issues. The SNP has called for an atrocity prevention strategy for years. The 2021 integrated review should have included one, so why has all of this been ignored? When will the UK Government change their strategy to accommodate such an approach, and will

[Drew Hendry]

they bring to the House details of how they are going to take that forward, along with all of the other answers that should be heard today?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman needs a new watch.

Leo Docherty: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford for her deep expertise and experience, and for tabling this urgent question today.

We did not ignore warnings. We have absolute confidence in our diplomats, our civil servants, and those members of our institution who have deep expertise in Sudan. They do not have a crystal ball; they cannot predict every last machination in a conflict that is highly complex and extremely volatile. Diplomacy is the art of the possible, as is peacebuilding, and that is where our diplomacy, considerable humanitarian investment and expertise will be focused.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On the Wagner Group, my hon. Friend said that he keeps matters under constant review and close watch. When will it be time to stop watching and do something?

Leo Docherty: I cannot comment on any timescale; it would be inappropriate for me to do so.

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

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am really grateful to the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for shining a spotlight on this, because for too long the international community has not directed its attention to it. Civil society groups reported to my Committee a month ago, and said that they are going unheard when they have been trying for years to raise concerns. Despite rising conflict and reports of atrocities across the region, the Government have continued to make cuts in UK aid in east and central Africa. FCDO bilateral aid to Sudan dropped sharply, from £220 million in 2021-22 to just £25 million the following financial year. Against a backdrop of ongoing conflict and severe humanitarian suffering, what assessment has the Minister made of reversing these cuts, especially in relation to preventing conflict, stopping the atrocities and building peace?

Leo Docherty: We do engage and we have engaged with civil society groups, so we do care about their perspective. Our ambassador and his team have a long track record of engaging with civil society, youth, women and Darfuris in Sudan, and that will continue, notwithstanding the security constraints they currently face, so we do have a good track record of engagement with civil society. The hon. Member mentioned the scale of our investment. Despite the fiscal reality with which we live and our responsible approach, we should be proud of the fact that, over the past five years, we have invested a quarter of a billion pounds in Sudan in humanitarian aid. We should therefore be confident that our significant investment, twinned with our diplomacy, can have a significant effect.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha is due to take place—that is the prediction—next Wednesday. This should be a time of

great joy for Muslims across the world, but clearly it is not going to be in Sudan. Could the Minister advise the House on what action he is taking to at least try to negotiate a ceasefire during the festival, so that people can celebrate even if in terrible circumstances?

Leo Docherty: I thank my hon. Friend for making that good point. The festival of Eid al-Adha should provide an opportunity and an opening for peace. We will continue to make that point, and push it with our Gulf partners particularly, in our diplomatic efforts, in concert with members of the African Union.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In normal times and peaceful times in Sudan, large quantities of food crops such as sorghum and millet—and corn, barley and others—are grown. If in this planting season we do not see these crops being sown, we could have a massive widespread regional catastrophe on our hands. Can I take it that the Minister understands this issue and that maximum effort will be made via diplomatic channels to see that these crops are planted this year?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Member raises an extremely pertinent point. The food crisis in the region is acute. It has been exacerbated by constraints in global supply, and the catastrophic impact of Putin's war in Ukraine, in cutting off the global supply, has had a very significant impact, especially across the African continent. We will of course do all we can to improve not just conditions in the east African region, but the global supply of grain, which is where things such as the Black sea grain initiative are important on a geostrategic scale.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Africa, which will have a quarter of the world's population by 2050, has many great and powerful economies with which we trade. So what representations have the Government made with the African Union, to which we have an ambassador based in Addis Ababa, about the role the African Union is going to play to remedy this absolutely horrendous situation?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I think the African Union is a very valuable partner, and we have an important role to play. At its core, this is about reform, the promotion of enterprise and societal development, and institutional capacity building. That is the route towards more sustainable and long-term economic development, which means countries will be more resilient when it comes to climate change.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Important humanitarian initiatives in Sudan have been closed down by the authorities in Darfur, including those of the UK charity Tearfund, which is referred to in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does the Minister see any prospect of those initiatives being able to reopen in the foreseeable future?

Leo Docherty: We must be realistic: it is hard to see an opportunity in the near future, but that does not stop us being very energetic in our diplomacy. Peace will be the gateway to such organisations returning to their work, so we will exert all efforts possible.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I have received many pieces of correspondence from constituents deeply concerned about the horrendous situation in Sudan. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to support Sudan's neighbouring countries as civilians flee the ongoing violence in Sudan?

Leo Docherty: That is a good question because the regional impacts are very significant. All countries in the region are a focus of our humanitarian efforts and investment by the UK international development fund. We hope that that, twinned with our diplomacy and the very active diplomatic efforts of our Minister for Africa and Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—he has recently been in Ethiopia and Egypt, for example—can bear fruit.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): We stand here many times to remember and commemorate genocides, and we say, "Never again," but genocides are not inevitable. Twenty years after the Darfur genocide, unthinkable crimes are taking place. The Government were warned repeatedly about the atrocity risks in Sudan. Will the Minister pledge today to ensure that atrocity prevention training is given and informs all of our work in all of our country teams?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady makes a good point and I am sure the Minister for Africa will look at exactly that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the Minister aware of concerning reports that Eritrean refugees in Sudanese camps, who have already fled violence and oppression in their own country, are now facing targeting, violence, oppression and deportation from Sudan? When he is taking part in the various diplomatic initiatives he has outlined, will he make sure this is investigated and support provided where needed?

Leo Docherty: Yes, I think I can give an assurance that the Minister for Africa will do exactly that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response to this urgent question, and the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for her assiduous commitment to highlighting all these issues across the House. It is estimated that since 15 April fighting in the city of El Geneina in Darfur has taken the lives of 1,100 people, and it is increasingly coming to light that many of them are not soldiers in combat but civilians fleeing the city in fear of their lives. Will the Minister outline what discussions have taken place with our allies to enable women and children to get to safety, and what steps can we take to stop this carnage?

Leo Docherty: The protection of women and children is at the heart of our diplomatic efforts and we discuss that with our allies in all fora, including the African Union and the UN. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point.

Business of the House

10.53 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 26 June will include:

MONDAY 26 JUNE—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, followed by consideration of a Lords message to the National Security Bill.

TUESDAY 27 JUNE—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate in the name of the official Opposition—subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 28 JUNE—If necessary, consideration of a Lords message, followed by Second Reading of the Holocaust Memorial Bill.

THURSDAY 29 JUNE—General debate on the fishing industry, followed by general debate on artificial intelligence. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 30 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 3 July includes:

MONDAY 3 JULY—Second Reading of the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

TUESDAY 4 JULY—Estimates day (4th allotted day)—subjects to be confirmed.

WEDNESDAY 5 JULY—Estimates day (5th allotted day)—subjects to be confirmed.

At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 6 JULY—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 2) Bill, followed by a general debate on building safety and social housing, to mark six years since the Grenfell Tower tragedy, followed by business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

It might also be helpful for the House to know that, following further discussions with the Procedure Committee and Mr Speaker, it is the Government's intention to bring forward a motion next week for the House to consider the extension of the proxy voting scheme for ill health and injury.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. Today we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the first people from the Windrush generation. They made their homes in cities such as Bristol. They built their lives here, they had their children here, and we are proud of the contributions they made throughout their whole lives. After years of their dedicated public service in the NHS, transport and industry, I have to ask, why are the Government treating these now 60, 70 and 80-year-olds so badly?

The Home Office has failed to process more than 2,000 of the claims for compensation. More than a third have been waiting more than six months for a decision. It is expensive and complex, and just getting to that

[Thangam Debbonaire]

point is hard enough. A lack of access to affordable legal advice is stopping people from even applying for compensation. Can the Minister tell us when the Home Office will clear that backlog and give people the compensation they are owed? What are the Government doing to make the process fairer and more efficient? Will she ensure that those who need it get specialist help? There is a deep sense of injustice in communities such as mine in Bristol. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Home Secretary to come to the House and make a statement, so that the people we represent can get the answers they deserve?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Thangam Debbonaire: No, I have got more. That was just a pause for effect.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to Members looking at their watch that the shadow Leader of the House has up to five minutes?

Thangam Debbonaire: I have done only 90 seconds.

I thank the Leader of the House for stepping up while the Prime Minister stepped aside in Monday's vote to start restoring trust in democracy. It is a very low bar, but a big improvement on her predecessor but one, who tried to rip up the standards system when faced with a similar situation. As grateful as I am, it must have been difficult for the Leader of the House, with no Prime Minister to rally the troops, no Cabinet colleagues on the Front Bench to cheer her on and a roll call of Johnson's sycophants behind her. I am afraid to say that the Leader of the House looked a rather lonely figure on the Government Front Bench—a Tory version of Greta Garbo; glamorous, but all alone. For most of the debate, she was seemingly the only Cabinet Minister holding the torch for any level of standards in public life. However, I know she will be pleased that her powers of persuasion worked wonders over some of her Back Benchers. In fact, more than 100 of them backed her motion.

The current Prime Minister was perhaps slightly less pleased and more nervous that the sword-carrying second favourite to replace him secured an unexpected amount of support. If so many Tory Back Benchers found the strength to do the right thing, why couldn't the Prime Minister? Not only did he fail to vote, but he was too weak to utter a single word of substance on this issue. We do not know where this Prime Minister stands on standards. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether the Prime Minister plans to sit out all future votes on integrity, professionalism and accountability? Where was he?

The Leader of the House famously once reassured this House that another Prime Minister was not hiding "under a desk"—words immortalised on the BBC's "Newscast" intro. I hear news from the parliamentary Press Gallery reception that she is a big fan of the podcasts, so I will end by tempting her to update "Newscast" and this House: is that where the Prime Minister really was on Monday evening—hiding under a desk?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I join the hon. Lady in saying how good it was this week to see the Windrush generation, and all their contributions to our nation, treasured and

celebrated. The Windrush scandal—the injustice done to those people when they had given so much of themselves, and their families' lives, to this nation—is a tremendous stain. I shall certainly ensure that the Home Secretary has heard what the hon. Lady said. She will know that the Home Office has stepped up bespoke surgeries for colleagues on other matters in our casework; I am sure that that could be extended to any cases of the Windrush generation that Members are dealing with.

I shall take all compliments that the hon. Lady gives me about my glamour, but I was not alone on Monday. Many Cabinet colleagues were in the same Lobby as us, as were the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. I repeat what I said in the debate: whatever hon. Members thought about the motion that we were presented with on Monday night—whether they agreed or disagreed with it, or agreed and disagreed with various aspects of it—we are entitled to exercise our right to vote in either Lobby, or not to vote at all. I stressed that I very much feel that people should be left in peace to determine the course of action that they deem correct.

The hon. Lady has not said this, but some of her colleagues have pointed to my colleagues and called them cowards. I do not have time to look into the character of each colleague who was not in the same Lobby as us, but of the Conservative Members who abstained or voted against the Privileges Committee, 20 of them are veterans. Between them they have more than 253 years of service. I do not know how many medals they have between them, but one of them has a distinguished service order. These people are not cowards; they are honourable and decent people, and they did what they thought was right. I would say to anyone beating up on Members of this House for voting one way or another, or abstaining, "Even though I no longer have a sword, back off!" I hope that the hon. Lady, who has been nodding, would agree with that. We are at our best when we have that approach to these matters.

I appreciate that we have had a lot of debate this week and are awaiting news on rate rises from the stresses that our economy is under. I was disappointed to hear the lack of confidence expressed this week by those on the Opposition Benches in the resilience and capability of our nation. It does not survive contact with the facts. Last year, British exports to the EU were at their highest since records began. We are the largest service exporter in the world. The UK's trade balance with the EU has improved. We now have the highest growth of any G7 nation in the last two years, and rank third globally as a priority investment destination.

We are the second nation in the world to have a stock of foreign direct investment worth \$2 trillion. We are Europe's most attractive destination for financial services. We have a trillion-dollar tech economy, and the largest life sciences, film and TV sectors in Europe. We have more people in work than ever before. We are modernising our statute book and can legislate to suit our needs and values on online safety, gene editing and data reform, just to give Members a few examples. We have identified £1 billion-worth of savings in red tape for UK firms and we are reducing compliance costs. We have given UK regulators the ability and resources to make sovereign decisions about globally significant mergers and acquisitions, and now have control over all aspects of our fiscal policy, the way we procure and how we grant subsidies, our taxes, and VAT.

We have scrapped 6,000 tariff lines. We have left the common fisheries policy and many of our ports have had a massive increase in sales; Brixham has gone from £40 million to £70 million in eight years. We now have an agricultural regime that supports the foundations of food production. Free trade agreements and state-level memorandums of understanding will increase our market share in goods and services. On freeports, Teesside alone is estimated to create 18,000 highly skilled jobs.

Are we still at the heart of Europe? Do they listen to us? Does NATO? Yes, they damn well do. I am proud of Britain's leadership, seen again this week on Ukraine. Ditto AUKUS. Ditto the Atlantic partnership and declaration, and our work at the World Trade Organisation. The British public should be confident in the nation and the decisions that it took, even if Labour is not.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I would vote for that. Windrush deserves prominence, but we should not forget SS Ormonde, which landed in Liverpool in 1947 and SS Almanzora, which landed in Southampton in 1947.

The Leader of the House has announced the debate on the holocaust memorial. In that debate I will say that I look forward to a holocaust memorial being built within two years at a far lower cost, but I will argue to detach the learning centre from it and to have a fast competition for a more appropriate memorial, so that most of the money can be spent on the education centre.

My question to the Leader of the House follows a question I put to the veterans Minister in Cabinet Office questions. Will the Government please consider giving the Cabinet Office more power to decide which of those people still stuck in Afghanistan should be given permission to come to this country, such as the person I mentioned, who had been secretary to a governor in a province? I have written to my right hon. Friend in the Cabinet Office and to the Minister for Security in the Home Office, and I hope that the Leader of the House will consider whether more power should be given to that Department, as the Ministry of Defence is failing to extract people who served this country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for what he said about the important Holocaust Memorial Bill. There are many different views about the right approach, but we can all agree that we want something done swiftly. It would be great to ensure that as many survivors as possible could be around to witness its fruition.

I completely understand his concern for the brave people in Afghanistan who were associated with the coalition's work. He is obviously doing all that he can to ensure that his suggestion is heard by Cabinet Office colleagues, but I will make sure they have heard what he has said.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): "Eternal Father, Strong to Save", written for those in peril on the sea, is one of my very favourite hymns. It calls to mind the dangers that those brave enough to venture forth on sometimes stormy waters can face,

whether those who travel down to its very depths or those risking their lives to escape war, persecution, famine or drought. Our hearts go out to all those currently lost and their loved ones, but the contrast in approach to recent events is telling. Where were the same levels of energy and resources to help the 750 poor souls crowded on board the vessel that capsized near Greece last week, in what will surely rank among the worst catastrophes in the Mediterranean in recent history?

It is a source of tragic irony that this year's Refugee Week immediately follows that horrific incident. It also reflects a growing global humanitarian crisis on which this UK Government continue to turn their back. Seeking asylum is a human right, but rather than providing safe and legal routes, this Government choose to abdicate their responsibilities under international human rights law, from the Afghan resettlement scheme to Rwanda deportations and the refugee ban Bill. While Ministers continue to reflexively parrot "stop the boats" to questions on the topic, this week the UK's leading medical bodies called for an urgent meeting with the Government, warning that plans to detain children indefinitely under the Illegal Migration Bill pose the risk of "unimaginable levels of harm" to their physical and mental health. Can we have a debate on the long-term health impact of that legislation and Government's immigration and asylum policies?

Scotland stands ready to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers. Glasgow remains the local authority with the most dispersed asylum seekers in the UK, while Scotland has taken in 20% of all Ukrainian arrivals under the sponsorship schemes. If the Home Office really wanted to assist, rather than enriching Tory-appointed private contractors it could provide the necessary funding for local authorities across the UK. Today, over 110 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes. That figure will only grow in the coming years. *[Interruption.]* Can the Leader of the House and her fellow advocates of global Britain tell us how they intend to step up to meet the challenge?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is shouting loudly because I am coughing! This is not a good way to do things. We have to get a grip of time, because a lot of Members want to get in, and we must look after them.

Penny Mordaunt: First, I thank the hon. Lady for the sentiments she expressed about the rescue operation taking place as we speak. I was proud to say the naval prayer at the armed forces flag-raising ceremony that many Members attended. She is right to point out the dangers of crossings on the Mediterranean and right to refer to that appalling situation. Clearly, investigations are ongoing with regard to the coastguards' activities. I remind Members that it was in a similar incident a few years ago that more people were lost in one night crossing the Mediterranean than were lost on the Titanic. That is why we must use every means at our disposal to stop people-trafficking operations and ensure we have a refugee and asylum system—not just in the UK, but a global set of rules—that enables us to direct finite financial resources to help those most in need and to take people who are lingering as we speak in refugee camps and other places, rather than one that encourages people to make dangerous crossings and puts funds in the way of people-trafficking organisations. I would just stress that to her.

[Penny Mordaunt]

We speak about many topics and matters, but we sometimes forget the personal impact on individuals of the policies our Governments make. One individual this week, Fergus from Inverness who worked in the legal profession for many years and will shortly be drawing his pension, is really dismayed at what is happening in Scotland. He is against the deposit return scheme and wants someone to come and sort that out; he is against the ill-thought-out marine protected areas; he is against the SNP's transition from oil and gas; and he is against the SNP riding roughshod over UK equality Acts. What would be the hon. Lady's advice to Fergus? What would she suggest to him, given that Fergus is an SNP Member of the Scottish Parliament who this week voted to support a motion of no confidence in his own Government's co-leader? I have some advice for Fergus: fill out an application form to join the Conservative party and hand it to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who is standing up for his country- men and his nation.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): First Bus, without any warning or consultation, recently announced major changes to bus services in Newcastle-under-Lyme, including, most significantly, the withdrawal of the No. 4 service to Audley and Wood Lane from 2 July—in less than a fortnight's time—which will mean that people will not be able to get to work or college. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is not appropriate for bus companies to do that after so little consultation with local residents? I am grateful to the interim managing director for agreeing to meet me tomorrow, but may we have a debate about the way bus companies do such things with so little warning and consultation with local residents?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on standing up for his local community. Whatever changes and adaptations are made to services, they need to be done in consultation with residents. If that has not happened, there needs to be a pause to enable that to happen. These are incredibly important services and that is why we have been backing local bus services with a further £300 million over the next two years, which includes £140 million to combat any indications of reductions in service.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): On Tuesday, the Backbench Business Committee heard applications for estimates day debates. Following the hearings, we selected the following subjects for debate: the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions; the spending of the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on measures relating to energy infrastructure; the spending of the Department for Education on adult and post-16 education and further education colleges; and the spending of the Ministry of Justice on His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. Those four debates will take place on Tuesday 4 July and Wednesday 5 July, but not necessarily in that order.

We have had a number of occasions recently when the House has adjourned early or relatively early on Government business days. If the Leader of the House and her colleagues have any inkling in advance about

such early finishes in future, there is the possibility that the Backbench Business Committee, in conjunction with applicants, might be able to fill the void and conjure up debates to fill the space. We have mentioned that in the past. If Government business were to run to time when we had something lined up, we would just park it and bring it back at a future date. We are always trying to be flexible, but we are also trying to be helpful.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is always flexible and helpful, and I thank him for the helpful advert of his Committee's deliberations. He makes a good suggestion. I want to ensure that Members have time to debate matters, particularly legislation, but if they do not want to take it up, we should still use our time well in this place. I will follow up his suggestion with him.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Canadian Solar and Windel Energy are proposing to build a solar plant in Rutland and the Stamford villages. This week, the Planning Inspectorate published my response, but they redacted the words "Modern Slavery Act", all mentions of the Uyghur and even quotes from the Energy Secretary. On top of that, *The Times* has reported deeply inappropriate approaches from those companies, asking me to drop my opposition in return for a school, a playground, a swimming pool or something I might like. They say that it has been done before. Who can I go to in Government to ask for advice on whether the Planning Inspectorate can make those redactions and for support in dealing with a deeply inappropriate approach?

Penny Mordaunt: That does sound inappropriate. I have some experience of dealing with similar companies in my constituency. It is difficult for colleagues when some of our concerns refer to, for example, issues of national security or other matters that are slightly outside the Planning Inspectorate's direct lane. I will write to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and ask for some advice. It is difficult for colleagues—we do not wish to put Ministers who may make decisions further down the line in a position that they cannot be in, but we also need advice. I shall see what advice I can get for my hon. Friend so that she can ensure that the right thing happens.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House and all Members for their warm words about the Windrush generation. Actions speak louder than words, and as the right hon. Lady said, the personal impact that Government policies have on individuals can be forgotten. With 74% of claims not being resolved, more people are likely to die before their claims are resolved. Will the Leader of the House not just speak to, but work with the Home Secretary to simplify and accelerate the Windrush compensation scheme?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for what she said. The media have highlighted this week cases such as she described. Whether it is the Windrush scheme or other compensation schemes that are administered by the Government, it is very much understood that the payments need to be swift. We do not want to add further injury to the damage already done. I know that the Home Secretary takes the matter very seriously, but I assure the hon. Lady that I will do all I can from my

office to ensure that people get their compensation in the shortest possible time and to facilitate any cases that hon. Members have where that is not happening.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): With the prospect of the Victoria Tower being refurbished on the exterior, will my right hon. Friend assure me that the interior will be done at the same time? I have heard that there may be a quirk in the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 that means that we can do only the outside, and that we will have to do the inside later, which may add considerably to the cost.

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is very knowledgeable on those subjects. I can tell him that that argument has been put forward to me by other quarters, but I have looked at it and there is no impediment to the outside and the inside of the tower being done at the same time. I know that I speak for Mr Speaker and others when I say that we want the work to be done well, with the least disruption, while also ensuring that there is value for money for the taxpayer.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Supporting the Privileges Committee report on Boris Johnson earlier this week, the Leader of the House said

“the integrity of our institutions matter.”—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 585.]

Mr Johnson’s actions were not right, and they were not honourable. The Leader of the House is also Lord President of the Privy Council, so can we have a statement from her, in that role, on whether she would recommend that Boris Johnson be stripped of his title as a right hon. Privy Counsellor?

Penny Mordaunt: I understand why the hon. Lady and Members are exercised about this matter and cross at the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip and former Prime Minister. As a matter of information, such a thing would be advice from the Prime Minister given to the King, and I would prefer His Majesty to be kept out of such matters. The threshold, for people who have been booted off the Privy Council previously—for example, having committed financial fraud—is much higher than the situation we were discussing on Monday. I understand where she is coming from and her motivation, and the integrity of all these systems is very important, as I said on Monday, but I do not think it is an appropriate course of action in this instance.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): This morning I was contacted by Leyland police, which executed a warrant on a property in Leyland and discovered items of such concern that it arrested a gentleman at the property and put an extensive cordon to protect people’s safety in the Broadfield Drive area. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how I can best communicate my gratitude to the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire for the swift action that Lancashire police has taken today, which has almost certainly kept the British public safe?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope all will be well in my hon. Friend’s constituency. She has arrived at her own solution. I will make sure that the Policing Minister has heard her remarks. On behalf of the whole House, we should

thank her local force for its proactive policing and for all it is doing in this ongoing investigation to keep the community safe.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I refer to my declaration of interest. Pneumoconiosis, the coal dust lung disease, is still prevalent in coalmining communities and is still a major cause of death. National Union of Mineworkers advice centres are reporting that Government lawyers have become increasingly difficult on applications for compensation. Can we have a debate in Government time on how the Government can assist, rather than resist, these compensation applications from families who have lost their loved ones?

Penny Mordaunt: Given that the relevant Department’s next questions will not be until after the summer recess, I will write on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf to make sure it has heard his concerns. As with all such cases, if I can facilitate surgeries and engagement with the relevant officials in that Department, I am always happy to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): There is an emerging scandal that the drone technology and other sophisticated weaponry being used by Russia in Ukraine, having been supplied by Iran, uses technology supplied by British universities. My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) raised this with the Prime Minister yesterday, and the Prime Minister agreed that a cross-Government investigation will take place. I have written to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade with full details, and it is quite clear that this is an emerging scandal and a threat to our national security.

At the same time, the executions continue in Iran. There have been attacks this week by the Albanian police on the Ashraf peace camp for Iranian refugees, and there is pressure on the French to prevent the Iranian resistance from holding its conference next weekend. Can we have a debate in Government time on Iran’s nefarious activities, and on making sure our national security is safeguarded?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions, as he raises a number of concerning issues. I thank him for all the work he is doing to bring this matter to the attention of the Business and Trade Secretary. He will be aware of what the Prime Minister said yesterday, but I shall make sure that that Department knows he has also raised this matter today.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Renters Reform Coalition held a parliamentary drop-in event yesterday to brief Members on the forthcoming Renters (Reform) Bill, but the RRC and many other stakeholders are becoming concerned that it is more than a month since the Bill had its First Reading. Will the Leader of the House therefore enlighten them as to when the Second Reading debate on this crucial Bill will take place?

Penny Mordaunt: I know that that Bill is of great interest to many Members, in all parts of this House. The hon. Gentleman will know that I will say that I will announce business in the usual way, but I am optimistic that he will not have long to wait.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for confirming the Second Reading debate next Wednesday on the Holocaust Memorial Bill, which will facilitate the holocaust memorial to be built in Victoria Tower Gardens. Does she agree that that is a good opportunity for Members from across the House to work together to deliver this memorial, which is a commitment of successive Governments and will be a fitting memorial to those remarkable survivors of the holocaust and those people who have given so much of their lives to holocaust education?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind remarks, and I agree entirely with his sentiments. Again, let me reassure him that we are doing all we can to make sure that this is brought forward in the swiftest possible time. The House of Commons has a working group to ensure that any work on restoration and renewal or other things is deconflicted with the work going on to produce this important memorial. It will also be very important to the ongoing work of education on those appalling events.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will know that we are about 30 minutes away from what is likely to be difficult news for homeowners and renters across the country, with expected rises in interest rates, on top of rising food prices, on top of the energy price hikes that they have seen. I have been speaking to people from businesses in my constituency that are locked into long-term energy deals that they cannot get out of. That is having a huge impact on their businesses and on their ability to employ people and generate growth in our economy. Will she ensure that a statement is made by a relevant Minister on what is being done to ensure flexibility in the energy market for business customers, so that they are not locked into ridiculously high prices if wholesale prices come down?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising an issue that is frequently raised at business questions. As with previous questions, I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what has been said today. The hon. Gentleman will know that the next departmental questions are on 4 July and I encourage him to put that question directly to the Secretary of State then.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Pupils have been denounced as “despicable” for failing to accept the reality of a fellow pupil who identified as a cat. May we have a debate on Confucius, for it was he who observed that the most difficult thing is to search a dark room for a black cat, particularly when there is no cat?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for not only the question, but the typically dramatic way in which he asked it. I shall leave Confucius aside and deal with the heart of the matter he is getting at. Obviously, the Department for Education is currently reviewing guidance to schools on these matters and I understand that the Education Secretary has launched an investigation into the incident to which he refers.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Today, on the 75th anniversary of the arrival into the UK of the Windrush generation, which included my grandparents,

I have written to the Home Secretary, along with other politicians and leading public figures, to call on her to right the wrongs of the Windrush scandal. May we have a Government statement on the compensation scheme and, more importantly, moving that scheme to an independent body so that those from the Windrush generation can finally get justice?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady adds her voice to others we have heard in the Chamber on this matter. As with them, I will ensure the Home Secretary has heard her remarks, and I am aware of calls for the matter to be moved to the Cabinet Office.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Following the Prime Minister’s AUKUS submarine agreement, Rolls-Royce has announced it is creating over 1,100 new jobs in a massive expansion of its Raynesway plant, in my constituency of Mid Derbyshire. That is fantastic news for the whole local economy. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement about the benefits that the AUKUS agreement will have for UK businesses, and for the 200 apprentices per year who will start at the Rolls-Royce nuclear skills academy and have the opportunity to work on world-leading submarine technology?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on that fantastic news and thank her for the role she has played in championing those incredibly important parts of our supply chain, which enable us to be as proud of our defence sector as we are. The AUKUS deal is so much more than a submarine deal. It is about our trade and our interoperability, and will contribute to our prosperity and security. I congratulate all those involved in it. She will be able to raise the matter at the next Defence questions, on 26 June.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Leader of the House will know that people living in rural communities have disproportionately higher costs, for example because of transport and older buildings, than people living in urban areas. I have asked time and again of her Government to take some cognisance of those living off the gas grid, who are effectively subsidising those on the gas grid, and to do something about equalising things for them while they face increased mortgage rates and food price inflation, on top of everything else. Can we finally have a debate, in Government time, on the pressures on rural communities and the need to do something to help them?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the recent strategy produced by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, looking at precisely these issues and everything that rural communities need to thrive. I will make sure she and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero have heard his concerns. The hon. Gentleman can raise the issue with the DEFRA Secretary on 6 July.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): This is Drowning Prevention Week. Three weeks ago, in Bournemouth, a 17-year-old boy and a 12-year-girl drowned in the sea close to the pier. It is thought there was a sudden rip tide. The girl’s name was Sunnah Khan and she lived in Buckinghamshire. Her mum, Stephanie, came to see me on Monday to ask me to help to avoid similar accidents

in the future. Can we have a debate, in Government time, on ways to raise awareness of the dangers of open water, especially the risks of rip tides, as a tribute to Sunnah and to 17-year-old Joe, who died on the same day, and to all those who tragically lose their lives through drowning each year?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I speak for all of us when I say how sad we are to hear of that appalling tragedy and the loss of Sunnah. Our thoughts are with her family at this incredibly difficult time. My hon. Friend raises a timely question, because with the warmer weather more people are likely to take to the water. It would be an excellent topic for a debate. I thank him for advertising his interest and I encourage him to apply for one, as I think it would be well attended.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Earlier this year, Capita experienced a cyber incident and data breach. Among the data potentially accessed, was information relating to members of the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme. Many of my constituents in Barnsley are now very concerned that their details might be used fraudulently. Will the Leader of the House commit to a statement on what is being done across Government to support everyone impacted by the breach, what discussions have taken place with Capita and what action has been taken to protect against future breaches of this nature?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear that. I know that this will be a matter of great concern to all those who may have had their data hacked in that way. Obviously, I cannot discuss the individual case with the hon. Lady today, but I can reassure her that Government take a proactive role in this. Prior to the incident, they will have been working with that organisation to ensure that it had not lost information, that systems were backed up and that there were some basic tools in place. I know, too, that they will have oversight of the ongoing incident and I can reassure her on that point. If she needs any further assurance, I will write today to the Cabinet Office and the Government's One HMG cyber lead to make them aware of her interest in this matter.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): On this 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, when we celebrate the contribution of the Windrush generation and the wider black community in Britain, can the Leader of the House commit to having a debate on health disparities, so we can ensure that every action is being taken to tackle the problem, which means that, for so many black women, maternity healthcare outcomes are poorer than they are for women from other ethnic groupings? This is an important issue and we need to tackle it.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for what she said about the Windrush generation and add her remarks to the growing letter that I will be penning to the Home Secretary. She is also right to point to the importance of tackling health disparities. Of course, part of the damage that was done to many of those from the Windrush generation was that they were denied access to the healthcare that they should have had. I know that in some services, including maternity care, as she mentions, there are concerns about poor outcomes for particular groups. I shall make sure that the Secretary

of State for Health and Social Care has heard her concerns, but she will know that he is gathering data on integrated care boards to make sure that we really understand where people are letting local residents down.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This Sunday in Glasgow, we will see the start of the Baton of Hope tour of Great Britain. It is visiting 12 cities across Great Britain and will reach Newcastle on Tuesday 27 June. I hope to be there to meet the organisers. They are meeting with a simple message: "Where there is HOPE, there is a real opportunity to save lives". The organisation was founded by Mike McCarthy and Steve Phillip, who lost their sons, Ross and Jordan, to suicide. It will reach Downing Street on 6 July. Can we have a debate in Government time, please, on suicide prevention, because suicide is preventable and not inevitable?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for what she said about that incredible organisation—I think people from that organisation came to Parliament recently to meet a number of colleagues—and for advertising that they will be back in Whitehall and Westminster on 6 July. This is an ongoing issue that is particularly affecting men. Many hon. Members will be concerned about it. I am sure that, if she applies for a debate, it will be well attended.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) has just highlighted that the absurd campaign to rewrite the biological reality of sex reached new heights this week, with a teacher branding a child "despicable" for refusing to accept a classmate was a cat. This comes after an investigation has found that schoolchildren are being allowed to identify as horses, dinosaurs and, in one case, a moon. This type of indoctrination in our education system is deeply disturbing and must be addressed. The rights of parents and children simply must come first. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the steps the Government can take to ensure that our young people are not being exposed and indoctrinated with such nonsense in our schools?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know that the Department for Education is reviewing the relationships, sex and health education statutory guidance and is expecting that to go out to public consultation later this year. A huge amount of work has gone into this and the review is being carried out by an independent expert panel, with input from health, children's development, curriculum experts and safeguarding. He can ask the Education Secretary about this at the next Education questions, on 17 July.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Bracken is a fern that is widespread in upland parts of the United Kingdom. It is carcinogenic and is the breeding ground for ticks, which give people Lyme disease, which can be fatal. My own wife had Lyme disease and it was very unpleasant. The only herbicide that controls bracken is called Asulox, and the Scottish Government have just banned it. It is still allowed in England, but it has been banned in Scotland. Understandably, hill farmers and the National Farmers Union have been in contact with me to express their extreme anger at this move. Can the Leader of the House advise me how we can persuade the Scottish Government to change their mind?

Penny Mordaunt: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about this and I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs also hears his comments. There are clearly potential health impacts, which I understand are taken into account when those decisions are made, but I think he is right to raise this as a matter of concern and I shall do what I can to assist him in getting some expert advice.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Can we have a debate on the critical value that oil and gas companies and, crucially, their employees provide—not just energy security for today, but delivering the transition to net zero in the future? Does the Leader of the House agree with the former leader of Aberdeen City Council, Councillor Barney Crockett, who yesterday announced his resignation from Labour on the basis of the Labour party leader's ideological plans to decimate this vital industry? Whether it is the SNP's presumption against new oil and gas or Labour's "Just Stop Oil" approach, is it not the case that only the Conservative party has a pragmatic and sensible approach to making the energy transition a success?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend makes some clear and important points and I completely agree with him. I think the best way I can assist him, given that I will be printing out a Conservative party application form for Fergus, is to print one for Barney too.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields, and Ahmadiyya Muslims across the country, are concerned about the increasing persecution of members of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan and the impact that that is having here in the UK. I visited Pakistan this year and saw that persecution, the danger to life faced in schools, jobs, housing and places of worship, and threats to the right to vote. Pakistan is a wonderful country, but this is a blight on their country and very concerning to constituents across the UK. Can we have a debate in Government time on this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for shining a spotlight on this tragedy. She will know that the next questions to the Foreign Office are on 18 July, and I encourage her to raise that matter there. However, given that there will be cross-party and cross-House support on the issue, she may also like to consider applying for an Adjournment debate.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Hundreds of thousands of people live on unadopted roads, with no speed restrictions, no traffic calming and no pedestrian crossings. On Fraserfields Way in Leighton Buzzard, there have already been a number of accidents. To me, it is a road safety no man's land, with the answer lying somewhere between Barratt Homes, the developers, and Central Bedfordshire Council. Will the Government act to minimise the amount of time that residents have to live on these dangerous roads, so we can prevent accidents?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. Usually hon. Members do so in the wake of an accident, so I congratulate him on getting ahead of that and trying to prevent one from

happening. I understand his concerns and I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Transport Secretary hear his remarks. I also suggest that my hon. Friend might like to raise this on 10 July with the former, who is likely to be able to assist him in his campaign, which again I congratulate him on.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): "We are paid handsomely for the job we do and if you need an extra £100,000 a year on top then you should really be looking for another job." Those are not my words, although I agree with them, but the words of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). I therefore read with much interest this week that the hon. Gentleman has a show starting tomorrow on GB News, for which he will be paid the sum of £100,000. With that in mind, can we have a debate in Government time on MPs' second jobs, and does the Leader of the House agree with 100G Lee?

Penny Mordaunt: We did have a debate on those matters—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman attended it. He will know that the Standards Committee looked recently at this matter and, after much deliberation, felt very much that, as we have had these conversations ad infinitum in this place, what he is suggesting is not the best course of action. I direct him to the Standards Committee report; it made other recommendations, which the House adopted, and in it he can read why that suggestion was not supported by the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I trust that the hon. Gentleman notified the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) that he was going to raise that matter.

Christian Wakeford *indicated assent.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Among other services, post offices across Cheadle handle currency transactions and parcel postage, and they have even picked up the pieces after bank closures left customers in the lurch. Now they are concerned about the impact on customers should the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency contract be lost. For people who need to renew their driving licence or vehicle tax, or get a permit to drive abroad, access to a post office is essential, particularly for the digitally excluded. Post offices are at the heart of all our communities, so will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on the value of post offices and how we can ensure their long-term sustainability?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and the campaign she is running to ensure that her local residents have access to those vital services. I am sure that she could apply for a debate, and I know that she has taken part in many debates touching on this matter. She will also be interested to know that the next Business and Trade questions are on 29 June and, with regard to DVLA services, the next Transport questions are on 13 July.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Diabetes UK estimates that in 2022 there were 7,000 excess deaths because of diabetes, and there is huge regional variation in the care provided to diabetes patients depending

on the effectiveness of their integrated care board. Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin is the worst performing ICB in England, with only 25% of patients receiving all eight recommended checks in 2021 and 2022. That is a serious problem—people’s health is at stake—so may we have a debate in Government time on improving preventive care for diabetes patients, which would ultimately save lives and save the NHS money?

Penny Mordaunt: I should say that I used to be a director of Diabetes UK, which does fantastic work. As I mentioned in an earlier answer, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is looking into the data. Previously, we had to rely on organisations such as Diabetes UK to collect such data on local services in their area. He is doing that, and I have been in discussion with him about how to make that data available to Members so that we can track the performance of our local health boards. The hon. Lady is absolutely right: if people get the good year of care that they should for diabetes, we will save the NHS a fortune. I thank her for raising that point.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): A few months ago, I was lucky enough to visit the Wharfedale air cadets squadron in Ilkley to oversee some of the science, technology, engineering and maths-related activities that they have been involved in. Recently, I joined the Keighley air cadets for a special occasion: the new cadets were enrolled and we oversaw the dedication of their new squadron banner. Without doubt, young people benefit enormously from their involvement in the cadets, developing new transferable life skills. With Armed Forces Day fast approaching, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all volunteers who go above and beyond, giving up their time week in, week out to aid and support cadets not only in Keighley and Ilkley but across the country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the work of his local air cadets, whom I visited in a former role—they are absolutely wonderful and amazing. I also thank him for reminding us that this is Armed Forces Week—Saturday is Armed Forces Day and yesterday was Reserve Forces Day—and I hope that all Members will take this opportunity to celebrate and thank our armed forces and, critically, their families for their work.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York has long had one of the greatest local housing allowance disparities, and now that mortgages are going up and prices are going up for private renters, many people are having to leave their homes. Can we have an urgent statement on the setting of the broad rental market areas and the disparity that it creates in setting LHA levels?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that matter. She will know that she can raise it with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 10 July, and I encourage her to do so. I will also ensure that he has heard her concerns about the matter and encourage his officials to get in touch with her.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Pubs play a really important role across our communities and local economies. In Burnley and Padiham, we have places

like the Woodman, the Royal Butterfly, the Bridge Inn and the Railway Inn, and I suspect every Member could give a massive list of pubs that are important. I know from speaking to pub landlords that the cost of living is having a real impact on their viability. Could we have a debate in Government time on how we can support pubs, so that they stay at the heart of our local communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I speak for all Members when I say that we completely agree with my hon. Friend’s praise for these very important community assets. They are not just where we can get a decent pint; they also provide a social network for people, and some have community services run out of them, such as post offices. They are at the heart of our communities and we should treasure them. I agree that a debate would be very well attended. I encourage him to apply for one, and I will also ensure that the relevant Department has heard his concern that we should continue doing all we can to support these important community assets.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): In 2014, this House voted to end the Liverpool care pathway. However, in April 2020 it appears that it was reintroduced under the guise of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline NG163 as a treatment for agitation and breathlessness. Can we have a debate on NG163 and why this national health guidance ordered the use of huge volumes of benzodiazepines and opiates, which are respiratory suppressants, for people who are already breathless?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly make sure that the hon. Gentleman’s remarks have been heard by the Health Secretary. The Liverpool care pathway was ended, and there was a great deal of focus on what really good-quality end of life care should look like. Of course, part of that was the Government’s support for and elevation of the profile of the role of hospices, which I know all Members greatly value. I shall make sure that the Health Secretary has heard his concerns.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House and I both represent great naval cities, so I am sure she will share my disgust at the illegal looting and salvage of second world war Royal Navy ships sunk in the East Java sea. Those wrecks are war graves and the last resting place for hundreds of Royal Navy sailors lost at sea. Will she agree to a debate on how we can ensure the protection of war graves at sea, and how we can encourage the Foreign Office to ensure that there is better diplomatic protection and that the nations around those war graves are looking after them and respecting the lives of the people who were killed in support of our country?

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have been appalled at the desecration that has gone on. This is not an easy task for those nations. I agree that, where we can give support, we should. It is also very important that we understand the importance of particular artefacts. I know that the bells have been retrieved from some of those wrecks, for example, and are in our dockyards. These are graves, and it is appalling that people are raiding them, whether it be for artefacts or, more appallingly, just for scrap metal. I shall ensure that both the Defence Secretary and the Foreign Secretary have heard his remarks.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): My question is about redundancy modification orders again, I am afraid. On 3 May, I received a response from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities saying:

“Announcements will be set out in the usual way.”

Will the Leader of the House explain what that actually means, considering that I first raised the question of redundancy modification orders in this place on 22 March 2018?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and also for her diligence in pursuing this matter. My team works very hard with Departments and parliamentary teams to ensure that they understand what Members need and why. The moral of the story is that if you send a one-line reply after a Member has been contacting your Department for many months, the Leader of the House will insist that an official from your Department meets with the hon. Lady so that she can be properly briefed on the matter.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): There are 9,900 families—20,000 people—in my constituency facing an increase in their mortgage of about £1,800 per household. They are facing a crisis already. Is it not the case that the Government are using the old philosophy first expressed by John Major: “If it isn’t hurting, it won’t be working”? The truth is that it is not working for the many, but it is working for the few—it is hurting the many, but only working for the few. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss this cruel, unequal and devastating economic orthodoxy that is damaging so much of our country? We need a new economic settlement.

Penny Mordaunt: First, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that myself and this Government appreciate how people are feeling at this time. People feel that they are being clobbered from all sides, particularly those on fixed incomes; whether it is housing costs, food inflation or energy prices, it is a very difficult time for many people in this country. As he knows, we have this perfect economic storm, exacerbated by things that are going on around the world at the moment. We have to weather that storm, and we are going to do all we can to see individuals and families through this tough time. That is why we have a £94 billion support package for the cost of living, and we are adapting that package and listening to people’s needs as they change.

With particular reference to mortgages, I refer the hon. Gentleman to what the Prime Minister said yesterday. It is a priority for us, and we have increased support for

the mortgage interest scheme and given new responsibilities to the Financial Conduct Authority with regard to a consumer duty to help mortgage holders. This is a matter we take very seriously. I am not sure that I have convinced the hon. Gentleman, but I hope I have assured households that we are going to do everything we can to get them through this time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This week marks the 40th anniversary of the execution of 10 Iranian Baha’i women. They were all given the choice of renouncing their faith or facing the death penalty. Of course, they did not renounce their faith and were murdered by the Iranian authorities. One of them was a 17-year-old student called Mona, who wrote:

“Freedom is the most brilliant word, but there have always been powerful and unjust men who have resorted to oppression and tyranny... Why don’t you let me be free to say who I am and what I want? Why don’t you give me freedom of speech so that I may write for publications or talk on radio and television about my ideas? Yes, liberty is a Divine gift, and this gift is for us also, but you don’t let us have it.”

That was 40 years ago, and those words are as true today as they were in 1983. Since those murders, the memory of those women has brought the plight of the Baha’is to the attention of the international community and inspired the careers of UN prosecutors, and it still feeds into the fight for women’s rights in Iran today. I know that these matters are very close to the heart of the Leader of the House, as they are to the hearts of many Members. Will she join me in paying tribute to the legacy of these incredibly courageous and remarkable women?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of us all, I thank the hon. Gentleman for using business questions to shine a spotlight on some of the world’s most persecuted people, especially women and girls. The Baha’i women and girls he refers to showed incredible bravery in the ordeal that they faced. As he knows, we have announced eight packages of human rights sanctions on Iran since October last year, and more recently, the Foreign Secretary launched the international women and girls strategy in March of this year. We will continue to stand up and speak out for these incredibly brave people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for their presence throughout the entirety of the statement on business.

Ukraine Recovery Conference

11.59 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the Ukraine recovery conference, which the UK is proud to be co-hosting with Ukraine in London.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister opened the conference, together with President Zelensky live from Kyiv, and the conference will conclude this afternoon. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, the conference is planting the seeds of Ukraine's future. From the speeches from Ukraine's international partners to conversations with business leaders and civil society representatives, the message that echoes from the conference is one of hope and belief in the tremendous potential of Ukraine's economy.

Before this terrible war, Ukraine's economy was becoming a huge investment opportunity. Ukraine was the breadbasket of Europe, a top five exporter of iron ore and steel, a leader in energy and a start-up nation with a thriving tech sector. That opportunity is still there today. The international community has come together to support Ukraine's recovery and economic future—one that is modern, open, green and resilient. By helping Ukraine's recovery and economic transformation, we will unlock the potential of the country and its people, help defeat Russia's aggression, and benefit global security, prosperity and the rule of law.

Putin's unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has caused untold misery. Thousands of Ukrainians have been killed, and millions have been displaced, including children. Schools, hospitals and critical infrastructure have suffered damage in Russia's indiscriminate airstrikes. Ukraine must and will succeed as a free, independent, sovereign and democratic state within its internationally recognised borders. That is essential for the people of Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic region, and for global peace and prosperity. We remain committed to a just and lasting peace based on respect for the UN charter and Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The conference has delivered funding to meet Ukraine's immediate recovery needs, help it to stay in the fight and lay the foundations for future growth. Ukraine's partners announced continued support for Ukraine's budgetary needs for the years ahead, including a new €50 billion EU facility dedicated to supporting Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and modernisation. The UK is playing its part. The Prime Minister announced yesterday that, over the next three years, we will provide loan guarantees worth \$3 billion.

Nearly 500 businesses globally from 42 countries, worth more than \$5.2 trillion, pledged to back Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction in the wake of Russia's illegal invasion. Big businesses that can work with Ukraine to deliver a more modern, open economy have pledged their support. Virgin, Sanofi, Philips, Hyundai Engineering and Citi are among the companies involved.

Development finance institutions announced mechanisms to provide the seed capital to support private sector-led growth. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development announced its intention to raise between €3 billion and €5 billion of new capital from shareholders. This could provide at least four times the amount in

new investment in Ukraine for years to come, including in critical infrastructure. G7 and European development finance institutions launched a new Ukraine investment platform that will promote co-financing to maximise the impact of their support.

The Government of Ukraine and their partners responded to businesses' demand to extend commercial insurance coverage in Ukraine. The conference launched the London conference war risk insurance framework, which will be backed by G7 members. The framework outlines support for immediate de-risking measures to increase investor confidence, and it will guide efforts in working with the commercial insurance markets to unlock private investment to meet Ukraine's long-term reconstruction needs. The UK is already delivering on the framework by releasing up to £20 million of funding for the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency to provide guarantees and insurance for reconstruction projects now, while the conflict is ongoing.

As the Prime Minister made clear in his speech yesterday, Russia must pay for the destruction that it has inflicted, so we are working with allies to explore lawful routes to use frozen and immobilised Russian assets to fund Ukrainian reconstruction. On Monday, we laid new legislation to enable us to keep sanctions in place until Russia pays to repair the country it has so recklessly attacked. After the sacrifices and suffering of the war, Ukrainians are hoping for a better future. It is in the interests of Europe and the world that the country they rebuild should be stronger than ever, integrated into western markets and self-reliant. The Government announced a major commitment of up to £250 million of new capital for the UK's development finance institution, British International Investment.

The true legacy of this terrible war will be a Ukraine that is more modern, innovative, resilient and green. To support this, G7 Governments committed to develop a new clean energy partnership with Ukraine to accelerate the transition to a green energy system that is secure, sustainable, resilient and integrated with Europe, and the conference launched the InnovateUkraine green energy challenge fund to accelerate low-carbon, affordable energy innovation. Ukraine's partners announced a new tech partnership to help realise the amazing potential of Ukraine's burgeoning tech ecosystem. With Ukraine we announced a new tech bridge to facilitate investment and support talent between the British and Ukrainian tech sectors. In the interest of encouraging private sector investment, President Zelensky reaffirmed his commitment to the reform path and towards EU membership, which was welcomed by Ukraine's partners at the conference.

The Government of Ukraine are committed to work in partnership with Ukrainian and international businesses, local government, civil society and the international community to deliver long-term sustainable recovery and development. The multi-agency donor co-ordination platform for Ukraine, whose steering committee met in London yesterday, will continue to help deliver prioritised, co-ordinated recovery efforts. We now hand over the conference to Germany, which will host the Ukraine recovery conference next year and build on the outcomes of Lugano and London.

This conference demonstrates that we and our allies are steadfast in our resolve to support Ukraine not just in the here and now, but for the long term. With Ukraine and international partners, we are planting the seeds of Ukraine's future. Together with our allies, we will maintain

[Leo Docherty]

support for Ukraine's defence and for the counter-offensive, and we will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes as it continues to win this war. Putin cannot hope to outlast our resolve or the spirit of the Ukrainian people. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

12.6 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I draw attention to my declarations in my capacity as shadow Minister. I thank the Minister for his statement and advice sight of it, and for his constructive engagement with the Opposition throughout the course of the conference; it was a great honour to be able to attend. We have many disagreements in this House, but Vladimir Putin should be clear of one thing: there is absolute unity across this House on this matter, and our resolute support will continue.

This week has truly underscored that the strength of support for Ukraine—for its sovereignty and nationhood and for the values that we share—is unwavering. It has also demonstrated that our diplomatic alliance stretches across not only the public sector and our Governments but the private sector, and we will continue to stand foursquare behind Ukraine until it is victorious and the full scale of Russia's barbarous destruction is reversed. I have seen that damage for myself, but I have also seen the resilience and rapid rebuilding the Ukrainians have been able to do even now. However, there are huge challenges ahead, for example in the removal of mines and unexploded ordnance and the huge damage to civilian infrastructure, and of course from disasters like the Kakhovka dam destruction.

For over a year and three months Ukraine has, at an unimaginable price, defended its territory but also the principles of an entire continent—liberty, democracy, self-determination and the international legal order. I thank the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Ukraine-UK inter-parliamentary friendship group and colleagues across the House for their engagement with the parliamentary components of this conference. We had some very successful events in this place yesterday, and I thank the House and the IPU in particular for organising them.

The Prime Minister was right to say yesterday that prior to this barbarous invasion Ukraine was becoming a huge focal point for foreign investment and interest. Across agriculture, raw materials, start-ups, renewable energy and technology, to name just a few sectors, there was so much promise in Ukraine, and it is in the interests of all of us, and most importantly of the Ukrainian people, that Ukraine gets back on a solid economic footing and becomes that internationally competitive nation once again. So Labour welcomes the multi-year commitments made to Ukraine yesterday, including the loan guarantees and other measures that will be critical in shaping Ukraine's future. Can the Minister provide more information on the timescale for those loan guarantees? How many deals are already in the pipeline as a result of them? Can he also say a bit more about the risk insurance framework, and what role London, as a leading international insurance market, will play?

We also welcome the announcement of \$15 billion to Ukraine over four years from the International Monetary Fund, and the announcement of £250 million of extra funding for British International Investment, formerly CDC. However, the Minister will be aware that BII and its predecessor have not worked in Ukraine or that part of the world for a long time. Can he say a little bit more about how it is going to scale up and ensure that that money is used quickly and effectively?

Moving on, as the Minister referred to, the Prime Minister rightly stated that Russia must pay for the damage it has inflicted, saying that

“we're working with allies to explore lawful routes to use Russian assets”.

That is most welcome, given that we on the Opposition Benches have been calling for the Government to take serious action since last year. Although the UK has been leading in many areas when it comes to Ukraine, I am sorry to say that this is one where the UK is following, not leading. When we look at what has happened in Canada or the EU, or in the US with the new bipartisan Bill being put forward, there are innovative suggestions on how we might legally and quickly secure resources for Ukraine's immediate reconstruction. We are still getting a lot of “wait and see” from this Government.

The Minister will have heard again and again at the conference yesterday about the desire for Russian state assets to be used. There is lots of expert advice out there publicly on how that might be achieved, so I ask him the same question we have been asking for almost a year now: what concrete steps will the Government take with our allies to ensure the urgent repurposing of Russian state assets, and when can we expect to hear announcements on that? We welcome the announcement about ensuring that existing sanctions will stay in place, which is crucial, but we need to go much, much further.

Briefly, on security guarantees, I was pleased to hear again this week that there is support for Ukraine's path to join NATO, once it has prevailed in the war. Britain must play a crucial role in securing that, and Ukrainians are proving beyond any doubt that their country is the vanguard for European democracy and security. We must acknowledge that and act accordingly. Can the Minister provide the House with an assessment of support for that course of action across our NATO allies? How will the UK ensure that Ukraine's voice and wishes continue to be heard?

Finally, I want to come to the important matter of Ukrainian democracy and reform, which the Minister raised and which was discussed in the conference and raised in the speeches of President Zelensky and Prime Minister Shmyhal. Ukraine's resilience has been tested in ways that many of us would baulk at, and Ukrainians have shown that they will stand firm, but we need to ensure that transparency, accountability and the strength of institutions continue to improve over the years ahead. Otherwise we will likely see further attempts by Russia, or others seeking to profit from the aftermath of this war, to achieve greater influence without having Ukraine's best interests at heart. President Zelensky said yesterday that

“we all have to realise that the more democracy we have, the greater its strength in our entire region. The more rule of law we have, the more law will work here on the eastern flank of Europe. And the more transparent Ukraine is, the uglier any corruption model will look in Russia.”

Can the Minister say a little more about how we and allies will continue to support the President's agenda to strengthen and deepen Ukraine's democracy and resilience?

In closing, I thank the Minister and the Government for their engagement with the Opposition and the House this week on this important conference. The UK is Ukraine's most committed ally, and that strength of feeling and solidarity will not waver as the war endures, but we cannot take our foot off the pedal. We must use this week as a springboard to secure ever more lasting international support. This week's demonstration of support will have been met with anguish in the Kremlin, as Russia is further frozen out of the global economy and the international community. Russia must be defeated not only on the battlefield of Ukraine, but in its economic warfare against the people of Ukraine. The focus is rightly now on the counter-offensive at the front and the bravery and courage of Ukrainian soldiers, but we across the public and private sector must show the same level of bravery and courage in our economic counter-offensive.

Leo Docherty: I thank the hon. Member sincerely for his questions and his support, which has been consistent and deeply appreciated. He is absolutely right in his analysis and judgment that the conference as a whole, as well as the discussions we have in the Chamber, show deep unity across British policies and among allies, which is noted in the Kremlin with some discomfort, so I am grateful for his support. He drew an interesting juxtaposition between the terrible damage inflicted upon Ukraine and the tremendous resilience and courageous spirit of the Ukrainians, on which I am sure the House would agree. It was on show yesterday at the conference, for which we are most grateful.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the timeframes for our underwriting of loans. Clearly we are in the primary stages of a lot of this fiscal support and underwriting, but these will be multi-year commitments. While we are in the primary stages, the abundance of opportunities means there is huge capacity to make significant impact, coupled with the work we have done on risk insurance. Again, it is probably too early to say, but the London capital markets and the London insurance market will be central to that effort to de-risk and to empower businesses to invest in Ukraine, and those two things together will leave the UK at the centre of the financial and structural reconstruction and resurrection of Ukraine.

The hon. Gentleman asked a pertinent question about Russian assets. The Prime Minister is on record as stating that, quite rightly, we are looking at all legal routes to ensure that the perpetrator of these appalling crimes and destruction pays. That work is being done at pace, in concert with allies. I cannot announce any more progress today. If it was easy, we would have already done it, but we are looking at that and hope to make progress soon.

The hon. Gentleman made some entirely relevant and interesting comments about NATO, which were relevant given that the Vilnius summit is coming soon. We are an energetic supporter of Ukraine's path towards that defensive alliance. I cannot pre-empt any discussions or announcements at Vilnius, but the inevitability is that although Putin calculated that he would somehow deter NATO through his outrageous invasion of Ukraine, the NATO alliance has been strengthened as we show our unity towards our near ally.

The hon. Gentleman made good points about the reform journey. What was palpable during the conference yesterday, especially in the remarks of President Zelensky, was the clear appetite of the Ukrainian political leadership and society to take a path of reform right across their society and economy. They know that ultimately prosperity depends upon transparency and a good investor climate. They will be very forward in showing their progress.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the success of the Ukraine rebuilding conference. It is what we do best in the UK: convening our global partners and bringing them together to support an ally. In particular, I welcome the fact that we have announced that no sanctions will be lifted until Russia pays compensation, but can I push the Government to go one step further and say that no funds will be unfrozen until Russia pays compensation?

In my discussions this week with global private sector leaders, they are making three clear requests as we plan for peace. One is to create that regulatory framework and the environment that allows them to go and do what they want to do to support Ukraine. The second is the importance of judicial reform to give global private sector leaders the confidence that the rule of law will underpin their investments in Ukraine. Finally, they see a transition to a cashless society as pivotal to Ukraine reaching all the opportunities available to it.

I urge my hon. Friend that, in order to help us bring peace sooner, we need to develop and establish an economic Ramstein, whether it be on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly in September, the G20 or the G7. That is the way we make sure that we are supporting the military effort and strangling Putin's financial foothold that is allowing him to continue to wage war.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee not only for her sustained interest and personal experience, but for her involvement in this conference and her questions today. She is absolutely right about the convening power of our country, which was on show at its absolute best yesterday, but we must deliver on the commitments made at the conference, and we will.

My hon. Friend made a pertinent suggestion about a similar approach to frozen assets, and we will take that away. She rightly outlined that the clear requirement and pre-condition for Ukrainian economic reinvention and renaissance is the improvement of the regulatory environment, the development of a truly independent judiciary and, ideally, the transition to a cashless economy. There is huge appetite across the Ukrainian Government—because they are forward-looking and tech savvy—for those sorts of developments and modernisations, which will allow investment to flow. We entirely support that kind of institutional development. The conditionality of a lot of private capital that now flows to Ukraine as a result of this conference will usefully have those conditions attached, and I entirely agree with her analysis.

My hon. Friend made a pertinent point about the notion of an economic Ramstein, as it were. Yesterday and today show that, in terms of matching our military effort, there is global will—especially among G7 major developed nations—to have a similar economic effort

[*Leo Docherty*]

that can be leveraged and mobilised to ensure that while we are giving lethal aid we are also driving economic improvement, because that is what will make victory not just inevitable, but sustainable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesman, Martyn Day.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and I welcome its contents. The SNP wholeheartedly welcomes the Prime Minister's pledge at the beginning of the recovery conference to provide the \$3 billion World Bank loan guarantees. My colleagues and I, and indeed the whole House, stand in unwavering solidarity with the people of Ukraine. We have always condemned, and will continue to condemn, in the strongest possible terms, Putin's unprovoked invasion of a peaceful, democratic neighbour.

Our Ukrainian allies are to be commended for never giving up in their fight for territorial integrity and self-determination. Ukraine is fighting not only for the respect and sanctity of its own borders, but for the very principles of world order and the international rule of law. Ukrainian officials and forces must know that until Russian troops withdraw from all occupied Ukrainian land, we will not stop calling for increased and continuing support, both military and non-military.

That brings me to my questions. The Government have yet to detail how they will introduce legislation to move from freezing Russian assets to seizing Russian assets. Will the UK Government follow the lead of the Dutch Parliament, for example, by setting up a trust fund based on seized money from Russia and Russian oligarchs to fund the Prime Minister's proposed plan to help rebuild Ukraine? How do the UK and its partners plan to bring onboard other Governments who have perhaps been less forthright in supporting Ukraine to date, and how do we plan to rally increased financial support around the world for Ukraine?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his questions, his supportive comments, and his welcome of the \$3 billion-worth of loan guarantees, which we think will make a significant difference. He asked a pertinent question about legislation to make provision for freezing versus seizing. We are still looking at that. We are looking at a robust legal path, and of course in our considerations we will look at the courses of action of other nations. He also asked what efforts we are making to support other countries. Clearly we are very energetic in the provision of lethal aid and our diplomacy therein, but yesterday and today at the conference showed that our ability to convene and to mobilise global capital—the City of London being a major global financial centre—is hugely important. That effort to inject capital to rebuild the Ukrainian economy will be equally as important as our resolute support for its military effort.

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

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The Ukraine recovery conference is yet another example of how the UK has led international efforts to support

Ukraine. The battles may not be over, but that should not stop us preparing for the peace. We are now all aware, however, of just how important grain exports are. The Minister reminded us that Ukraine is the breadbasket of Europe. Those grain ships are critical not just to Ukraine's own economy; the denial of them getting out has a knock-on impact on our own economy, with food inflation here running at 18%. Only one fifth of those exports are able to get out. I invite the Minister to see whether the UK, as a P5 member of the United Nations Security Council, could take the lead in upgrading the current UN deal, which may require a UN-led maritime escort force, so that all of Ukraine's grain can get out. Having visited Odesa a couple of times to investigate that, will he now meet with me to discuss the proposal further?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those remarks, and for his sustained interest and personal experience of Ukraine. He makes a very relevant point: Ukrainian grain exports are hugely important to global supply. They drive all sorts of consequences, from global inflation to terrible deprivation, poverty and attendant conflict in the African continent, so these are hugely important issues. We have put a huge amount of diplomatic energy into the UN Black sea deal, which we think is a good platform, but of course I would be very pleased to meet him to discuss what more we might do in that area.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement, but we have an expression in Yorkshire: "Warm words butter no parsnips." This is the most dreadful war in our European history for many years, and this House will not be sitting for some weeks. How will this House be kept informed about whether the promises and commitments will be delivered on, and about our defence? How will we keep alive the flame and spirit of morale in Ukraine when we are not sitting? Can we not do some symbolic things and tighten the restrictions on Russians living here? Lord Lebedev, appointed to the House of Lords by a former Prime Minister, calls himself Lord Lebedev of Richmond and Siberia. Why has that not been looked into? Why are we not looking at all the Russians coming in and out of Harrods? Why are we not stopping Russians coming in on private jets and helicopters? Let us tighten the sanctions and show that we mean business in supporting the brave people of Ukraine.

Leo Docherty: I think the last two days, and our actions over the last couple of years, show that we do not just speak warm words; we provide lethal aid and global capital. That effort will continue despite the fact that the House will not be sitting, as will our global presence in diplomacy and military support, but of course we will keep Members updated.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate everybody involved in the conference. It was an honour to meet many of the delegates last night, and the Minister is absolutely right about the great atmosphere of hope. As I have said a number of times in this place, it is vital that Russia, as the perpetrator, pays for the damage it has caused. It is really good news that the Prime Minister has confirmed that is the UK's intention. The work to use the frozen assets should be happening at great pace, but in the meantime, for the record, will the Minister

make it crystal clear that not a single penny of frozen Russian assets in this country will be defrosted until Russia pays?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct: the last two days have embodied hope of a brighter Ukrainian future, based on their tremendous courage and human capacity. When it comes to Russian assets, as the Prime Minister made clear, we are looking at lawful routes. That work will continue at pace, and I am grateful for her sustained interest.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Ukraine's extensive grain fields provide food not just for Ukraine, but for people living in countries many miles away. The task of recovery from landmines and devastating floods is immense. What in particular are the Government doing to prepare to assist that recovery, and what further steps will they take to encourage a broader range of countries to contribute to that work?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that very relevant point. The impact of the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam was appalling. We have injected an additional £16 million-worth of humanitarian assistance to enable aid partners to help some 32,000 people affected by it. That is on the back of more than £200 million of humanitarian aid last year. I think that our example has encouraged others. The global flow of humanitarian aid to Ukraine in order to deal with the impact of the dam, or to cover anti-mining, is hugely impressive.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Yesterday, I was privileged to meet several Ukrainian MPs who came to Parliament on the sidelines of the Ukraine recovery conference for a series of meetings organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), commented on that in his remarks. That cross-party support sends a crucial message to our friends in Ukraine—a message that those in the Kremlin would do well to think about. Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reconstruction of Ukraine will involve sharing experiences and ideas between Parliaments to help to ensure that Ukrainians continue to enjoy a strong democracy, which has lasted throughout this terrible period, for many years to come?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Democracy is and will be central to a flourishing Ukrainian society. I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet Ukrainian counterparts at the IPU event yesterday. Their role bringing accountability to the system is hugely important to the long-term development and stability of society and the viability of the economy, in which external investors will want to invest. President Zelensky himself referred to the central importance of democracy and the Ukrainian democratic tradition as a pillar of its recovery. We entirely agree and we look forward to a flourishing Ukrainian democracy in the future.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I was interested to hear the Minister talk about the war risk work. If we are to support Ukrainian reconstruction, global public money will have to be spent, as a catalyst to leveraging private sector investment. London's unique role as an insurance and reinsurance market should put us at the heart of that international

effort. Could the Minister expand further on how the House will be kept informed of that effort? Importantly, how can the insurance and reinsurance markets be used not only to de-risk private sector investment in Ukraine but to make it harder for our international partners and those people around the world who are still trading with Russia to do business with Russian businesses on a global scale? There is a real opportunity here, because of London's unique role at the heart of that global finance sector, and I would be grateful if the Minister could explain how the House will be kept informed. It is a great initiative, but I worry that we will not have the scrutiny of it.

Leo Docherty: The Department will keep colleagues informed through oral and written statements. The hon. Gentleman is correct that public capital is a small component; we are trying to create an environment where global private capital can flow into Ukraine to drive development and long-term sustainable growth. The de-risking of that is a key condition in which the London insurance market will be central.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Our Government deserve great credit for the military and non-military support—£470 million has been given. The World Bank estimated in March that the total rebuilding of Ukraine was likely to cost in excess of £411 billion—that was before the destruction of the Kakhovka dam. Did my hon. Friend detect at yesterday's conference a willingness among the world's wealthier nations that for one reason or another have not felt able to participate in the military effort to participate generously in the efforts to rebuild Ukraine?

Leo Docherty: That is a relevant question. I think that there is that appetite. The sheer scale of the economic and financial heft of G7 and non-G7 nations there left us full of confidence that our resolute military effort across allied nations will be matched by global capital.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I welcome the success of the conference. I have just returned from the Council of Europe in Strasbourg this week, where there was genuine and palpable hope about its actions. We all know that what we need to do with Russian assets is seize, not just freeze. Given that London remains one of the money laundering capitals of the world, what more will the Government do to stop the flow of dirty Russian money through the City of London and fully implement and embrace the Magnitsky principles?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's comments about the Council of Europe and our participation in that important forum. We are working at pace to look at the legal route for seizing, not just freezing, assets to inject that money into the reconstruction effort. We will keep the House updated.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Tuesday I had the privilege of discussing with Ukrainian telecommunications operator Kyivstar the challenges it faces. As a telecoms network engineer, I want to put on record my absolute admiration for what it is doing to change network design, investing in new technologies to maintain service and coverage in the midst of Putin's illegal war. Given that it is Putin's illegal war, should the

[Chi Onwurah]

frozen Russian assets not pay for investment in critical national infrastructure? Will the Minister set out when that money will start to flow?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and I acknowledge her expertise. The heroes involved in supporting the telecoms industry in Ukraine should be lauded, as should all heroes involved in keeping the electricity grid and public services running over the past year, during a winter of terrible hardship and outrageous Russian bombardments. We salute the infrastructure heroes of Ukraine, who have shown amazing technological agility. We will keep the House updated as we develop a lawful route towards deploying frozen Russian assets.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): One has only to go out to Ukraine and see the damage caused to realise the scale of the rebuild challenge once the war concludes. However, the reconstruction is already under way; many key pieces of infrastructure are already being rebuilt. Companies in the UK wish to get involved in that, but the travel advice has a prohibitive impact on insurance, particularly for medium or smaller companies that could offer specialist skills in the rebuilding efforts. What work can the Department do to create a framework of advice that reflects the fact that, although some parts of the country are in conflict, given its vast scale, companies could operate relatively safely and appropriately in other parts to help support rebuilding efforts?

Leo Docherty: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's personal interest in Ukraine. He is right that the rebuilding effort must be concurrent to the military effort. That is already the case. British businesses play an important role, and I am pleased to confirm that as part of the conference, the Department for Business and Trade convened hundreds of businesses of all sizes that are energetically seeking the many opportunities that await them in Ukraine.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I want to return to the environmental, humanitarian and agricultural disaster following the explosion at the Kakhovka dam. Mine is the only party calling for a reinstatement of the commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on helping countries deal with that type of disaster. Will the Minister consider revisiting that commitment? Could he update the House on the release of the £2.35 billion proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club, which we understand are to be used for humanitarian purposes in Ukraine and are needed now more than ever?

Leo Docherty: On our efforts around the dam, we have committed a significant amount of resources—£60 million of additional humanitarian assistance, with an impact on 32,000 people around the dam. We are confident that our approach has been generous and effective. The hon. Lady asked a pertinent question about the proceeds of the sale of Chelsea football club, which are now in a non-governmental structure. Work is being done at pace to ensure that the proceeds can be deployed in Ukraine as soon as possible.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I echo other Members' steadfast support and commend the success of the conference in bringing so many together to support Ukraine's long-term recovery. I met many Ukrainian MPs at cross-party meetings and talked about the economic counter-offensive that we can join. I echo the comments made by other Members about not just freezing but seizing assets. Some \$300 billion of Russian state central bank assets have been frozen by western Governments. The EU, Canada and the US are moving forward with legislation on that, so what steps is the Minister taking within the Group of Seven to use those funds to rebuild Ukraine? Russia must pay for the damage and destruction it is causing.

Leo Docherty: I thank the hon. Lady for her supportive words. She is absolutely right. The economic counter-offensive is hugely important in tandem with our tremendous military efforts to support our Ukrainian friends. On seizing and deploying frozen assets, clearly we pay attention to and co-ordinate with allied nations in their approaches. We will consider their approaches as we forge our own lawful path towards deploying this capital.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his very positive statement and for the Government's clear long-term commitment, which we all welcome across the House. I am very supportive of the idea hinted at today by several news outlets that Ukraine may be given NATO membership under the same terms as those given to Sweden and Finland earlier this year. With that will come an obligation that means more support, defensively, for Ukraine. Is the Minister able to outline whether that was discussed and at what stage that process is?

Leo Docherty: Of course, I would not pre-empt the outcome of and discussions at the Vilnius summit in July, which will be the major NATO summit to deal with those issues. What is clear is that the security relationship between Ukraine and NATO is increasingly close.

Backbench Business

Infected Blood Inquiry

12.41 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Inquiry.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, ensuring that this important issue is considered on the Floor of the House. Over the years, it has been incredibly generous in allocating time to Back Benchers in our attempt to hold Ministers and the Government to account on the infected blood scandal. I also thank the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for working with me to secure the debate and with whom I am proud to co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who are here today and who have fought so hard for their constituents who have been infected and affected. I know of many other MPs who are not able to attend the debate today but support our work.

In opening, I want to say a few words about three individuals among the thousands who have been affected by this scandal, to remind the House of the people at the heart of this debate. First of all is my constituent, Glen Wilkinson. In 2010, he came to see me at my last surgery before the general election. He told me how he had been infected by dirty blood given to him by the NHS. Along with thousands of others, he wanted to know how that was allowed to happen and he wanted a public inquiry. I promised to try to help him if I was still an MP after that general election. It was a very close run thing and I ended up with a majority of just 641, so I was fortunate to be returned. I joined the all-party group and have been very proud since then, with Glen, to fight for truth and justice, not just for him but for all those who have been infected and affected. Of course, we did secure the public inquiry in 2017. Glen is still campaigning for justice despite his health problems, but I know that, as the years have dragged on, the need to keep fighting has exerted enormous pressure on him, his wife Alison and his wonderful family. At this point, it is worth remembering all those family members and pay tribute to those who have been caught up in this scandal.

A few nights ago I could not sleep—it is very hot—and I ended up going online. I read the witness statement to the public inquiry by Nick Sainsbury, whom I had met through Glen and who lived in East Yorkshire. Nick attended the Lord Mayor Treloar College as a child and was one of dozens of children at the school infected with HIV and hepatitis through infected blood products. We know that 72 of those pupils later died. After school, Nick worked as a civil servant and then at the Land Registry, which he said was his dream job, until his mid-30s when he became ill from multiple viral infections. He had to give up his job. He said:

“It was just too much. I was going to work bent double on crutches.”

I want to quote what he said about being HIV-positive in his statement to the inquiry:

“The knowledge that I was infected with arguably the most feared infectious disease since the bubonic plague of the middle ages was hard enough to deal with. The constant reminders on TV and in the newspapers made it very grim.”

Nick campaigned for years for justice. He travelled to many meetings here in Parliament, and attended and contributed to the public inquiry. But just two months ago, Nick sadly died, never having seen justice.

I also want to mention Michele, who currently is not represented in Parliament by a Member of Parliament, but wanted me to raise her case. Michele Claire was given a contaminated blood transfusion following childbirth and consequently developed hepatitis C. She now has stage 6 liver disease. After people in her village found out about Michele’s infection, she received letters through her door saying things like, “We don’t want your type round here”. On compensation, Michele told me:

“Money can cure nothing. It will, however, bring about some dignity and ensure peace of mind going forward.”

My message to the Minister is this: it is time. Action to fully compensate those infected and affected by the contaminated blood scandal must start now. The Government have accepted that compensation should be paid and that there is a moral case to do so.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will agree with me that my right hon. Friend has done a sterling job in campaigning on this issue for a number of years. Will she join me in paying tribute to Della Ryness and her husband Dan, who sadly passed away last month, who fought the good fight on behalf of their son, who died from this very awful thing, and in thinking about the beautiful granddaughter who he left behind?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very grateful. This is about people. It is about mums and dads, sons and daughters, and aunts and uncles. We have to remember that. It is about those individuals and their families.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, first, for securing the debate, and, secondly, for the determined way in which she has pursued the issue over so many years. She is right that it is about people. I have been contacted by a number of constituents. One of them is Robert Cardwell. He says that the people who are experiencing this problem are investing a great deal of hope in the debate today. Does she agree that a lot of progress has been made but, if we are going to redeem the need to honour those who have been victims, we need to go that bit further now so that a proper compensation scheme reaches them all?

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. Progress has been made. The interim payments last year were very welcome—absolutely—but we need to do more. As I was saying, victims and their families have waited far too long. The 30,000 people who contracted hepatitis C after being given dirty blood by the NHS have waited too long. The parents of the 380 children infected with HIV have waited too long. Too many of those infected and affected are no longer with us and they will never see justice. They will never hear the Government say that what happened to them could and should have been prevented. They will never receive a penny in recompense for the jobs lost, the relationships destroyed and the life lost.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The right hon. Member is truly to be congratulated on behalf of all those people who have complained for so

[Liz Saville Roberts]

long, including Judith Thomas and Ruth Jenkins, the wife and sister of Christopher Thomas from Penllŷn, who died of the effects of contaminated blood in 1990. They want us to emphasise that there should be no further delays, given that we know from the interim report what the recommendations are. They particularly want me to emphasise that the infected blood scandal happened before the devolution of health to Wales. Consequently, the financial powers and responsibility to deliver a compensation scheme must remain with the Westminster Government.

Dame Diana Johnson: I hope that the Minister will respond to that particular point when he speaks later.

I want to go back to those who have been infected and affected and are still alive. I hope that today they will witness the Government atoning for what went so systematically and catastrophically wrong. There is simply no excuse for dragging out the process of justice any longer.

It is not as if the scandal has just been discovered, with those in power hearing about it only recently. It is now five years since the infected blood inquiry was launched, and three years since the then Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), wrote to the Chancellor saying:

“I believe it to be inevitable that the Government will need to pay substantial compensation... I believe we should begin preparing for this now”.

Since then, we have had three Prime Ministers, four Chancellors and five Paymasters General. Today, I ask the Minister for the result of all their combined efforts to prepare for paying compensation.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work and for securing the debate. I am sure that she understands the frustration of my constituent, who was a young teenager nearly 40 years ago when he was infected and who has HIV. He just wants justice now.

Dame Diana Johnson: Absolutely. The House is probably united in that view. We want justice now.

We know that the report of Sir Robert Francis KC, which the former Paymaster General commissioned, on a framework for what compensation would look like was presented to the Government at the start of 2022. The former Paymaster General understood that preparatory work could start, ready for the Government to act quickly, when Sir Brian reported—which he did, on 5 April 2023. I am therefore hopeful that the Minister can set out, in detail, all the work that has been undertaken to date when he speaks later in the debate.

The story of how successive Governments responded to those infected and affected by contaminated blood is a story of how a disaster became a scandal.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, which will mean a huge amount to my constituents, Linda Cannon, who lost her husband to hepatitis C from contaminated blood, and Vera Gaskin, who I met recently and has cirrhosis of the liver. The re-victimisation of our constituents

is one of the key issues. They have had to wait so long, and the longer they wait, the deeper the trauma becomes. Does the right hon. Lady agree that swift action is crucial and that we need to ensure that Governments do not behave in the same way with other scandals?

Dame Diana Johnson: I could not agree more.

The biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS turned into a scandal. Prevarication, obfuscation and delay—that is what victims met for decades. They have had to fight every step of the way. I want to quote from the statement that Sir Brian Langstaff, the chair of the infected blood inquiry, made when he took the unusual step of producing his second interim report on compensation before he had published his final report, which is due in the autumn. His words are powerful:

“I could not in conscience add to the decades-long delays many of you have already experienced due to failures to recognise the depths of your losses. Those delays have themselves been harmful... My conclusion is that wrongs were done at individual, collective and systemic levels... my judgement is that not only do the infections themselves and their consequences merit compensation, but so too do the wrongs done by authority, whose response served to compound people’s suffering.”

So today we say, “No more. It is time.”

Any further delays to the delivery of compensation are unconscionable. I have lost count of how many times I have told the House that a person infected with contaminated blood dies on average every four days. Sir Brian Langstaff said,

“this compensation scheme should be set up now. It should begin work this year.”

He also stated:

“Time without redress is harmful. No time must be wasted in delivering that redress.”

Does the Minister accept Sir Brian’s recommendations on compensation and redress in full? What progress has been made on setting up the compensation scheme? Has the Minister started registering people for it? Can he make a commitment that the scheme will be up and running by the end of this year? Will the compensation scheme be run by an arm’s length body, chaired by a senior judge and accountable to Parliament? Will each affected and infected person be able to make a claim in their own right? Will he pay interim compensation payments to bereaved parents and bereaved children? If so, when? Will a bespoke psychological service be provided in England, as already exists in other parts of the UK? Will he ensure that people who were infected with contaminated blood and blood products are meaningfully consulted and involved in the process of establishing the new mechanisms for redress?

Before Nick Sainsbury died, he told the infected blood inquiry that “justice delayed is justice denied.” Nick was right. Justice was delayed and, as a result, it was denied to him. It must not be denied to another single person. It is time to launch the compensation scheme and finally deliver justice, not in a few months, not after the next report, but now, now, now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I will call the Father of the House and after that, I will place a formal six-minute limit on speeches because a lot of Members want to participate.

12.57 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is difficult to follow the speech of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and I will not try to match it. As the Minister may say, it is helpful to think of what we can do in future, the situation we are in now and what has happened.

I commend to those who have not read it Richard Titmuss's book, "The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy", which was published in 1970. He made it clear that it was better for people to give rather than sell their blood. The collection of blood in other countries was the biggest problem.

When people were given factor VIII made from contaminated or infected blood, it was done with the best intentions of trying to provide a prophylactic to avoid the dramatic treatments that were needed by people with haemophilia when they started bleeding.

However, that is not the point of the inquiry or of this debate. The point of the debate is to give the Minister an opportunity to update the House in the same way as he kindly met the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and me recently and followed up with a helpful letter. We ask him whether, before the summer session ends, it is possible to give further information, by a written or oral statement so that we can follow that up. Between now and the autumn, a payment scheme should be possible. We want to ensure that the Government are given the most effective, co-operative encouragement and that pressure is put on them.

I speak as someone whose mother had major blood transfusions during the peak period and so, it is on record, did my wife. My mother was the first person in our family to have an HIV test. She was clear. I take an HIV test four times a year, when I give blood. The contamination issue has now been addressed, so the question facing Sir Brian for the remainder of the report is how we got to where we are. This debate is mainly about compensation and the system being brought forward.

The Minister will be able to explain how co-ordination with the other Governments of the United Kingdom and the permanent secretary of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland is coming together. It is accepted that a national scheme will be needed, but are we sure that the names of those affected and infected are being gathered now? It should not start in the autumn, when the scheme is agreed.

Some believe that the scheme's details are not clear, so it would be helpful if the Minister could make plain how the Government intend to fulfil the recommendations of Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report, based on Sir Robert Francis's specially commissioned study.

One of our closest friends was HIV-positive, having received infected blood, at a time when people thought they should not associate with those with AIDS or HIV. We did not believe that, and we spent our time socialising as best we could. We also understood the devastating impact on families. I have constituents who are survivors, and I had constituents who did not survive, and I know from all of them what it is like not to be able to get insurance, what it is like not to be able to save into a pension, what it is like not to be able to continue with their job, what it is like not to know whether they have infected their partner, and what it is like to go for treatment and have to explain that, no, they are not an

alcoholic—that they do not have that illness—to every person in every hospital or clinic.

Hannah Bardell: That chimes with me profoundly. When I sat down with my constituent Vera Gaskin, she talked about exactly those things. She talked about not being able to get insurance to go on holiday, and so not being able to leave our beautiful country of Scotland, and about being asked repeatedly whether she is an alcoholic, even though she does not take a drop of alcohol. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that these people have lived with these things for a lifetime, or since they had those transfusions? Will he also pay tribute to the many people watching today from the Public Gallery?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The difficulty with where I am standing is that I cannot see the Public Gallery, but I do, of course, pay tribute to them. Those of us who have spent a lot of time with the real campaigners can be their mouthpiece. We have the microphone, but they are the ones Sir Brian rightly listened to at the beginning of his inquiry. Successive Ministers have also listened to them, for which I give them credit.

I think the health service could have done better by giving people a tag, so that they are not asked these difficult questions three or four times a year. I will not take up more time, but I associate myself with what the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North said about Glen, Nick and Michele. It is for them that we rely on the Minister, his advisers and the small ministerial group to make an impact in putting right the things that can be put right and in acknowledging the mistakes that cannot be put right.

1.3 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I agree that it is important to keep the victims and their families at the heart of this debate. We should all take a moment to remember and to pay our respects to those who lost their fight and are no longer with us.

It is only due to the persistence of activists that the scale of the disaster and the cover-up began to be revealed in 2017. I pay tribute to their determination not to give up, despite some of them being in poor health. I particularly thank Sean Cavens and Bruce Norval, who have provided me with so much information and support over the years. Their effort meant that there was strong cross-party support for a public inquiry before the emergency debate on 11 July 2017.

In that debate, I explained how, as a young surgeon, the revelations of the early to mid-1980s shocked me to my core: to think that in transfusing a patient, I might have exposed them, while trying to save them from trauma or surgery, to HIV or hepatitis. It led me to totally change my surgical approach, and to use every technique available that could reduce blood loss and minimise the need for transfusion. That was 40 years ago. My entire surgical career has passed while the victims are still seeking justice.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend has worked tirelessly on this matter, and she is right to refer to Bruce Norval and his work. Bruce Norval has pointed out that up to 100 people

[Drew Hendry]

affected by this scandal are dying each year, and they have not been able to access compensation. It is time to get on with this, isn't it?

Dr Whitford: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

I pay tribute to Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for their meticulous, forensic and dogged examination of all the evidence, and for their sensitivity to the witnesses. They have helped reveal the truth about 60 years of disastrous policy decisions and individual decisions, including the failure to ensure blood transfusion services are self-sufficient and the failure to switch to safer treatments more quickly. In particular, the inquiry exposed systematic attempts to cover up the scandal.

I am not sure whether the Minister attended any of the hearings but, if he did not, he should watch the video recordings, and maybe he would get the merest hint of the suffering of those infected by contaminated blood and their families. I attended a couple of sessions in London and Edinburgh, and it was harrowing even as an observer, let alone for those who had to recount their experiences and relive their pain. Their bravery and determination were humbling.

The inquiry staff did an incredible job of providing support to the victims who came to bear witness, while Sir Brian ensured that they and their representatives were involved in steering the inquiry to its conclusion, with the final report due in the autumn. While that report will seek to ensure that the lessons from this disaster are learned, one of the key aims of the inquiry is to achieve just compensation for the victims and their families.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent contribution. I spoke this morning to my constituent Robert Ross, whose young life has been blighted and ruined. It struck me hard that it feels so desperately unfair that this happened to somebody. In recent times we have seen a mixture of emotions in this place about the way we do things, but one of the undying principles of British and Scottish politics is a sense of fairness. Let us hope that an equitable solution—one that is seen to be fair to these people—can be found.

Dr Whitford: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. The support right across this Chamber is clear.

Money cannot redress the loss of lives and loved ones, nor the reduction in quality of life caused by illness, stigma or caring responsibilities, but it can at least ease the hardship and financial worries that many families face, particularly at the moment. The Leader of the House, when she was Paymaster General, was the first Minister to accept that responsibility for this disaster lay with the UK Government and that financial compensation was inevitable. She commissioned Sir Robert Francis to develop a compensation framework, which he duly delivered last March. The Government refused to publish it, saying they would only publish it along with their formal response. It was finally published three months later, when it was about to be leaked, but with a mere covering letter and no real commitments. Indeed, the Government have still not responded.

It was only after Sir Brian published the first interim report last July and directed the Government to pay interim compensation payments of £100,000 that we finally saw action. These payments were, however, limited to surviving victims and their partners who were registered with support schemes. Nothing was provided to those who had lost parents or children, or who had spent many years as family carers. This issue is particularly important for HIV-affected families, as three quarters of the victims have already died of AIDS, as have many of their partners. Appallingly, they were often not told their HIV status and unwittingly passed the virus on to their loved ones. After 40 years of denial, cover-up and obstruction, there is little trust in the Government, and ongoing delays are exacerbating that distrust.

More than 560 victims have died since 2017, including 67 partners. If the Government want to rebuild trust, they must now respond to Sir Brian's report from April, which includes all the recommendations regarding compensation, with urgency and action. I hope the Minister has come with more than the blather we have had to listen to in this Chamber for over a year, and is ready to make it clear that the Government accept all of Sir Brian's recommendations.

On behalf of all victims, whether infected or affected, we need to know when the chair of the independent compensation body will be appointed. We also need a commitment that victims and their representatives will be included in its development. Victims need to be reassured that the system will not be adversarial, so that the process does not re-traumatise those who have already suffered so much. We need to hear from the Minister how bereaved parents and children will be registered now, so that they can receive interim payments quickly and be included in the final compensation process.

I would love to think that this will be the last debate that is needed to achieve justice for the victims of contaminated blood; sadly, I fear that that will not be the case. With an average of two victims a week losing their lives since that debate in 2017, the Government must surely accept that time is of the essence for these people—enough is enough.

1.11 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on securing this debate. As a member of the Backbench Business Committee, I was delighted to agree to their application for it.

The background to this debate is well known, but it deserves to be on the record again. In the 1970s and 1980s, about 5,000 people with haemophilia and other bleeding disorders were infected with HIV and hepatitis viruses through the use of contaminated clotting factors. Some of those people unintentionally went on to infect their partners, often because, as has been said, they were simply not aware of the infection they had. Since those times, more than 3,000 people have died, and fewer than 250 of the 1,250 people infected with HIV are still alive. It has to be remembered that they are alive only because of advances in the treatment of that condition, which were simply not available at the time of their original infection. In addition, many people who did not have a bleeding disorder were infected with hepatitis C as a result of blood transfusions during that

period. The best estimates we have—of course they are estimates, given that these things were not particularly well recorded—suggest that about 27,000 were infected with hepatitis C. About 10% of them were still alive and seeking justice as of 2019.

It is safe to say that justice has not been speedy or quick for those affected by this scandal. Decades have been spent campaigning for justice, and now it is often being done by a son or daughter, as the length of time that has passed means that the fight is being passed on to a new generation.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am here this afternoon on behalf of several constituents, but particularly Mr Adam Fleming, who has been adversely affected by this issue and, understandably, feels very passionately about it. May I make a simple plea to the Minister, through my hon. Friend? This has gone on for so many years and a compassionate Government would surely do everything they could to accelerate the payment of compensation. Does he agree with me and many others that now, really, enough is enough?

Kevin Foster: I am only too happy to agree with my right hon. Friend about that. Some of my oldest outstanding cases—I am sure this is the same for him—ones that I inherited from my predecessor, who had been pursuing them for 18 years before my election, relate to victims of this scandal. It is time to bring this matter forward and to give them the justice for which they have waited so long and that they so totally deserve. Sadly, as I mentioned, in many cases it will now be a son or daughter, or the next generation, who is waiting, given the time that has elapsed since the original infection, the inevitable passage of time and the conditions concerned turning into fatal outcomes.

The establishment of the infected blood inquiry in 2017 gave hope that the long wait for justice was finally nearing an end. Although it is making progress, it is worth noting that more than 500 people affected by the scandal are estimated to have died since the inquiry began, in addition to the thousands we have already lost. Therefore, I have no problem in agreeing with my right hon. Friend that there is no time to waste in delivering compensation to surviving victims and others affected.

On 5 April, the infected blood inquiry published its report on compensation and redress. The key recommendation is that a compensation scheme should be set up now and begin work this year. The inquiry chair has said:

“The scheme need not await the final report to begin work, since this second interim report fully covers the inquiry’s recommendations on financial redress”.

The report makes several recommendations, including that each affected and infected person should be able to make a claim in their own right; and, given the passage of time, that people should be able to make claims on behalf of the estates of people who have died. Simply the passage of time should not be allowed to reduce the liability for this scandal.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My friend Steve Dymond died in 2018, and his wife, Su, had had to help him through a very difficult time for 30 or 40 years. He had been infected by blood products and had hepatitis C. I just feel it is time that Su had her compensation.

Kevin Foster: I could not agree more, and the recommendations are welcome. Many who have waited decades for justice are, understandably, keen to see them quickly accepted. There is no need for the Government to delay in accepting the recommendations from the inquiry and beginning to implement them now. Last summer, the Government moved quickly to accept and implement the recommendations in the inquiry’s first interim report on compensation. They should now do the same for the full and final recommendations on compensation and redress.

Simply stating an acceptance of the recommendations for compensation may end up being the easiest part of that process; actually delivering a compensation scheme will bring many challenges. It will involve looking back over decades to identify the impact on a person and on their family, often including long periods when the person was not aware of the infection and the impact it was then having on them. Inevitably, therefore, they will not have kept receipts or evidence of that impact. We must also be realistic about the sad reality that many involved in their care and affairs in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s will have almost certainly have passed on in the decades since. That means that their oral or written evidence cannot now be adduced to assist in a claim. Delivering justice in the face of these challenges, to those who have now waited decades for it, will not be easy.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and I know from our dealings with things such as the Windrush compensation scheme, which is having to do a similar task and in some cases is looking back over decades to see the impact on an individual, that these are complex cases. They are not easy. It is not simple to go back over someone’s life, see the impact, put it together and then come to a compensation award. We need to find people with the skills required to help deliver justice in a timely way, and that will not be simple.

That means that the Government should be appointing a chair to lead this body, in consultation with infected and affected people and their representatives. I urge the Minister not to wait in doing that. Candidates for such roles cannot be simply taken off a shelf when we decide to do something; they need to be identified and brought on board so that they fully understand the role and can quickly get under way. As soon as it has a chair, the body should start recruiting panels to review applications, build processes for reviewing claims, ensure it is ready to contact eligible people and allow people not covered by the current support schemes to register for this one. It must also ensure the active and relevant involvement of infected and affected people in its work and processes.

Crucially, an independent appeals and review process will also need to be created. Just describing the process makes it clear that it will take some time to establish, with potentially thousands of cases to consider, and so we need to start now. This cannot simply be announced and then start work the next day, which is why it is becoming all the more urgent that the practical reality of delivering this compensation scheme is engaged with.

The contaminated blood scandal is a tragedy that simply should not have happened. It has seen thousands of people lose their lives, with many facing prejudice as well, given the ill-informed attitudes to the conditions they had. Often they did not find out what had happened to them until many years afterwards. The scandal affected not just them but their whole family, many of whom are

[Kevin Foster]

now on to the second generation fighting for justice. The final report of the inquiry will be a landmark moment, one that has been awaited for decades. Yet what I say to the Minister is: please do not wait to act where you can, and do so by quickly accepting the April recommendations and coming back to the House with a clear plan as to how you are going to deliver them.

1.19 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I too pay tribute to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for securing the debate and for the work they have done on this issue, on behalf of all of us and particularly on behalf of those who have been campaigning for justice for so long.

I draw the Minister's attention to the words of Sir Brian Langstaff, who implores those who will make the decisions and respond to his recommendations to listen to the victims. I also warn the Minister that the final report, which will be published in the autumn, will be extremely damning. Just imagine what will be said if the Government have not responded to the interim report when that final report comes out, so I urge the Minister to heed that warning.

I pay tribute to my constituents, Lee Moorey and Mary Grindley, who have been campaigning on the issue over many years and have recently come to see me. Mr Moorey went to Treloar's School when he was 12 and he wrote:

"I am a severe haemophilic A sufferer. I attended Treloar's in 1985 aged 12 years. At the age of 14 years, I was told I was HIV positive and that I had only a few years to live. You can imagine the impact this had on myself and my family. I have watched so many of my Treloar blood brothers pass away, I suffer from survivor's guilt. From the early 1970s until the late 1980s approximately 130 haemophiliacs went to Treloar's, of which less than 35 are alive today due to infected blood. I am one of the less than 35 still alive."

Mary Grindley met her husband in the 1970s and they married in 1980, knowing that he was a severe haemophilia sufferer. She gave up teaching in 1991 to look after her husband, John. He died in June 1994, aged 41. Her testimony is harrowing. Her son, Tim, lost his father at the age of 14. To read their stories, as I have done over the last couple of days, is harrowing. That they have had to expose their private details to the public gaze in order to get justice is shameful.

I have been reading about those people's experiences. They suffered prejudice; their relationships suffered; they suffered harassment, both where they lived and from work colleagues; they were threatened by people they knew, who were upset when they found out; they were unable to get insurance, so they could not get a mortgage, which compounded the problems of being harassed by neighbours, as they were unable to move away; careers were lost; pensions were lost; education was destroyed; and there were impacts on family.

Lee Moorey talks about how his mother struggled financially, and Mary talks about the impact on her son, who was 14 when his father died. They both talk about the psychological impacts. One of the appeals made by Sir Brian Langstaff is that the Government provide psychological support in England, which is provided in the rest of the UK.

My constituents have some requests of the Government, which echo what has been asked by other hon. Members but I will reiterate. The Government have been intransigent in setting up the compensation scheme and there has been a lack of transparency. What are they hiding? Are they actively looking for a chair now? When will that person be in place? Why are they not willing to preregister affected people, particularly parents and children, with possible claims to compensation in order to speed up the process? On the devolution issue, we do not want devolved Governments to set up different compensation schemes, as the scandal occurred pre-devolution. We want one central scheme.

The time for sympathy is over and the time for action is now. I will finish where I started, with the words of Sir Brian Langstaff. Talking to those people who gave evidence about their personal experiences, he said:

"I record in the report that some of the milestones that eventually led to the Government's acceptance of a moral case for compensation have been marked by the reactions from individuals in power when they have listened—actually listened—to people describing what happened to them and their families. So the right place to start my report was with some of your voices, and that is where it begins. I urge those responsible for considering my recommendations to start there, listening to you and appreciating the depths of what you have experienced so that they, like me, can understand why compensation is overdue." 1.24 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this important debate.

The conclusion of Sir Brian Langstaff's recent interim report is absolutely clear: a compensation scheme must be established to provide appropriate redress to all those who have been wronged over so many decades, and that must be done as soon as possible. That recommendation is clearly correct, and the Government should lose no further time in implementing it. I would like to focus on one issue, of particular importance in Wales, which is whether the scheme should be administered centrally or at a devolved level.

The report has been welcomed by the charity Haemophilia Wales, which supports over 500 of those who have been infected and affected across Wales. The charity has expressed concern that the Government intend to consult with devolved Administrations on the issue of whether the scheme should be administered centrally or locally. The position of Haemophilia Wales is absolutely clear: it believes that a UK-wide compensation scheme should be created, so as to avoid potential inequities in financial support and the danger of political point scoring.

That stance reflects Sir Brian's own view. In his report, he observes that the scheme he is recommending

"lends itself to administration from one place within the UK rather than being localised."

He goes on to say:

"The latter is more likely to give rise to disparities of approach."

It is important to remember that in Wales, devolution was not established until 1999, very many years after patients were infected with HIV and hepatitis C. Many of those patients have had their care delivered by hospitals in England.

Take, for example, my constituent Mrs Rosemary Richards. She was born in 1953, and in the late 1970s decided to be tested to establish if she was a haemophilia carrier, before making a decision whether or not to have children. She was diagnosed as a carrier and was referred to the Royal Liverpool Hospital's haematology unit in 1980 for testing and counselling. She had two sons, who were born with haemophilia in 1983 and 1985. The official regional centre for the whole of north Wales was the Royal Liverpool Hospital. It paid for and provided the blood products for haemophiliacs. Both her sons were under the care of Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Liverpool, from 1983, and throughout their childhood they attended reviews at Alder Hey. All their factor VIII treatment was funded from Liverpool.

Therefore, patients resident in north Wales had their treatments funded from and delivered by hospitals in England. There will be very many victims resident in Wales with a similar history. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that children from north Wales with bleeding disorders, such as haemophilia, are still, many years after devolution, receiving their treatment at Alder Hey.

Haemophilia Wales also makes the important point that contaminated blood victims were infected prior to devolution. Many live in Wales but were infected in England and therefore, in any event, do not come under a Welsh scheme. Others were infected in Wales, but now live in England. This pattern does not fit neatly into a devolved landscape.

The Cabinet Office has suggested in correspondence that it is the preference of victims that the scheme should be delivered locally. That is certainly not the view of Haemophilia Wales, which considers that a UK-wide scheme is entirely preferable. The question arises: what is "local"? In Wales, *ex gratia* payments to the infected are made via the Wales infected blood support scheme at Velindre hospital in Cardiff, which is administered by the Welsh Government. It cannot be said that that scheme is being delivered locally unless the patient in question happens to live in Cardiff. It is certainly not local for victims in my constituency for whom Cardiff is more than four hours away. In fact, on journey time, London is considerably closer—considerably more local.

Time is passing and action is called for. Giving consideration to a devolved structure for the scheme is simply protracting matters unnecessarily and is contrary to the wishes of victims and their families. What the Government should do now is ensure that the scheme is set up and implemented without any further unnecessary delay. I would therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to heed the recommendations of Sir Brian Langstaff and the views of Haemophilia Wales and proceed to establish a UK-wide scheme as quickly as possible.

1.30 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to be called to speak in this very important debate. It is also a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), with whom I agree wholeheartedly regarding his points on devolution, the settlement and the fact that there is no need for the consultation to delay matters. There should be one central system from the UK Government. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the Father of the House and the important all-party parliamentary

group on haemophilia and contaminated blood for securing today's debate and for their tireless work on this campaign.

Like other colleagues, I pay heartfelt tribute to the victims, their brave families and all those affected by this horrific scandal, some of whom are in the Public Gallery today. Campaign organisations such as the Hepatitis C Trust, the Haemophilia Society, Factor 8 and, in particular, Haemophilia Wales have campaigned tirelessly for years. I must also put on record my gratitude for the work of the infected blood inquiry itself. I know the whole House will agree that the inquiry's meticulous work, led by the well-regarded Sir Brian Langstaff, is to be commended.

Long before the inquiry was finally initiated in 2017, after 30 years of Government refusal, campaigners—often working tirelessly despite their own trauma—had been striving for justice for decades. Ultimately, it is thanks to their courage and commitment that we are here today participating in this parliamentary debate. I hope that we do not require another, and rightly so, because the infected blood scandal is a shameful stain on our nation's history. At the heart of this unimaginable injustice is the simple fact that we now know for definite that the UK Government ignored the very well-known risks of obtaining blood that had been pooled from high-risk donors, such as prisoners and drug addicts in the US.

We also know that the UK Government chose not to tell people that they had been infected until years later. Many campaign groups say that this is simply because the UK Government hoped that the victims would not remain alive long enough to fight for justice. That is an astonishing level of ignorance and arrogance. Government documents were destroyed and medical records were conspicuously lost. The numbers affected nationally are truly heartbreaking: more than 5,000 patients were infected, and more than 2,500 people have died so far as a direct result. That does not even take into account all of the others affected.

Of those victims infected with HIV, only about 200 people are still alive. Last week, alongside Lynne Kelly from Haemophilia Wales, I met constituents of mine: Meinir Gooch, Owain Harris, Gerald Stone and members of the Sugar family. I sat down with them and they bravely and powerfully told me of their ordeal. They have trusted me with their stories and have graciously allowed me to share details of how this horrific scandal has destroyed their families, and I thank them for that from the bottom of my heart.

Leigh Sugar was a husband, a father and a son. He was a successful businessman from Llantwit Fardre in my constituency. Leigh loved horse riding and the outdoors. Leigh also had mild haemophilia so, after a riding accident in 1980, he was given a treatment of factor VIII—that revolutionary new blood clotting treatment. The riding accident was not life threatening, and the treatment should have been routine, but like so many other victims, Leigh's dose was contaminated. His dose had not been screened, and he was infected with hepatitis C. It was not until 1994 that he was informed that his illness was due to hepatitis. Like thousands of other victims, Leigh was not told, which meant that opportunities to save him, such as considering a liver transplant, were missed. The infection destroyed his liver and killed him at the age of 44. Leigh's family—his mother Margaret, his widow Barbara, and his daughter Jodie—told me, "We will never recover. Our family has been torn apart."

[Alex Davies-Jones]

The big thing that the families wanted me to say today was about the stigma, which sadly still exists. Gerald Stone is now 80 years old. He is a proud man from Tonyrefail in my constituency. I have gone back and watched the brave and powerful evidence that he gave to the inquiry. Up until that point, no one knew that Gerald was infected. After he gave evidence, just a few years ago, BBC Wales got in touch and wanted to cover his story. This was the first time that Gerald had gone public with his story. Even then, following his story and that interview, his neighbours, with whom he had lived for his entire life, went to the police and asked them whether it was safe that he was living on the same street as them. That stigma still sadly exists and goes with these victims and their families even now.

The chair of the inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, says that

“time without redress is harmful.”

This ongoing suffering is prolonging the torment and mental anguish for families. I call on the Government urgently to publish their timetable for the compensation framework, before the inquiry’s final report this autumn. Fundamentally, I am calling on the Government to do the right thing. Of course, no amount of financial compensation will remedy this horrific scandal, but for those still living with its consequences and their families, they deserve justice. Fundamentally, they deserve a full and comprehensive settlement at last, after decades of fighting for their loved ones.

1.35 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to speak in this incredibly important debate. I congratulate the Father of the House and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. It has been very moving to listen to the speeches of right hon. and hon. Friends and Members.

I begin by echoing the tributes that have been made to the brave victims and their families, who have been battling and working through personal ill-health, grief and trauma and yet have campaigned tirelessly for justice. I am very pleased that the Government have acknowledged the moral case that victims of blood contamination should receive compensation, and that interim compensation payments of up to £1,000 have now finally been made to some of those who have been infected, or to their bereaved partners.

Last Friday, at one of my regular surgeries in Southend West, Mr David Corroyer came to see me. He had provided evidence as part of the inquiry and that has been published. I wish to put his story on record, although his story is slightly different because he contracted hepatitis C through donating blood, not through a transfusion.

In the late 1970s, the NHS set up a blood donation centre twice a year at David’s workplace. David and many of his colleagues happily went along to donate blood, and he donated blood on four separate occasions—this was before diseases such as AIDS became well known. It was general practice then for nurses to use the same needle 10 or more times. The only precaution taken then was that the needle would be given a quick swirl in sterilising liquid before use.

On one occasion, shortly after donating blood, David became ill, suffering from intense vomiting and diarrhoea. One week later, his condition deteriorated to the point that he was unable to eat anything without vomiting. His urine was bright orange and his skin was bright yellow. He went to see the doctor. The doctor took one look at him and told him that he must have hepatitis C. He then asked him a series of questions. Had he eaten seafood? Was he a drug addict? Had he had a tattoo? Had he had sex with anybody who had hepatitis? Finally, he said, “Have you recently had any injections?” At that point, David told him that he had given blood two weeks previously and he was told, “That’s it: an infected needle from a blood donor and it has happened before.”

After David caught the infection, he was horrendously ill for two years. He was run down, was in a constant state of worry and lost a significant amount of weight. He had to learn to control his diet along with what he drank, because if he did not then the consequences were horrendous. In short, David has told me that his life has never been the same again.

Quite rightly, having contracted hepatitis C through no fault of his own, David believes he is owed compensation by the Government. However, more than 40 years later, he has still not been offered any financial assistance whatsoever. As matters stand at the moment, David believes he may not be included in the compensation scheme being proposed through the infected blood inquiry, because he contracted hepatitis while donating blood rather than receiving it. That cannot possibly be right.

Will the Minister agree to meet me and my constituent David to discuss his circumstances? Will he assure me that the inquiry is looking into claims from people in circumstances such as David’s? Finally, can he confirm that the Government will consider expanding the compensation scheme to include people who contracted hepatitis C through donating blood?

1.40 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I start, as others have done, by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for obtaining this debate.

The families affected by the scandal have endured unimaginable suffering. They were failed when their loved ones were infected, they were failed by the Government’s subsequent denial and neglect, and now they have been failed by delays in getting the justice they deserve. While the inquiry has been a source of healing and community for some of the families, it has often required them to relive their most traumatic memories, for which they are yet to receive proper closure or justice. I pay tribute to them and thank them for their strength in sharing their stories. Of course, that strength should never have been required of them, but I am truly humbled by it.

I was humbled again recently when I spoke to my constituent Diane, who shared with me her experiences of living with and losing her brother, Graham Fox, and asked me to take part in this debate today. Graham had severe haemophilia. He was treated with factor VIII as a child and became infected with HIV and hepatitis C. Diane told me that as a child and as a young man, Graham never let his condition get in his way. He was a keen cyclist and kept himself very fit.

However, to be told as a late teenager that he had been infected with those diseases was devastating for Graham. The whole family was affected, not only by the knowledge that they could lose Graham, but by the fear, ignorance and lack of information about his condition at the time. Graham died peacefully in a hospice aged just 26 on 23 April 1996. By that time, he and the family were well aware that he had been given contaminated blood products. Diane tells me that before he died he said, “Don’t forget.”

Talking to Diane, the immense betrayal that the family have felt as a result of the scandal was clear. She told me:

“There is a base level of trust that we have in our lives, in our society. And that was breached.”

Like Graham and his sister, many people affected by haemophilia grew up around hospitals and got to know healthcare professionals as though they were family. The betrayal they feel is deeply personal and the inquiry, while also necessary, tortures old scars for many of them. The victims of the scandal are not only the people who have died or suffered immeasurably as a result of being infected. Those who have cared for and loved those people, and in many cases have lost them, have also suffered trauma beyond imagining.

Graham lived with his sister and her young children in the last years of his life. The deep emotional and physical impact of his loss have been felt through three generations of their family. His sister says:

“Our lives shouldn’t have been like this. They were dictated to by people who didn’t know us. Sorry doesn’t cut it—compensation is the only way that the Government will think twice about doing this again. I am frightened that the inquiry will end and it will all disappear. We need recognition for what has happened.”

There has been widespread acceptance across Government of the wrongs done and the need for compensation, but, as the second interim report outlines, the families who deserve this compensation

“do not yet know the nature of the body who will determine it, how that body will assess and deal with their claims, nor the boundaries of eligibility”.

That delay, on top of years of denial and no accountability, places a further toll on victims, more than 500 of whom are estimated to have died since the inquiry began.

Sir Brian Langstaff has recommended that the compensation scheme must start now. If the Government do not meet that recommendation, they are accepting that more victims will not live to see justice—not only those infected, but their bereaved relatives and carers. While some parents and children will be entitled to an interim payment, it has become apparent that that will only apply to those who lost their loved ones in an arbitrary three-month period between July and October 2022. Do the Government believe that the suffering of families of people such as Graham, who lost their lives so early, is not worthy of recognition?

Graham’s sister Diane went into care work to give back to hospice staff who looked after Graham in the final days of his life. From great tragedy, she has worked to make something good. Today she mentions Graham’s name as often as she can, but she has endured years of suffering, with little support for her and her children other than from an AIDS charity. The Government must let people know how they can get compensation. To Diane, I say that we will follow Graham’s request, “Don’t forget.” Across this House, we will not forget.

1.46 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist); my thoughts and, I am sure, those of the whole House are with the family of Graham, who sadly passed away. We have heard some incredibly moving stories from all hon. Members, and that does not make this an easy debate. I put on record my thanks to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of the House for securing this important debate.

When I got first elected in 2019, one of the very first constituency meetings I had was with Clive Smith, the chair of The Haemophilia Society. We never forget those first meetings. It was just before the period of the pandemic. Clive kindly explained to me all the complexities associated with the infected blood inquiry and I gave him my reassurance that I would do all I could in my role as his constituency MP to raise that case. I am pleased to take part in this debate; it is important for me to put my weight on the Government to ensure that they are listening, not only to me but to all hon. Members in this House.

Some of the most valuable assets that all of us in this Chamber have are our health and our time. Unfortunately, all those who have been affected throughout these terrible circumstances, going back to the 1970s and 1980s, have had both of those valuable assets impacted or removed from them one way or another. Both their health and their time have been taken away from them.

It is important that we understand the number of people impacted through this terrible situation. Around 5,000 people with haemophilia and other bleeding disorders were infected with the HIV and hepatitis viruses through the use of contaminated clotting factors. Some of those people unintentionally infected their partners because they were unaware of their own infection. How must that make them feel? It must be incredibly difficult. Since then, more than 3,000 people have died and, of the 1,250 people infected with HIV, fewer than 250 people are still alive today.

Furthermore, many who did not have a bleeding disorder were infected with hepatitis C as a result of blood transfusions during that period. The best estimates suggest that around 27,000 were infected with hepatitis C, of whom only around 10% were still alive and seeking justice as of 2019. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, those numbers are still declining, which just emphasises why time is of the essence. Those individuals have experienced challenges with education, with the fear factor and stigma associated with going through life, practical challenges in gaining insurance and travel documents, and challenges in dealing with their own doctors.

The inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal was set up after my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) gave it the go-ahead in 2017, when she said that it was

“an appalling tragedy which should...never have happened”

I welcome its first and second interim reports. I hope that the Government accept the recommendations in full.

I will emphasise the key recommendations: each affected and infected person should be able to make a claim in their own right; people should be able to make claims on behalf of the estates of people who have died; and it

[Robbie Moore]

is vital that an award should be made for injury impact, social impact, autonomy impact, care and financial loss. All the different factors of those individuals' lives been affected by those challenges. It is right, proper, fair and just that the Government listen to the inquiry's calls.

The Government's lack of response should be acknowledged as part of any award. Rather frustratingly, it is being reported to me that, even though the report has been issued—I put on record my thanks to Sir Brian and Sir Robert for their work—there is still no clarity from the Government, from whom a better level of communication is required. It is absolutely up to the Government to meet key stakeholders on a regular basis. As I say, the two most valuable assets to us all are health and time. Time is of the essence, and I call on the Government to act with the quickest of speed, because one person is dying from these challenges every four days, and that is not fair.

1.52 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We usually say on Backbench Business Thursdays, "It is a pleasure to speak in this debate", but I do not find it a great pleasure to speak in yet another one on contaminated blood. In my 22 years in this House, no issue has so frustrated or consumed the time of my office, in the hours put forward to support and represent constituents and in our efforts to ensure that they get justice. It is a modern-day tragedy and a health scandal without precedent. It needs now to be urgently resolved, and justice must be delivered for the families and victims of the crisis.

We have now had the two interim reports. We get the full report in the autumn, and we all look forward to seeing it, in the hope that it will more or less conclude the process and, certainly, get the payments established. But things could and should be done now. We know that the compensation scheme could be set up without any further delay, and there is no good reason whatever why it cannot begin its work this year.

The interim report fully covers the inquiry's recommendations on financial redress. The scheme does not need to wait for any more outcomes from the final report. What the process needs is leadership. It does not need any more prevarication; it does not need anybody to tell us that progress has been made. It needs progress and it needs conclusion. The publication of the second interim report served a clear purpose: to prevent, or at least minimise, any potential delays in establishing a compensation scheme that would bring financial justice to the victims who have been denied it for decades.

We have heard that the Government have started to make some of the compensation payments, but those payments cover only a third of the families of those infected with HIV. It is shocking that the scheme is available only to those directly impacted, and their widows and widowers, but not to the families, excluding thousands of victims, including those who have lost parents and children. While the prevarication goes on, people are dying—they are dying weekly. Nine more have died in Scotland since the closing oral submission on behalf of the Scottish infected and affected core participants. That takes the total number of those who have died in Scotland since the inquiry was established to 113.

Given the lack of a clear Government response to the second interim report, Haemophilia Scotland, which is chaired by my constituent Bill Wright and has done outstanding work on this issue over the years, has sent via its solicitors a formal legal request for further rule 9 written statements from Ministers to explain the delay. As the Minister will know, rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 entitles the inquiry to send a further request for evidence, which will usually direct the recipient to the issues that need further to be covered. It is not a requirement, as he will know, to reveal who has received a rule 9 request, but let me ask him: has he received such a request, will he go to give further evidence, and have any of his colleagues received a rule 9 request to revisit the inquiry? It is all a bit desperate that campaigners have to resort to such legal tactics to get the Government to do something. Just do it! It should not have to be pursued via such means.

At some point, we will also have to establish what went so badly wrong at the early point of the inquiry. I have been in this House since 2001. I remember going to debates, speaking to Ministers and tabling early-day motions only to be told a pile of rubbish about what was happening. I was constantly fobbed off and told all the time by Ministers that no wrongful practices were employed. We now know why, from what Andy Burnham had to say about all this in the inquiry. He now accepts that he was given the wrong information by civil servants. He did not seek to mislead me or others in the House. He was given information, and he relayed it honestly and truthfully, thinking that it was right. We have to find out why that evidence and information were put in the hands of Ministers. I actually feel sorry for Andy, and for Ministers such as the current Chancellor, who also feels that he was given the wrong information to communicate to Members of the House. We deserve a proper explanation as to why Ministers stood at that Dispatch Box for all that time, while people were dying, halting the establishment of an inquiry. If one had been put in place at the proper time, we might have had justice by this point.

What has to end is the lack of transparency and the failure to deal properly and appropriately with the survivors, victims and campaigning organisations. That is still, unfortunately, a feature of how we go forward, and it now has to end. Make the payments, include all the families, end the culture of secrecy, and make sure that the process is as transparent as possible. Please, please, bring justice to the victims.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Neil—*[Interruption.]* I call Stephen Kinnock.

1.58 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and don't worry—people have been doing that since I was about 13 years old. You are not the first and I am sure you will not be the last.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member would probably like to know that I remember his father well.

Stephen Kinnock: And so do I, Sir—every single day.

It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), on securing this vital debate. My right hon. Friend and others have campaigned unstintingly for justice for the victims and their families. I pay tribute to her for her perseverance and dedication.

My constituent David Farrugia first told me in 2015 of the absolutely appalling manner in which he and his family had been treated throughout this entire sorry affair.

David and his siblings are part of the so-called fatherless generation. Their father was infected with the hepatitis virus in 1977 and with HIV in the mid-1980s. He died in 1986 at the age of 37, and a week later David went into care, where he remained until he was 17. He was separated from his twin brother for three years and from his youngest brother for 13 years. David was not reunited with his other brothers until 2008 and 2010. They have also lost two uncles to this terrible scandal.

Their story—the trauma of losing their father in horrific circumstances and of ending up separated in the care system—and the stigma they have lived with are deeply harrowing. Sadly, their story is not unique, and many of those affected by the infected blood scandal have similarly tragic stories to tell.

Lord Robert Winston described the scandal as “the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS”, but the scandal and the suffering caused have been compounded by the length of time it has taken victims and their families to receive justice. The wait has had a profound effect on David’s mental health, and yet he continues to fight for justice, like so many others. I pay tribute to David, who is in the Public Gallery today, and to all the victims and their families for their tireless campaign. It has been difficult, but they have never given up.

Let us be clear: this has taken far too long. Thousands have already died, and with each passing day more and more are lost without receiving the justice they deserve. Justice delayed is justice denied, and every day we wait is a day more that justice is denied.

Sir Brian recommended in the second interim report that children of those infected should be admitted into the payments scheme. That report was published in April, but families such as the Farrugias are still waiting to hear about being admitted into the scheme. The Government must act without delay to allow those who are now eligible to receive the interim compensation payments to register with the existing infected blood scheme. Delaying that only prolongs their anguish. Sir Brian has also recommended that an arm’s length body be established to administer the compensation scheme. That work needs to begin as soon as possible, so will the Minister update the House and these families on where the Government are in setting it up and appointing a chair?

Time is of the essence. We simply cannot wait for the final report in the autumn for the Government to respond. Sir Brian has made it clear that,

“The scheme need not await that final report to begin work”, and that,

“The structure of the scheme should be set up as soon as possible, and before the final report of the Inquiry.”

This scandal has caused decades of suffering, health issues, financial loss and stigma for those affected, as we have heard so powerfully from all Members across the House today. The wait for justice has already gone on far too long. My constituents, along with all the victims and their families, deserve better than endless delays. They deserve to see justice delivered, and they deserve to see it delivered now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call Ian Lavery.

2.2 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

“Oh, make it make sense. Please make it make sense.

Oh, why am I still here? Please make it make sense.

Why was it their turn to die? Please make it make sense.

Why am I chosen to continue this fight? Please make it make sense.

Another victim of this scandal dies without justice. Please make it make sense.

Another day of government silence. Please make it make sense.

An inquiry report full of recommendations. Please make it make sense.

Delays from the government. Please make it make sense.

After all, enough is enough. So please make it make sense.

Do we ever trust the powers that be? Please make it make sense.

Will I be another statistic of this greatest of tragedies? Please make it make sense.”

That was a poem written by my constituent Sean Cavens, a victim I first mentioned in this House back in February 2021, and what a personal, powerful and emotional poem it is. It sums up this entire tragedy in just a few words. Mr Cavens has been a tireless campaigner on behalf of those fighting for the justice they deserve, despite the setbacks he has faced over the years. He, like others, feels that he is not getting any nearer the closure of this great tragedy. Many experienced campaigners, like Sean, feel totally marginalised, and they fear dying before the full settlements are made.

When Sean Cavens first came to see me, we had a bit of an altercation. I invited him to come and see me. He came into my office and threw this contaminated blood tie on to my desk and said, “What’s that, Mr Lavery?” I did not have a clue. He said, “What does it represent, Mr Lavery? You’re the MP!” I said, “I’m sorry; I haven’t got any idea.” He said, “The black is for death, the yellow is for haemophilia, and the red is for HIV.” I promise you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I was taken aback by what happened in the conversation following that.

Mr Cavens went on to explain to me exactly what the situation was with the contaminated blood issue and, to be honest, I was a bit ashamed; I had not really taken it on board as a Member of Parliament, and I dare say I would be one of a majority in this House. Once I was fully aware of the situation, I began to educate myself about this absolute tragedy, which has been explained by many Members across the House. It is unusual to see Members across the House share the same views.

Lots of questions have been asked, and lots of detail has been given. The interim payments are positive, but they need to be full payments. Why on earth are people still dying? Why is it that one person is still dying every four days, many of them in receipt of interim payments,

[*Ian Lavery*]

but a lot of them not having received interim payments yet? This cannot happen, man! Minister, it cannot be allowed to happen.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned the rule 9 requests. It would be interesting if the Minister could inform the House who has had rule 9 requests and whether he has received one himself. It has been promised that an arm's length body will be set up. When will that be put in place? Who will be the chairman? Who is leading on this in the civil service since Sue Gray left? That is another question people are asking.

People are dying as we speak—mothers and fathers, uncles and aunties, brothers and sisters, friends and relations—and we need to get a move on. It is time to stop kicking this can down the road and to deal with compensation for the people who have been the subject of this tragedy.

2.9 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I became truly interested in the contaminated blood scandal only very recently, after my constituent Simon Taylor told me about his experience. Frankly, I was stunned by how calmly he told me about his harrowing experiences over so many years. Simon has severe haemophilia A, and was co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C through blood products required to manage his disorder. Some 1,243 people with haemophilia were infected with HIV in the late 1980s because of their treatment through the NHS; my constituent Simon is one of 200 who is still alive. Thousands more were infected and died through contracting hepatitis C in a similar manner. I cannot imagine what they all went through. What happened is a true national scandal.

People with haemophilia lack the protein that makes blood clot. Even minor injuries can lead to bleeding that is difficult to treat. Until the 1970s, those disorders were treated by plasma infusions that had to be given in hospital. That treatment was later replaced with factor concentrate, a new product that could be administered at home with an injection. Factor concentrate involves pooling human blood plasma from up to 40,000 donors. That plasma was often imported from paid, high-risk donors such as prisoners and drug addicts in the US. Just one contaminated sample could infect the entire batch.

Haemophilia can affect many family members, and sufferers often form tight-knit communities. For decades, many young people affected were educated together at special schools. That made the impact of HIV and hepatitis C even more devastating. Sufferers watched as family and friends became ill and died, knowing that they faced a similar fate. Simon served for many years as a trustee of the Haemophilia Society. During that time, six of his trustee colleagues died, as did most of his friends from school.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a lot of hostility associated with HIV and AIDS. Haemophilia became a marker for those diseases. Many haemophiliacs lost their jobs, children were stigmatised at school, and families saw their homes vandalised. As a public spokesperson for the Haemophilia Society, my constituent Simon found his own job under threat from prejudiced colleagues. The society has always been convinced that the disaster

was caused by inherently unsafe practices and processes. The Government recognised the risk they were taking with paid blood and plasma collection. The former Health Minister Dr David Owen committed to UK self-sufficiency in 1975—that is how long this has been going on—but the failure of successive Governments to implement that commitment led to prolonged reliance on dangerous imported blood.

My constituent Simon was lucky: he has largely recovered from AIDS and hepatitis C, and was able to return to employment after his illness, but many did not. So much misery could have been averted if promises were implemented and action taken. The Government have a clear moral responsibility to support and compensate those individuals and their dependants who died or have suffered because of Government failures—we have heard many such testimonies today. No compensation was paid to UK victims of the contaminated blood scandal until 2022. The chair of the infected blood inquiry recommended that interim compensation of £100,000 be paid to everyone currently registered on a UK infected blood support scheme. That recommendation was accepted by the Government, and payment was made in October 2022.

At the time, Ministers claimed that the payment would help to “right a historic wrong”. However, many of those affected by the scandal have been callously excluded from that payment, including bereaved parents and children, who could receive the payment only if the infected person died in a strict three-month window between July 2022 and October 2022. Why have the Government drawn that arbitrary line in the sand? All bereaved parents and children should be treated equally—this is not the time for penny-pinching. Factor 8, which advocates for victims of the scandal and their families, described the Government's actions as a “massive betrayal”, and said that it only compounds the sense of unfairness for affected families. It truly adds insult to injury.

This tragedy still takes lives. Since the Government announced in 2017 that a statutory public inquiry would be held into the contaminated blood scandal, more than 500 people have died, and more will die before the inquiry reaches its conclusions this autumn. We Liberal Democrats propose that the Government act on the recommendations of the inquiry to ensure a just settlement for victims and their families as quickly as possible. After so long, it is time that the Government act without delay to help those devastated by this tragedy. Nobody directly in contact with those affected by the disaster can be left unmoved by the bravery of the survivors. They have fought for justice for so long—they deserve justice now.

2.15 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on the immense amount of work that she has done over so many years; the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley); my constituent Nigel Miller, who is himself a victim of this scandal; and the many others who have campaigned on this issue.

As we know, Sir Brian Langstaff has recommended that the new compensation scheme be set up now, and that work should begin this year. The Government, however, have not responded to Sir Robert Francis's recommendations on a framework for compensation,

which he presented to them 15 months ago. Sir Brian has issued his second interim report, which supports Sir Robert's recommendations with a minor adjustment for the inclusion of hepatitis B and the extension of cut-off dates for infections.

Rather than repeat what hon. Members have said, I would like to quote my constituent Nigel Miller:

"I am frustrated at the suggestion"

by the Minister

"that there is a need for further meetings with the infected or affected for Government to hear our experiences, as this has happened numerous times in the past. Everyone's evidence is on public record and is available as written and oral evidence on the Infected Blood Inquiry website. It is to my mind purely a time wasting measure in order to delay any payments being made."

He goes on to say:

"I and others like me want the UK government to implement Sir Brian Langstaff's 2nd interim report by providing interim compensation for previously unrecognised deaths",

and states that the compensation scheme should be delivered

"by an arms length body which is independent of Government and is centrally funded not funded through the NHS. Sir Brian has said that work must begin now on delivering the interim compensation via the 4 existing support schemes. This is not as complex a task as the Government is suggesting—for example Haemophilia Wales is in touch with the families...across Wales. I strongly feel that there is no need for Government to have further meetings with victims as all the evidence is on public record and this will be used as another excuse to delay and do nothing as has happened so many times before."

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North has said, this is a desperately urgent situation: every four days, another victim dies. Not only do we want the compensation scheme to be implemented as quickly as possible, it should be able to work as efficiently and speedily as possible. I have raised these matters with the Minister before, but I would be very grateful if he could update us on progress on identifying a big enough team of staff—whether through secondment or recruitment—to deliver compensation quickly, providing staff with all the training they need, setting up the processes for the identification and verification of all those who may be entitled to compensation, and setting up the necessary IT systems. We all know the frustration of websites that crash and phone switchboards that are overwhelmed, leaving phones unanswered. I ask the Minister to please do everything he can to speed up the delivery of compensation and ensure that victims and their families get paid compensation as efficiently and quickly as possible.

2.19 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): First, as others have, I pay tribute to the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood—the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson)—for securing the debate. As a vice-chair of that APPG, I thank them for all their work. I also thank my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), a former chair of the all-party group, who set up a meeting last week with groups such as Haemophilia Scotland and the Scottish Blood Infected Forum. I pay tribute to those campaigners, as well as to my constituents Cathy Young, Nicola Stewart and Paul Gallagher, who are regularly in touch with me about this issue.

Sir Peter Bottomley: May I, through the hon. Gentleman, say how important Scottish participation has been to the whole UK campaign? Those involved provided a lead, they have always been there and we are very grateful to them.

Chris Stephens: I am very grateful to the Father of the House for those kind words, and I am sure campaigners in Scotland will be very grateful to hear them. Those campaigners are driving us all on. They are driving us on to continue to fight on their behalf and to continue to seek justice, because they have been met for far too long, in my view, with prevarication, procrastination and delay, and as a community, they have often been subjected, marginalised and ostracised.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member is quite rightly pointing out the Scottish dimension to this. Earlier, I mentioned Mr Robert Ross, who lives in the north highlands, and of course this problem is all over the UK. That is the point. In the four corners of the UK, it is a huge issue, and it matters to people whether they be in the highlands, London or Cornwall.

Chris Stephens: I absolutely agree with that, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing it out. If I led him down another political path, I apologise for that.

I want to make it clear that there are far too many people who have been marginalised and ostracised as the result of this scandal, and that includes those who suffer from hepatitis B. I have had to write to Sir Brian on behalf of the Scottish Infected Blood Forum, because on page 31 of his second interim report, he shows that hepatitis B has clearly been found to be one of the infections passed on by contaminated blood products and should therefore be included in the compensation scheme, but that recommendation did not appear among the actual recommendations of the report. I have written to Sir Brian to seek clarification on that issue, because I believe that clarity should be provided. However, that should not delay what we are asking the Government to do.

Those who either watched or were in the Chamber this morning for Cabinet Office questions will know that I took the opportunity to ask the Paymaster General whether the Government accept the principle of the arm's length body overseeing compensation payments. I see that the record is now up online for those Members who want to view it, and it has the Minister saying that the "Government have not yet" made any final determination on that particular issue. I have to say that I was very disappointed to hear that from the Paymaster General, because I do believe that the principle of an arm's length body to oversee the compensation payments must be agreed today.

There seems to be a suggestion in previous statements from the Government that they are looking at alternative ways of doing this. I hope that they are not going to look at things such as, for example, how they administer personal independence payments in dealing with this, because if that is the way they want to look it—and I will be polite about this, Mr Deputy Speaker—the Government should jog on.

The Government need to agree the principle of an arm's length body. Why is that important? It is important for a number of reasons. We know that there are issues

[Chris Stephens]

to do with death certificates. The Father of the House has raised consistently for a number of years the fact that we know that some people's death certificates do not really reflect what happened, because of stigma and because of other issues. That is something that an independent arm's length body would have to determine. It would have to look at death certificates and those issues.

Such a body would also have to look at the fact that there are people who, as I understand it, have not been getting interim payments because they are in a cohabiting couple relationship. The Government have already conceded this point when it comes to bereavement support payments for cohabiting couples. I know that because I am one of the Members of Parliament who have been pushing for the Government to accept that principle. They have now accepted the principle in law that people can apply for bereavement support payments if they are in a cohabiting couple relationship.

An arm's length body could also determine the issue of carers, which I feel passionate about. We know that there are carers and family members who have looked after loved ones for decades. They have had to give up their careers and educational opportunities, and they had to do that to care for those loved ones. I want a statement from the Government today that recognises the whole issue about carers and those who have had to care for their loved ones.

I am going to make a prediction. I know that is very dangerous in politics, but I am going to make a prediction that we will hear the phrase "working at pace" when the Paymaster General rises to his feet. I already have a £5 bet with another hon. Member on that. Can I say that it does, I am afraid to say, look like a snail's pace, rather than anything else? The fact is that there have now been suggestions that rule 9 requests from the inquiry have been given, as I understand it, not just to Government Ministers, but to the Leader of the Opposition. He may very well have received a rule 9 request on the simple basis that the Leader of the Opposition is in the unique position that he could be sitting on the other side of the Chamber at some indeterminate point in the future. I think the Minister does need to answer the question whether rule 9 requests have been given, because there is a very real concern about Government statements saying they are looking at alternative schemes.

I want to join the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) in asking this question, which seems a very simple one: who is the lead civil servant in the Cabinet Office dealing with this? We know it was Sue Gray, and we know that she applied for some other job and may or may not be in that job, but who is the lead civil servant for Members of this House to contact about what is happening on this issue and where the Government are on it? I hope the Minister will be able to tell us.

I join others in this House in saying that all we are asking for is justice—a simple ask. We want to see those who have suffered through this scandal receiving the justice they so rightfully deserve.

2.27 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of

the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for giving us this opportunity, on a cross-party basis, to have this debate, which is really important—there is much support for this, as we have seen—and for their campaigning work on this issue through the APPG.

As has been apparent from the many debates we have had in this House over the years, the infected blood scandal is a deeply personal issue for constituents of ours. We are all, across this House, saying the same thing today: "Please do not delay, Minister. Please act with urgency lest we continue to compound this massive injustice." I say that for my constituent Linda Ashcroft, who lost her husband, Bill Dumbelton, at the age of 49, after he contracted HIV and hepatitis C from NHS blood products he was given to treat his haemophilia. Bill lost his job at BT because of his HIV status, and lived his final years under a cruel cloud of uncertainty. His death in 1990 left Linda to deal not only with the emotional trauma of his loss, but with a huge financial burden. Linda tells me that, after 33 years, she is still looking for closure. She asked me to relay this to the Minister: "Please do not leave victims begging for compensation—it's inhumane". So please could he hear her?

In the same year that Bill passed away, my constituents the Smiths lost their seven-month-old son Colin to AIDS and hepatitis C. It was a tragic case, which I have repeated often in this place. Colin spent much of his short life fighting illness contracted as a baby from factor VIII blood product, sourced from a prison in Arkansas, with his family having to fight to discover that fact. The indignities that the Smith family suffered beggar belief, from the bullying and abuse of their children to the loss of Mr Smith's employment. Like other bereaved parents, they were excluded from the interim payments scheme. Bill and Colin should still be with us today, and I pay tribute to Linda and to the Smiths. I do not know how such families have maintained such dignity through all of this, fighting for all these years. I am in absolute awe of them. I imagine how we would have felt if any of this had happened to us personally. The best tribute we can pay after all they have been through is to make sure there are no more delays.

It is right that the Government have accepted the moral case for compensation, and not just for those directly infected, but for those affected. We talk about the contaminated blood scandal in a singular sense, but we are really referring to injustices in the plural: the intertwined tragedies of lives lost and lives ruined.

I know the Paymaster General says that he understands and respects the gravity of the situation. We all appreciate the complexities of the long-term compensation framework for victims and know that requires careful attention, but I also reiterate what everybody else has said this afternoon: time is of the essence, and the continued wait for redress just adds to the layers of pain, frustration and injustice that the infected and affected feel.

After all, this is a group of people who have had more than enough experience of waiting. It has been 40 years since the information on the dangers of the contaminated blood products was published, and 35 years since the Government agreed funding for the Macfarlane Trust to assist haemophiliacs who contracted HIV from contaminated blood products. It has been over 30 years since my constituents lost those they loved most, eight years since the Scotland-only Penrose inquiry, and six years

since the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) launched the infected blood inquiry—something for which campaigners had been calling for decades—and next Sunday marks the fifth anniversary of the inquiry officially getting under way.

It has been two years since the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), told the infected blood inquiry that the Government had a “moral responsibility” to address the issues, and a year since Sir Robert Francis produced his study on options for the compensation framework, which was intended to guide the Government in preparation for Sir Brian Langstaff’s final report, but the Government have still not formally responded to that study. We are a now just a few months down the line from Sir Brian’s second inquiry, and I join other Members in urging the Minister to tell us now how advanced the work is and to update the House on whether the Government will respond and accept its recommendations in full, and if so, when.

The Paymaster General has spoken previously about the Government working “at pace” on this. I hope the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is wrong, but we need those commitments and we need to hear them today. I was very moved by the party and the briefing we received today from the campaign groups, and by hearing the campaigners talk about what is decided about them, calling for “Nothing about us is done without us.” That is still hugely important now.

I also echo fellow Welsh Members’ comments about the remarks by Haemophilia Wales. I would be grateful if the Paymaster General acknowledged for the record that although health is devolved, this issue is not, and that it is related to a scandal that pre-dates devolution and therefore responsibility for compensation rests solely with the UK Government.

Reference has been made to the article in the *Daily Mail* about one-off interim compensation payments for people who must have died within a strict three-month period last year. Will the Minister respond to that, too?

Ultimately, with all of the matters discussed today, the key issue we keep coming back to is time—time that is fast running out. More than 500 people affected by the scandal are estimated to have died since the inquiry began, in addition to the thousands of people already lost far too soon. There is simply no time to waste in delivering compensation to surviving victims and others affected. I urge the Government again today to end the uncertainty, end the delays, and act swiftly to do what is right. Victims, families and the British public deserve nothing less.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said when opening the debate that it was about truth and justice—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am sorry but the hon. Lady is out of time. I call the Scottish National party spokesman.

2.34 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), on securing this debate, and I add my

thanks and those of the SNP for the commitment and leadership they have shown on this issue over so many years, particularly through the all-party parliamentary group. It is also right to recognise the considerable personal and professional experience that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) brought to the debate right at the start.

Between 16 Back-Bench speakers and nine different interveners, many tributes have been paid to those who have lost their lives because of the infected blood scandal, and our condolences go to all those who have been bereaved. We have heard many moving stories this afternoon, and that perhaps is one of the most important points to take away: that this is not some abstract policy debate; this is about people, individuals and families whose lives have been completely transformed—often shattered—as a result of this scandal, and for many of whom time is now running out.

The impact has not just been living, and indeed dying, with the consequences of being infected or affected by contaminated blood products; it has also been the fight for justice, which itself has become all-consuming and a life-changing experience for so many people. So we also thank those campaigners, and we must now resolve to make sure that justice is delivered.

Among those campaigners is Joyce Donnelly, one of my constituents in Glasgow North, who is the convenor of the Scottish Infected Blood Forum. Her husband, Tom Donnelly, lived with haemophilia and received contaminated blood products at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a result, he contracted hepatitis C and lived with that condition for 35 years until his death in 2015. Joyce has campaigned passionately and tirelessly for justice and recompense for all those whose lives, in her words,

“were similarly blighted by a disaster that should never have been allowed to happen.”

I also want to thank other constituents who have been in touch and shared their stories in recent years and assure them of my support and solidarity.

When I met Joyce a couple of weeks ago, her frustration—like the frustration expressed by many Members today on behalf of their constituents—was palpable. The forum that Joyce convenes supports many people who have struggled and are struggling to cope with the impact the scandal has had on their lives and their families. We have heard examples of that across the Chamber today: people accused of being alcoholics; the pain and fatigue they suffered as a result of disease; the stigma they have had to put up with; and the survivor’s guilt, which a number of Members spoke about passionately. Now they are looking for justice and compensation before it is too late.

In some cases it is too late: even if the person infected is still alive, they have lived all these years without the financial support that could have made it easier to deal with the effects of their conditions. The interim compensation payments that have been made to many are welcome, but in many cases they are not enough. It is now estimated that around four infected people are dying every week; as my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said, nine people in Scotland have passed away since the interim report was published. So the need for urgent action by the Government could not be clearer, and the lack of action only adds to the frustration, and even anger.

[Patrick Grady]

There is action that could be taken now. Indeed, it is action that was recommended by the inquiry, especially on the appointment and even interim formation of the recommended arm's length body. Everyone accepts that compensation must be paid, so the process of establishing how that will be paid and beginning to compile who will be paid could have already started, even if what or how much they will be paid still has to be calculated. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) articulated that issue clearly.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the light of all the suffering, it is now time to see generosity, not penny-pinching?

Patrick Grady: Yes, that has come through very clearly in all the contributions.

Sir Brian also recommended that interim payments should be made now—not “at pace”, not at some indeterminate point in the future, but now—to recognise deaths that have otherwise not been recognised: bereaved parents and bereaved children who have lost their parents, where these have not already been recognised by an interim payment.

It is also important to recognise, as the right hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and others have said, that ultimate responsibility for this lies at UK Government level, because the infections took place before the establishment of devolution; before control of the health services was devolved.

The Government say that they accept the moral case for compensation, as they should. The current Chancellor's testimony to the inquiry described the scandal as “a failure of the British state”.

Sir Brian Langstaff's report concluded that

“wrongs were done at an individual, collective and systemic levels.”

The Paymaster General has the opportunity to answer some of these key questions today, many of which have already been asked by Members, but which I repeat to make clear that the SNP shares those concerns. When will the Government appoint a chair and interim members to serve on the arm's length body and advisory board that will administer the compensation scheme? What engagement have the Government had with Sir Brian Langstaff since 5 April? Have they been asked for or provided written statements in response to the report? I echo the questions about rule 9 inquiries that my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked.

Where does responsibility lie within the civil service on bringing forward Government action? Has a named senior civil servant been appointed since Sue Gray moved on? Above all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, what on earth does “at pace” mean? The Government keep saying they are working at pace, but Members who have spoken in this debate, our constituents and the campaign groups can see no evidence of that whatsoever. The Paymaster General said again at questions this morning, in answer to my hon. Friend, that it was all terribly complex and the Government had to take time to get

things right, but surely the inquiry was set up in the first place to make those recommendations so that the Government could take them forward without having to do even more additional work?

As Joyce put it to me, people are fed up waiting for jam tomorrow from this Government. Perhaps the Government are worried about the total bill, which will not necessarily go down even if more people pass away, because they will have families who are entitled to compensation. Perhaps they are worried about setting a precedent for future scandals, or perhaps they just do not see this as a political priority. Today's debate should make it clear that this is a priority. The price that our constituents have paid is higher than any financial price that the Government might have to pay. The best way to avoid this being a precedent is to avoid future scandals. The use of contaminated blood was totally avoidable. This scandal should never have happened, and the inquiries have made it clear, and will continue to make it clear, that plenty of lessons are to be learned so that something similar does not happen again. The key lesson from this debate is that people have waited long enough. It is time for compensation and justice to be delivered.

2.41 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this hugely important and timely debate, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and to the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), for securing the debate and for all their campaigning on this issue for so long. I send my condolences to all those who have been bereaved by this scandal.

This has been a powerful and powerfully painful debate. I thank all Members who have made contributions today from both sides of the House. We heard some incredibly moving speeches, putting the stories and lives of those affected at the forefront. So many Members have paid tribute to those constituents and stayed with them. They came to see them one time in a surgery, but those Members are still speaking up for them. We are doing what we can.

The whole theme of the afternoon has been that we want justice now, but I start by paying tribute to the victims and their families, who, while working through their own personal ill health, grief and trauma, have been campaigning tirelessly for justice. Instead of listing the Members who have spoken in the debate, I will list those victims, families and advocates to whom they have paid tribute: to Glen, Nick and Michele; to Sean and Bruce; to Robert and Adam; to John, Mary and Tim; to Rosemary and her sons; to Leigh, Margaret and Barbara; to Gerald, Diane and David; to Graham and Diane; to Clive; to David, his brother, his father and his uncles; to Bill; to Sean; to Simon; to Cathy, Nichola and Paul; to Linda and Bill; and to Colin and Joyce. Those are just some of so many stories, and that is why we are here today.

I give special mention to those organisations that have been campaigning on this issue: the Scottish Infected Blood Forum, Haemophilia Wales, Haemophilia Scotland, the Hepatitis C Trust, the Haemophilia Society, Hepatitis B Positive Trust, the Sickle Cell Society, Factor 8, the Terrence Higgins Trust and all other organisations. If they did not already know it, I want them to know that

we on the Opposition Benches are listening carefully, and we want to continue to partner with them to make sure that justice is done.

I also pay tribute to Sir Robert Francis, Sir Brian Langstaff and their teams for their reports, which have been so instrumental in bringing us to where we are today. I thank the Paymaster General for meeting me and the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), yesterday on this issue. This awful scandal has already needlessly claimed the lives of 3,000 people. Statistics from the Terrence Higgins Trust show that between the start of the inquiry in July 2017 and February 2022, more than 400 people died. In fact, while we await the conclusion of the report and the inquiry, one person is dying every four days. Every day that we delay the compensation is justice denied to those people and their families.

Waiting for that justice and compensation is adding to the trauma and pain of the victims and their families. The continued work of the infected blood inquiry is crucial to ensuring that victims' voices are heard. I had the privilege in March of meeting many victims of the scandal. Their stories will stay with me forever. No one should have to experience the pain and anguish that they have faced and are still facing. For too long the contaminated blood community has been failed—failed by the state in a dreadful way to start with, failed by health workers, failed by successive Governments, and ignored by those who have let the demands of those affected fall on deaf ears, leaving the community without justice. It is heartbreaking that so many members of the infected blood community will not live to see the outcome of the inquiry.

The Minister has agreed that there is a strong moral case for compensation, which is welcome. The inquiry has recommended an interim payment of £100,000 to victims of the contaminated blood scandal and bereaved partners, and the Government have committed to delivering those payments, which Labour also strongly welcomes. However, questions remain about those affected by the scandal, such as family members who have been left out of the compensation scheme. The report of Sir Robert Francis KC on the compensation and redress scheme was published in June last year, but the Government have still not responded to any of its recommendations. Sir Brian Langstaff published an interim report in April this year, which recommended, among other things, that the compensation scheme that is to be set up begin its work this year, and be ready to deliver before the final inquiry makes its report in the autumn, but families are disappointed and angry that there seems to be no commitment from the Minister to respond to that second report until the final report is published in the autumn.

The victims and their families, who are also victims, wait for justice and clarity. The Government could be setting up the compensation body now, taking action to track down and register those infected and affected for future compensation, and looking at ways in which the current scheme for interim payments could be expanded, or whether a scheme could be set alongside it, or how else it might work. The overwhelming feeling of the victims and their relatives on hearing of the scandal is one of heavy hearts, disappointment and anger. We understand the complexities of the scandal and of delivering this process, but I hope that the Minister can

see that many individuals directly affected still feel angry and unrecognised. They need more communication, and above all action.

I will end with more questions for the Minister. There have been many questions that I hope he will respond to today. The Langstaff interim report of April recommends that a publicly funded compensation scheme be set up. How advanced is the work to set up that scheme? Will it be an expansion of the existing scheme for interim payments? Does he agree with the Langstaff interim report that the scheme should avoid legalistic or adversarial concepts of the burden and standard of proof, and not add to the trauma already experienced by victims and their families in the way that it is set up and delivered, and the way that assessments are carried out?

Has the Minister begun approaching people to chair the compensation body? Will he involve people from the affected community in that process, and are additional staff being sought so that the payments can be delivered quickly? Will the scheme be run by an independent body, and will legislation be required for that? If so, will Government time be ensured to enable the legislation to be expedited, so that that is not another reason for being slow? Will he repeat his commitment to start making compensation payments before the next Budget?

This scandal should not have happened. It should not have been covered up. Politicians should have acted. There should not have had to be a campaign by victims, who have had to work so hard to get justice. It should not have taken so long. There must not be any more delays.

2.48 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for bringing this important matter to the attention of the House, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time for a debate. She referred to Glen, Michele, and to Nick Sainsbury, who as she said never lived to see this concluded. She said that it is all about people, and in doing so set the tone for the rest of the debate.

I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position. I have a lot of ground to cover, and I apologise if I cannot be as generous allowing interventions as is always my preference.

The victims of the scandal are at the forefront of my mind on a daily basis. We heard this afternoon the deep and tragic circumstances that led to the inquiry, of which many if not all of Members of this House will be keenly aware, either through personal experience or that of their constituents, of whom we have quite rightly heard a great deal this afternoon. I have the utmost sympathy for the plight of every individual who has been infected or affected.

In March, I met members of the infected blood community, facilitated by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and the Father of the House in their roles as chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. They have been such powerful and effective advocates on behalf of victims throughout the scandal, which left a profound impact. We are all keen to ensure that the process of resolution for those impacted—which has

[*Jeremy Quin*]

taken decades and which so many have not lived to see—is brought, in the words of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), to a fair and equitable conclusion.

The emotions surrounding the dreadful plight of all those caught up in this appalling scandal is vividly apparent in the words said in the House this afternoon. As the whole House knows, the Government have agreed that there is a moral case for compensation. I welcome the publication of Sir Brian Langstaff's second interim report. His wide-ranging and innovative approach, building on the study conducted by Sir Robert Francis, has provided thought-provoking focus for ongoing work on compensation. However, this remains in practical terms an extremely complex and demanding issue that requires a huge focus to resolve. No final decision on compensation has yet been made.

I would like to share with the House some of the complexities that we are working through and the process that we have adopted. In order to progress the work on the issue and to build on the work of officials—including my own permanent secretary who stepped up when the second permanent secretary departed, among others who are devoted to working on this important issue—I established earlier this year and I chair a small ministerial group, to bring together the expertise of different Departments. This small ministerial group enables in-depth discussions with all interested Departments about the Government response.

Members will understand that, due to collective responsibility, I cannot go into the details of the deliberations, but the SMG is an important tool for taking this issue forward. Representation at the SMG usually includes but is not limited to His Majesty's Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care. I appreciate that some hon. Members and members of the communities affected would not wish to see any involvement from the Department of Health in this process. However, I am sure that colleagues will recognise that the DHSC and NHS arm's length bodies hold vital relevant clinical expertise and can bring to bear their direct experience of the England infected blood support scheme. Their insight is invaluable.

Sir Brian's far-ranging report sets out recommendations for compensation that go well beyond what would be expected from the courts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) pointed out. He explains why he has come to that view. The Government have not made a final decision on compensation, but I want to share with the House the complexity of the work in which we are engaged. Just as it is critical to ensure that any scheme works effectively for the victims, the House should expect the Government to work through the estimated associated costs to the public sector. Those estimates have not yet been finalised. Much work continues to be undertaken, but that is work in progress.

In line with the terms of reference, Sir Brian's expert statisticians did their utmost to come to a conclusion on the numbers of those impacted. However, given the sheer complexity of the question and the lack of readily available data, they were still forced to produce a very wide estimated range of potential applicants. I am afraid that speaks to the tragedy itself and the history, of which the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and many others are acutely aware.

Ultimately, the form and the extent of the compensation scheme come down to the decisions that have been made by Government. Sir Brian has helped enormously in bringing forward what he says are his last words on compensation, and I thank him for them. As the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North pointed out, it is unusual to take this route. Sir Brian set out clearly why he had done so. I am certain that Sir Brian's full report will put his compensation proposals into further and—I fear in many ways—deeply upsetting context.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) commented, Sir Brian's preference is for an arm's length body to be established in which the precise level of compensation under his framework would be determined by independent, legal and medical expert bodies. Sir Brian proposes that—I believe this is unique for anything like this scale—the ALB should report directly to Parliament rather than via a departmental accounting officer. While no decision has been made, were the Government to go down that route it would, as I alluded to in my previous statement, be a very significant step. It would also be extremely likely—the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) referred to this—to require primary legislation, although I should also say that the same may well be required for other compensation routes.

Turning to the delivery mechanism of any scheme, the mechanism favoured by Sir Robert Francis's study was an expansion of the existing mechanisms in each of the four nations. The reasons for that are that they have established expertise, they understand the needs of the applicants and they are able to facilitate non-financial support more efficiently at a local level. Sir Brian supports a new single delivery mechanism for the entire UK to prioritise the speed and centralisation of resource for expedient delivery and the processing of applications, an approach very much favoured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) speaking on behalf of his constituents.

Sir Brian recommends a UK-wide arm's length body to deliver one-off compensation payments, with the existing schemes continuing to deliver ongoing support. That would have the benefit of simplicity, protect ongoing support for those on existing schemes and ensure parity across the UK, but it would mean creating a new delivery mechanism. I have raised this issue with the devolved Governments. I recognise both the huge challenges inherent in us all putting on to the established schemes a task hugely more complex and substantial in nature than that which they have previously undertaken, and the difficulties in establishing a brand-new single mechanism. Whatever route is chosen—we are discussing that with the devolved Governments and will continue to do so—I absolutely recognise the point made by the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) that we have to ensure any compensation scheme brought forward avoids unnecessary stress and duplication for the victims who have already experienced quite enough trauma.

Having mentioned devolved Governments, we are mindful that health is a devolved matter. We are committed to working with those Governments to develop an effective response that delivers across the UK. I recently met Scottish and Welsh Ministers and the permanent secretary of the Northern Ireland Department of Health to discuss Sir Brian's report. It was a helpful meeting. We shared a common determination to provide appropriate redress to the victims of infected blood. It was agreed

that we would continue to meet as progress is made. That is not, for a minute, not to recognise the point made by a number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), that this is a decades-long issue that predated devolution by many years, and so the UK has a unique responsibility in coming to a proper conclusion.

The Government have made clear that they want the work to be done to ensure it is ready to respond to Sir Brian Langstaff's final report as soon as possible. I have also made clear that that does not preclude us from making an earlier statement if we are in a position to do so. However, at this stage I want to share with the House and thereby the community some of the complexities with which we are wrestling to come to that fair and equitable conclusion.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware of the case of my great friend, constituent and long-serving councillor Dr David Tibbutt, who lost his wife and his brother-in-law to this scandal. On his behalf, may I urge my right hon. Friend to bear in mind the precedent of the legislation we put through this House in a single day for victims in Northern Ireland? That was a very complex issue which also engaged with devolved issues, but we were able to make progress. Will he do everything he can to expedite the compensation that victims need?

Jeremy Quin: I am aware of the background to Dr Tibbutt's case, as my hon. Friend has discussed it with me. I was not aware of the legislation to which he refers. I would hope that if a conclusion could be brought to bear on compensation which required legislation and space was found for that legislation, it would have the support of the House to seek a resolution. I think today's debate proves that there are so many hon. Members who are keen to bring this matter to a conclusion when it is possible to do so.

There were many powerful contributions to today's debate, with some 16 Back Benchers speaking. I apologise for not being able to cover all the points that were raised. The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) spoke with great emotion, which was matched by many others, including my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Southend West (Anna Firth), and the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock)—he is not his father, but he spoke eloquently—and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) read a powerful and moving poem that one of his constituents had written.

I am acutely aware of the House's interest in the issue. We are all determined to take it forward to make certain that we produce a just and equitable settlement. I am sorry that I am not in a position to say more to the House at this stage, but we will continue to update hon. Members as we go through the work on an extremely complex issue—I know hon. Members recognise that—which, above all, we need to get right for the victims.

3 pm

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. They described so many individual cases, so many lives and so much suffering. The Minister has set out the Government's position, but I respectfully say to him that it is not good enough. He said that the issue is complex—and yes, it is—but putting a man on the moon was complex, and we managed that. It seems to me that real political leadership to get this done is lacking.

As I said in my opening remarks, the time is now. We are not going away, and Parliament spoke with one voice today. It is not good enough; action is needed now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Infected Blood Inquiry.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is with great sadness that I inform the House of the passing of Winnie Ewing. Winnie served in this House after a spectacular by-election win in 1967. She served Hamilton between 1967 and 1970 and was re-elected in 1975 to serve the constituency of Moray and Nairn until 1979. She went on to serve in the European Parliament, where she became affectionately known as Madame Écosse, before serving in the first term of the Scottish Parliament, where she proudly chaired the opening session. She famously said,

“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.”

Since her by-election win in 1967, there has been a permanent Scottish National party presence in this House. To us on the SNP Benches, she was a friend, a mentor and an inspiration. Our condolences go to her children, Fergus, Annabelle and Terry. We will miss her immensely. We will not see her like again.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As one of the people who served here with Winnie Ewing, may I say that the words of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will be echoed by many others?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Winnie was a formidable politician in three separate Parliaments—I do not know whether that is unprecedented. She was a formidable voice for Scotland and her passing will leave a vacuum in the world of politics, not only in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom and, indeed, in Europe. I ask the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) to pass on to her family the deepest condolences of the British Parliament.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that I am the only Member present who served with Dr Winnie Ewing in Holyrood. It was a great pleasure and an honour to know her. On a personal level, she showed me tremendous kindness when I was a new Member, first elected in 1999. I am very grateful for that and I will never forget it.

Local Radio: BBC Proposals

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will be looking for speeches of about four minutes, but I will do the maths while we listen intently to Sir Mike Penning.

3.4 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the BBC to reconsider its decision to reduce local news output from local radio journalism which will have a negative impact on communities across the UK, reduce access to local news, information and entertainment and silence local voices.

I start by asking the House to note that some of our Doorkeepers are wearing regimental medals today, after Mr Speaker granted them permission to do so, for the first time, to mark Armed Forces Day. We acknowledge the service of our veterans to this country and this House.

I say a big thank you to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and to all the colleagues who supported my bid. I was a little worried at one stage about whether we would have enough colleagues on a lovely Thursday afternoon, but the air conditioning is good in the Chamber and bad in the rest of the House. I hope my contribution will be accepted on both sides of the House.

The future, or lack of future, of BBC local radio affects everyone in this House and everyone in this country. Not everyone listens to BBC local radio, even though it has a substantial following, particularly among people who cannot access it through any other source, such as digitally. It is trusted in a way that no other medium is trusted. Local radio, local presenters, local knowledge and local topicality cannot be replicated in another part of the country. In my constituency, BBC Three Counties Radio turns into BBC eight counties at weekends.

The National Union of Journalists had an excellent lobby in Parliament, which I had the pleasure of attending, but this issue is not only about journalists. BBC staff, all the way from junior runners to local presenters, do not know whether they have a job. Some of them were issued with pre-redundancy notices at a really difficult time for renegotiating their mortgage. I was told categorically at the lobby that some people have been told they cannot remortgage when their fixed term runs out because they have no guarantee of a job.

Some freelance presenters were compulsorily moved into the pay-as-you-earn scheme by the BBC, probably because of concerns about IR35 legislation. They had work in other places, but they did not have a formal contract. Given that they were moved into PAYE a couple of years ago, we might think they will get redundancy compensation, but because they have been on PAYE for such a short time, they probably will not get it.

This debate is about the people who need local radio and the people who serve us on local radio. I think the BBC needs to wake up and smell the coffee. There are whole generations of people in our constituencies who have nothing to do with the BBC. They do not watch the BBC and they do not go online with the BBC, but they have to pay the licence fee. Constituents say to me,

“The only thing I listen to is Three Counties Radio, which offers a service that no commercial station offers. Why am I paying the licence fee?” The younger generation, including some members of my family, say, “I’m paying the licence fee, but I don’t have anything to do with the BBC. I have to pay it because, obviously, it is a criminal offence not to pay the licence fee.” I think the BBC is going down a very dangerous road in alienating the core people who want to support it at the same time as trust in the national media is waning.

What will the BBC gain from these proposals? The BBC would say it has to move with the modern world and go digital, but most of its listeners cannot do that. Is the BBC saving huge amounts of money? I was told off by a colleague in this House for naming Gary Lineker as a very highly paid BBC employee. Well, I am going to do it again. He gets £1.2 million a year from the BBC, and he also works for BT Sport and other organisations. That is entirely up to him, but the people we are referring to cannot do that and are not on that sort of salary. This would be loose change out of the salaries being paid to the high-cost presenters. It is not just Gary Lineker; lots of others have high values.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a good point. One thing that grips me about this issue is that so many of our BBC radio reporters, such as those on BBC Radio Solent, which I want to see thrive and not get cut back, have starting salaries of £30,000. It is bizarre that BBC bigwigs think it is okay to have people on serious megabucks at a public institution, while they are making redundant and unemployed journalists who are on relatively low wages, given the importance of the job they do.

Sir Mike Penning: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. This is about people. The way that the human resources people and the hierarchy at the BBC have handled this is appalling for a public body. It is so wrong that people are petrified, and have been for months, about whether they have a job. They are being told, “If you don’t accept the job we are going to offer you, you will be out the door.”

Ofcom has responsibility here. More than 600,000 people took part in the consultation that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport held on Channel 4, whereas Ofcom’s review of the BBC operating licence had 12 people respond to it. I cannot believe that Ofcom believes that that is representation in a consultation on the future of the BBC. I cannot believe Ofcom just sat back on that. It has a responsibility to make sure that the BBC fulfils its obligations to the people who pay the licence fee—a fee they have no choice but to pay.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As Members are fully aware, I hail from the far north of Scotland and once upon a time I was a councillor up there. The BBC was well staffed in those days and I bear the scars of its reporting on me. I did not like it at the time but, by God, that is what local democracy was about, and it was properly reported. That is part and parcel of the way we do things in this country, even as far away as where I live. This cutback will fundamentally undermine proper local democracy in remote places such as the far north of Scotland.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman has hit the nail on the head. Accountability is the key, but we can have accountability only when there is knowledge on the part of the person asking the question. That comes from local journalists and local radio. One reason local radio is trusted more is exactly because, as he said, we get hauled over the coals sometimes. We go on our local radio stations and we say what we think is right, and sometimes we are told categorically, “That’s not right.” Why do they say that? It is because it is their opinion and because they have the local knowledge in that part of the world.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I completely agree with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone); what he describes in the far north of Scotland applies to the south-east of England, in Kent, where Tunbridge Wells is pleased to host Radio Kent. We seek a local democracy in which people make decisions about who is to be their Member of Parliament and who is to be their councillor, but if they do not have the ability to listen to them and see them answer questions, how can they make that informed decision, on which our democracy depends?

Sir Mike Penning: That is the crux of this debate. As many colleagues know, before I came into this House, I was here for many years as head of news and media for the Conservative party. I interacted with the journalists and I was termed a “spin doctor”; that is what I was accused of, probably perfectly correctly.

I interact with my local presenters fairly regularly. I cannot remember the last time a senior BBC journalist did that. They walk straight past me as though I am completely invisible and go on the “Today” programme the following day and say, “This is the view of the Conservative party.” I do not know who they talk to, because they are not talking to me. Perhaps I have got a bit long in the tooth and I should be texting them or WhatsApping them. They do not actually communicate, particularly with the Back Benchers, unless of course they are going to say something completely outlandish that causes their party a load of grief, and then of course they will be on the “Today” programme the following morning. At the end of the day, that’s fine, if I have said something like that. However, I really feel that the only way that can work is if there is empathy with the people who understand what is going on in the local patches of different constituencies around the country.

I had the largest explosion and fire since the second world war in my constituency, just after I, a former fireman, was elected. My thoughts about what went on that day will live with me, and with my constituents, forever. The first people to get on to me were from my local radio station. They asked me, “What the hell is going on, Mike?” I said, “I’ve no idea, but give me 15 minutes. I am at the command centre and I will let you know”. Of course, later on Sky, the BBC and other national broadcasters got in touch, but it was the local paper—which has now met its demise, as have local papers in most of our constituencies—and the local radio station that contacted me first.

As we look at where these proposals will go, we see that it is absolutely imperative that this House sends a message to the BBC hierarchy, as well as to the workers

of the BBC, including journalists, runners and junior people in offices, that we will not tolerate the undermining of local radio in our constituencies.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He mentions sending a very clear message to the BBC, but I would like to take him back to his point about Ofcom. We should also be sending a very clear message to Ofcom. This House expects Ofcom to regulate the BBC and robustly hold to account the management of the BBC for delivering local services. Ofcom has written to the BBC saying that it is not certain that its own rules for regulating local radio are robust and sufficient. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time for Ofcom to stand up for this House, and for listeners and viewers?

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend makes an important point to bring me back to Ofcom. If Ofcom is saying, “Nothing to do with me, guv. We don’t have the power to sort this out,” then this House should do that, because we gave Ofcom the powers in the first place. That is crucial.

I will touch on one last thing. It is not all about whether the schools are going to close or the brilliant work that BBC local radio—and, to be fair, some of the commercial stations—did during the covid lockdowns. It is about the little things that matter in our constituencies.

I put my hand up—I am president of Hemel Hempstead Town football club. We are in the Vanarama national league south. If we do really well, we will be in the play-offs, I hope, this year—let’s keep wishing. We used to have two hours of non-league football on Three Counties Radio on a Saturday—gone. Why would that be? Perhaps they think no one is interested, but it was the lifeblood for a lot of the clubs to tell people where they were playing and who were the new players coming in. Football clubs, like pubs and post offices, are the core of our constituencies. Cutting that programming willy-nilly saves what? The BBC cannot even tell us that.

Why does the BBC not say, “Well, we are going to invest more money—£19 million or so—elsewhere”? I am not really interested in that. What I am interested in is why it is taking one amount of money from a certain core activity to put it somewhere else, when it was doing a frankly brilliant job in the first place. By the way, it is the BBC’s duty, under its franchise, to provide that.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. I want to pick up on his point about what is important to local people. People who live in a rural area like North Shropshire want to know what is happening in North Shropshire. As much as they bear no ill will to the people of Stoke or Wolverhampton, they are not that interested in what is going on there. The lifeblood of every fête, charitable event or local football match is that the organisers can get on local radio and tell people that those events are happening. Does he agree that the local connection is important, particularly for people who live in rural places and cannot access commercial stations, because they do not get a signal? BBC local radio is the lifeblood of those organisations and people.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct; BBC local radio is the lifeblood. Whether it is a football match, or the local schools closing because we have had

[Sir Mike Penning]

half an inch of snow, those are the sorts of things that are really important to local people. I love Norfolk. I go fishing on the Norfolk broads on a regular basis, but I do not think the Norfolk broads area has any synergy with junction 8 of the M1 being blocked. The latter has massive effects in my constituency, but no effects in another area. I am not really interested in their issues; they are not interested in mine. It breaks up the empathy with the community in what people trust the BBC to do.

As well as our sending a message to Ofcom and to the BBC, the motion before the House today, which was carefully drafted with the assistance of the Table Office, is worded in such a way that, if necessary and if anybody in this House objected to it, we could divide on it, so that this House could send that message to the BBC. I hope that we are unanimous and that we do not need to do that, but if we do, we will. If this House does not divide and we unanimously accept the motion before us, that message needs to be heard by the BBC loudly and clearly. It needs to wake up and smell the coffee before the British public say they have had enough of the BBC.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thanks, Mike, for keeping to 15 minutes, so that we can get a few more people in. I have already given forward notice that we will have a time limit of four minutes, so, for four minutes, I call Emma Lewell-Buck.

3.20 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for doing a great job in setting out the details of all of our concerns here today.

I have never made any secret of my love for BBC Radio Newcastle. No matter where I am, I always tune in. My love of local radio is shared by many, not just in the north-east but right across our country, because local radio matters. Many of us struggled through covid. Unlike those making the rules and breaking them, we stuck to them and it hurt us. We missed our loved ones. We cried alone for lives lost and we tried to do our best to help our communities.

The familiar local voices on the radio every day gave comfort, brought reassurance, and connected people in a way that no other medium was able to do, especially when different parts of the country were under different covid regulations. Under the BBC's proposals, I just cannot imagine how radio from 2 pm onwards coming from a different part of the country could have accurately conveyed, at that time, the right information for all the areas that it was expected to cover.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): Local BBC stations such as our much-valued BBC Radio Berkshire are invaluable because not only do they hold local politicians to account, but they give voice to local people who would not otherwise be covered by the national media. I appreciate that the Government have cut funds to the BBC, but does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must give reassurances to the good people of Slough and others in Berkshire that they will not lose out on that BBC Radio Berkshire output?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Just before the hon. Lady replies, let me just say to her that the Annunciator is showing her as representing Westminster North. That is clearly not true, is it?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: That is not me, no.

I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has pre-empted a point that I will make later in my speech.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As somebody who understands the ins and outs of local government, does my hon. Friend agree that BBC local radio, which often takes a much more detailed approach to a problem than other media, is very important to those who want to follow local government decisions? It often provides really good scrutiny—much better, in fact, than that provided nationally.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. At a time when people are losing faith in politics and politicians, it is vital that all voices are heard, not just in this place but in local government.

Disgracefully, the BBC started these cuts during the pandemic, asking more than 100 staff to take voluntary redundancy, stripping back the schedules, forcing all shows to have four-hour slots with solo presenters, and axing specialist programmes. That set the scene for homogenising practice at all local stations, making it easier for the BBC to make the cuts that it wants to make now and merging everything from 2 pm onwards. For the nation's flagship broadcaster to introduce those changes without consulting the fee-paying public is pretty galling.

As a fee payer, I am angry that my views were not sought, but I am angrier about the loss of jobs and talent at the BBC that these changes will cause, and the loss of service to my fantastic constituents. Digital exclusion in the north-east is the highest in England. The north-east is the region with the highest proportion of disabled people, and my area of south Tyneside has the largest elderly population in the north-east, a group who have already been battered by the changes to the over-75s licence fee. Those are the very groups who not only listen to local radio but rely on it the most. When the BBC's director general appeared before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, he said that the changes were "critical for local democracy", but when it comes to the north-east he is simply wrong—these changes are quite the opposite.

The director general also claimed to have empathy with striking staff, yet MPs across this House have heard how disgracefully staff have been treated, how he is presiding over a toxic culture of fear and paranoia and how the reselection interviews related to the cuts in local radio have been embroiled in workplace bullying. Little wonder that in a recent survey, less than one quarter of BBC television and radio staff said they had confidence in their senior leadership team. I pay tribute to those workers, and their union, who have bravely spoken out not just for themselves but for their 5 million-plus listeners—more than listen to Radio 1 or 5 Live.

Local radio employs some of the best journalists we have in the country. Anyone who is in doubt should just re-listen to the disastrous round of interviews that the previous and brief incumbent of No. 10 did last year.

She underestimated and undervalued those journalists, just as their employer is doing now. We are now in a scenario where the BBC is blaming the Government, as its revenue is down from the licence fee freeze, and the Government are simply saying, “Well, that’s up to the BBC.” The reality is that with these changes the BBC is not adhering to its own charter, it is not delivering on contributing to social cohesion, and at the same time—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, but we have so many people to speak.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Sorry, I thought I would have an extra minute.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We did actually put more than that up.

3.27 pm

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): Mindful of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make sure that my remarks show—I hope—an admirable economy.

It is 100 years since the BBC was founded. Lord Reith took on that responsibility in the late 1920s and talked about BBC’s mission to inform, to educate and to entertain. Without the local radio network that we have seen developed over the last 50 years or so, I am afraid the first of his three maxims will not be fulfilled. Without the important network of journalists, supported by the staff to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) quite rightly referred to in his excellent introductory remarks—I thank him for securing this debate—local people will not be informed.

Swindon sits right in the middle of the south of England, between the west of England and south central regions, and it is frankly not adequately covered by television; we are affected by a real dividing line where my community sits. BBC Radio Wiltshire is the only glue within the broadcasting network that links us with the historical country from which Swindon has developed. It is certainly the view of my constituents, and the constituents of my colleagues in North Swindon, Devizes and other local seats, that the loss and denigration of that service will really harm the way local people can access information.

It is all very well talking about digital coverage, and I accept that many of us use online services. However, without local journalists generating live coverage daily by ringing MPs here, ringing councillors or ringing local people and getting them on the show, there will be no material generated to put online. The co-ordination between the generation of live content—particularly for evening drivetime shows, in our case—and its transfer online seems to be being missed in all this.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing the debate. BBC Three Counties Radio is a local radio station, but how can it be local if it is not able to deliver local news? To go back to the point that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) is making, the key thing is that the BBC is effectively getting rid of the local in local radio.

Sir Robert Buckland: I agree. The amalgamation of Wiltshire with Gloucestershire—a vast area—will put us back into the sort of regional miasma that affects the access to local news of the residents I represent.

We have great community radio in Swindon—105.5 is a wonderful community station—and it is doing its best to provide a public service, but the BBC is the public service broadcaster, and its obligation is to get public service right. In the reforms, it has paid lip service to consultation, and the way in which staff are being treated is unacceptable. This is, I am afraid, another example of poor decision making, poor communication and poor leadership from the BBC. We expect better of it. In the delivery of these botched reforms, it is failing in its duty.

3.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Under the banner of “digital first”, 39 local radio stations will have their content dramatically reduced, as we have all heard. Local radio will become regional and national, in many cases, after 2 pm. Now, I am not saying that we do not need digital—I have nothing against digitalisation—but it should not come at the cost of local radio. It is as simple as that.

Local radio has 5.7 million listeners every week, yet no meaningful consultation has taken place, so I have written to the director general, along with many Merseyside colleagues, to say that we are dismayed about the changes that will see weekend breakfast shows shared with Lancashire and Cumbria, which have very different audiences. The original plan also envisaged sharing with Radio Manchester, but it has been decided that Radio Manchester will be able to keep its breakfast show, despite it having fewer listeners than Radio Merseyside. Why? What is the rationale? I do not know, and I do not think they know.

At other times, broadcasting will be either regional or national. That will mean that a significant proportion of Cheshire will not be covered as appropriately and locally as it could be, which is a serious blow to our local democracy and will threaten listener numbers. Some specialist local radio shows, including a dedicated political programme on Friday afternoons, are being axed as well. Listeners are yet to be made aware of all the changes, which include the replacement of a popular local presenter who has excellent ratings by someone who is potentially less experienced.

We believe that local radio programmes provide a valuable service of information and companionship in communities, and that millions of people need to continue being served locally. Local radio is a lifeline for news and education, mitigating rural isolation—I know that—and supporting people’s mental health. It is a great incubator for new talent and one of the crown jewels of our public sector broadcaster. We have to protect it.

We are very concerned that those plans are being pursued without appropriate consultation. I have had a letter from the BBC since the announcement, but I did not receive one before—talk about putting the cart before the horse. We are asking the BBC to consider its approach and ensure that there is proper local consultation.

On a personal level, I was on BBC Radio Merseyside last Friday talking about an issue close to my heart: the air ambulance service, which helped my late daughter. We had a great 10-minute programme on what it means to our community, and we would not have had that

[Peter Dowd]

were it not for local radio. I would not have had the chance, as a father, to make the case for it. That is what local radio does, so it has my full support. Those journalists do a fantastic job, and they need the support of every single one of us in this Chamber.

3.33 pm

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): BBC local radio is unique. In the multifarious and busy media landscape we have today, it is very rare to be able to say that. Nobody else in the market provides what BBC local radio does. We have BBC local TV, but it is regional. It provides a very good service, but the difference between TV and radio is that in radio—again, this is unique in the media landscape these days—we can have long-form, detailed conversations. We do not have to think about the number of characters we use. We are not asked to answer a question in 15 seconds. We can actually have proper, grown-up conversations, and we can be challenged as public servants, whether that is us in this place or councillors. It is the lifeblood of impartial local broadcasting, and we do not get that anywhere else.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) said with reference to Three Counties Radio, which serves my constituency too, doing that requires the people on the ground with the time to be on top of very local issues—for example, those at Wycombe Hospital, which I discussed on Three Counties the other day. Without those people, it will never be local.

Lia Nici: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In these days of flexible working and working from home, and with the technology we can now use with radio, local radio can be unique in how it works.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) organised a meeting with the director general of the BBC the other week, and I gave him a really hard time. My background is in television, video and radio, and I have to say that with the changes being made, I do not believe the BBC is particularly committed to local radio at all. Yes, it is still committing to local radio from 6 am to 2 pm, but I looked at the BBC site through the link that was sent to us with our briefing, and it says that BBC local radio has a 15.5% reach. Other media organisations would kill for a 15.5% reach. My local station, Radio Humberside, has a higher reach than that, at 16%.

It worries me that 58% of local radio listeners are over the age of 55, and 48% are in C2, D and E socioeconomic groups. That means they are unique to the places that feel they have been left behind. We talk about levelling up, but if we want to do that, we should make sure the BBC has to level up and keep our local BBC radio services. Once we have lost it, we will no longer see proper democratic reporting.

The BBC says that it is taking on 130 new local journalists, but it is all for digital. My concern is that digital and print media, in the old sense, do not have to be impartial, and people may not understand that. Public sector broadcasters have to be impartial, and we need to make sure that the BBC does not become any more partial than it is starting to become.

My worry is that the majority of my constituents who listen to local radio and feel that it talks to them are going to lose out on hearing their own news. For people who are visually impaired, elderly or cannot get out very often, radio is a lifeline. I am pleased that so many Members are here to talk about this, because I feel passionately about it, and the BBC needs to be made to stop.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On the topic of elderly people, 8% of my residents in Southend West are over 80, and for them, our local BBC Essex radio is a lifeline. We know that younger people consume media online, but 35% of the over-75s do not consume their news online, so does she agree that this policy is directly discriminating against the very people who actually support the BBC?

Lia Nici: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. Unless we are really good at working with digital, it is quite difficult to find our local radio station. Podcasts, BBC Sounds and all these things are really difficult for the exact people in BBC local radio's target reach.

I would like to say a big thank you to my local presenters, in particular David Burns and Andy Comfort, who have been fantastic. We do not talk about this, but for people who do not get out much and want to listen to their local radio, hearing local voices is so important; there is a sense of familiarity and a feeling that they know that person. The BBC seems to be losing those presenters who are exactly the right demographic to talk to the people who are listening. Yes, we want to bring on young broadcasters, but they are not the right demographic for their target audience, so I would say to the BBC, "Please listen. This is vitally important. If we lose any more of local radio, it is going to be a desperate situation for our constituents."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): If Members do not take too many interventions, I think we can go to a time limit of five minutes.

3.40 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate, and on his excellent opening remarks. I absolutely agree with what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) has just said. I share Radio Humberside with her, and we are committed across the Humber: all 10 Members of Parliament representing the area covered by BBC Radio Humberside support that radio station and value it. We know that it is rooted in our community, it works all year round and it is indispensable in emergencies. As a number of Members have said, the local BBC is more trusted than the national BBC.

I will concentrate on the proposal to end local radio at 2 pm on weekdays and at weekends. I see that as part of a process: it seems like the next lot of cuts are already in train. Why is that? We know that the linear radio medium is not dying due to inevitable technology-driven trends; it is a deliberate cull, a decision on behalf of the BBC. There are still 5.7 million BBC local radio listeners, spread fairly evenly throughout the day, and Radio Joint Audience Research listening figures show that

59.4% of BBC Radio Humberside's audience listen on FM. Only about 0.4% listen via BBC Sounds, and 8% listen on smart speakers.

BBC management are using the damaging effect of the previous lot of cuts on ratings to justify this next set of cuts. With 95% of the local radio audience listening from outside London, these cuts would mean a more London-centric and metropolitan BBC. We know that commercial radio will not replace BBC local public service radio, and that downgrading local news adds to the growing news desert problem. In addition, as a number of Members have said, there has been no impact assessment of the effect of those cuts on the 34% who are digitally excluded—the poorer, the lonely, the over-50s, those with disabilities, and those in rural and coastal areas. Digital services cannot replace live local radio, and linear radio provides most of the content for digital.

I also want to say something about BBC staff and to pay tribute, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby did, to some of the employees in Radio Humberside who have already left. That includes David Burns—Burnsy—a popular morning presenter who has gone already. BBC staff have felt humiliated, patronised and bullied by this process. Well-known local presenters are going, but we are apparently bringing in presenters from other regions, which just seems ridiculous. The BBC points to a 30% fall in income since 2010, but the BBC is a very large organisation. It can save on management costs, for example, including management costs within the £117 million BBC local radio budget.

So what do we want from the BBC? I fully support the motion before us. We want the BBC to halt this calamity now—to open up its finances to independent scrutiny, see what efficiencies can be found to protect services and develop digital, consult local radio staff on their ideas, hold a proper public consultation alongside an impact assessment, and invite axed local radio staff such as Burnsy to return.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I wonder whether the right hon. Lady, the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, shares the surprise that I feel when looking at the BBC's briefing for this debate. It says that it is creating 130 additional local journalist posts, and that as part of those posts it will create a new network of 70 investigative journalists across England. I can see the value of investigative reporting, but when people such as the excellent staff of BBC Radio Solent have to go on strike over the threat to their jobs, is that the right priority that the BBC should be following?

Dame Diana Johnson: I very much hear what the right hon. Gentleman says. What I value about local radio is that it holds me to account. It is already investigating what local councils are doing and what local MPs are up to, and I think that is the value that many have talked about today.

Just to conclude, if the BBC thinks again and halts these cuts, we will work together as parliamentarians to protect local radio and to support the BBC. I hope that W1A is listening to this, and that it is not just SW1A listening to this debate. I know that constituents in Hull who live in HU5, HU6 and HU7, and in other postcodes across Humberside, feel at the moment that that they are losing a friend with these cuts to the BBC.

3.45 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), and I think I agree with every word she said. This is a classic debate in which we find Members of all parties coming together to make the same cause, because it matters so much to our constituents and is so important.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on bringing forward this debate. More specifically, I congratulate him on the very well-worded motion we are debating. I reiterate his point that, even if we do not divide on the motion, it needs to be read and taken seriously by BBC management. This set of proposals would silence local voices.

The proposals would also be detrimental to the BBC's work as a public sector broadcaster on equality grounds. I question whether the BBC has ran proper equality tests on the impact of what it is doing. I recently joined blind campaigners outside No. 10 Downing Street to present a petition on this issue, which was also presented at BBC headquarters in W1A, and I do not think that has been responded to in detail by the BBC. Local radio stations are trusted voices, which are trusted by our constituents because they are local voices, and they are also trusted by people who miss out on digital and people who are isolated, lonely and living on their own, whether for reasons of disability, age or digital exclusion. These are audiences that the BBC should absolutely be going out of its way to serve.

We have heard about proposals for timing changes. The BBC will say that it is keeping local radio for the most important part of its listenership and the most popular part of its readership, but that misses the point. If we take away the journalists who are covering news for key periods of the day, we will lose key local content that does not then find its way to digital. We all know that events in our constituency—whether political or educational, or about volunteers doing great work—do not just take place between 7 o'clock in the morning and 2 o'clock in the afternoon. In fact, most educational stories are likely to take place during the afternoon when people have more time to talk about them. A lot of politics takes place later on in the day and feeds into the evening shows. These are the things the BBC should be paying attention to.

The BBC should also be paying attention to its staff. I have rarely been one to speak out in favour of strikes, but I have to say that I have every sympathy with members of the NUJ who have been striking and protesting, because they have not been consulted and have not been listened to. In fact, local journalists who work incredibly hard, and who are a key pipeline for future talent into the BBC nationally, are not being listened to in this space. I think that absolutely needs to change.

Talking of listening, the BBC says it has listened on some of its regional proposals and changes, but from a Worcestershire MP's perspective, it has actually made things worse. It was originally proposing to put together programming from Hereford and Worcester with programming from Coventry and Warwickshire. That, from a Worcestershire perspective, is difficult—it would not necessarily be as local as it was—but vaguely understandable. The BBC has changed that now, and

[Mr Robin Walker]

has taken away the idea of combining us with Coventry and Warwickshire. It is now suggesting combining Hereford and Worcester with Shropshire, Staffordshire and Stoke. My constituents do not feel that the news in Stoke is terribly relevant to them, and I am sure my Stoke colleagues would feel likewise. I agree with what the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) said about the genuinely local content of what local radio can deliver and the huge importance of that. With the best will in the world, her constituents are better served by BBC Radio Shropshire and my constituents are better served by BBC Radio Hereford and Worcester.

There is much more I would like to say. I have discussed in previous debates the importance of BBC local radio at times of crisis, such as times of floods; my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead referred to the fire in his constituency. We need that coverage through the day; we need those local voices through the day. I urge the BBC to sit up and listen and make sure that this motion is taken seriously and we keep that very valuable part of the crown jewels of public service broadcasting, BBC local radio.

3.49 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): May I break it very gently to the House and those following the debate that not everybody listens to Radio 4 or the World Service? As mentioned by many previous speakers in the debate, lots of people depend in many ways on listening to local radio. Local radio is extremely popular in this country, a reminder of our pride in our robust local characters and in local heritage, history and traditions.

I was born in the north-east; I believe it is like nowhere else in the country and it should be celebrated rather than ignored and piled in with the rest of the country as if we are just one big blob. Most speakers have said that people in their regions want to hear the local news of relevance to them told to them by people with the same accents as them. They want to hear about what is happening on their high streets and the local weather—what it will be like tomorrow? People do not want to know what the weather will be in Southend when they live in Newcastle upon Tyne or Northumberland, where I live, where it is misty all the time. Basically, we are being misled. We need to make sure we get this right. The BBC must listen, for heaven's sake, and understand the value of the crown jewels of local radio, as it has been described.

The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) mentioned that non-league football plays a huge part in people's lives. People cannot put on Radio 4 and find out how Ashington or Bedlington have got on. It is fantastic for people when the local radio station has reporters with the same accent as them telling them how the different clubs and teams are doing in the different parts of the region. That is invaluable.

It is good to listen to fantastic journalists with skills and knowledge of their own area telling us what is happening in politics. It is great to be interviewed by people who understand us and who press us on the local issues. It is great in the morning to get a phone call from Alfie Joey from Radio Newcastle asking if I will come on and talk about this, that and the other. It is essential; it is what people want.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned that we in the north-east have a huge issue with digitalisation. Of course we do; people in the north-east still call the radio "the wireless." Not everybody uses wi-fi. We have to remember that.

A lot more can be said, but I have fond memories of Radio Newcastle. I remember when my mother used to make the Sunday dinner in the morning to feed seven of us. There was a programme called "Sing something simple", and we once rang up and said, "Can you give a message to our mother on Mother's Day?" and Radio Newcastle gave a message to her. She was absolutely past herself; she said, "If I had known my name was going to be on the radio, I would have got my hair done." That is how much it meant to my mother.

In conclusion, we have some fantastic reporters and fantastic journalists, and the way they are being treated, bullied and intimidated by the BBC is not acceptable. The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) suggests that he supports the strikes; I am going to invite him on to the picket line. He cannot deny it; he will have to come. We hope that the BBC will reflect on the fact that local radio is the people's radio.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We look forward to seeing Mr Walker on the picket line.

3.55 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Times are changing—often at a rapid pace—so I can understand the rationale behind the BBC's plans. However, I am worried that its proposals have not been properly thought through, have not been fully researched, consulted upon or scrutinised, and risk isolating particular groups and communities that the BBC is obliged to serve. It is in that context that I make the following observations.

My first point is that if these proposals go through, at certain times Radio Suffolk will share content not only with Radio Norfolk, but with Radio Cambridgeshire, Three Counties Radio, which covers Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and Radio Northampton and Radio Essex. The total population of all those counties is higher than that of Denmark and they cover an area three quarters the size of Belgium.

Secondly, it is necessary to bear in mind that older people are often living on their own without advanced digital skills. For them, local radio is a vital link to the outside world. In many respects, the need for such a service has been reinforced and restated by the covid lockdowns. The need to meet the needs of older people is very much relevant in East Anglia, where we have a particularly high proportion of older people living in the region.

Thirdly, it is vital that policy changes of this nature are subject to a rurality test to ensure that they do not unfairly impact on those living in rural areas, such as Suffolk. It is also important to highlight the role that BBC local radio has played at times of emergency and crisis. On the night of 5 December 2013, a storm surge hit the east coast of the UK. Radio Suffolk, led by presenter Mark Murphy, played a key role in keeping local communities and those responsible for co-ordinating

support and rescue services informed about the progress of the storm surge down the Suffolk coast. The information provided may well have saved lives and prevented injury. It was a spontaneous and local decision by Radio Suffolk to alter its programming to provide that service. It has been suggested that local newspapers can take on this role, but it should be pointed out that many of them have embarked on the same journey that the BBC is now pursuing of moving their services on to digital platforms.

My final point is that it is important to emphasise that the BBC is not the only provider of local radio. East Suffolk One is emerging as an exciting new local radio station based in Lowestoft and covering the Suffolk coast. However, it is currently constrained from growing and developing by not being able to broadcast on a DAB frequency, by poor local DAB infrastructure, and by a time-consuming, bureaucratic and expensive commercial radio licensing structure. On 29 March, the Government published the draft Media Bill, which has the objective of reducing the regulatory burdens and costs on commercial radio stations. There is now an urgent need for this Bill to start its progress through Parliament, and I would welcome an update on the Government's plans when my right hon. Friend the Minister replies.

In conclusion, I urge the BBC to pause and review its plans, and I ask the Government to liaise closely with the BBC to ensure that its proposals fit in with and complement a properly co-ordinated local media strategy.

3.59 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for his excellent work in securing the debate. I thank right hon. and hon. Members from across the House, and I agree with many of the points they expressed. I declare an interest as somebody who was once a local newspaper journalist and is still a member of the NUJ. I commend its excellent campaigning work on behalf of BBC staff over this matter.

I will briefly cover three things: the nature of the modernisation, the importance of radio as a medium, and a call for a rethink by the BBC. On modernisation, it is important that we all acknowledge that change is sweeping through the media. Sadly—I experienced this myself many years ago—there has been huge change already in print, not all of it positive. We have to accept that there will be an element of change; the question for the BBC is whether it can manage that change effectively, and how it protects and preserves the unique value of local radio as it changes and modernises its services. I am in favour of better online coverage, but I do not want that to be at the expense of local radio, which is a hugely important local medium.

I will make a quick plug, as did the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland). Large areas of the country are already poorly served by other BBC media, such as local television. In our part of central southern England, we have suffered for many years from a lack of Thames valley-based TV coverage in the same way that Swindon does—yet Reading is the second-largest urban area in the south-east of England. We want the BBC to look more broadly at its coverage across the country in different media.

My residents would be very badly affected by the proposed cuts. We are used to having BBC Radio Berkshire, which as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said is a much-loved county-based station. Almost all the content is local, but sadly it looks like it is being cut to only 48% local content from across the county. Exactly the issues that other Members have mentioned apply to us. We potentially face the ridiculous situation where commuters on the M4 near Windsor will be listening to a drivetime programme shared with people near Banbury, which is practically in the midlands. *[Laughter.]* Sorry—that is the local view from our part of the world. Local radio needs to be local, and drivetime and other programmes need to be truly local, as people said earlier.

I will briefly mention the importance of radio as a medium. As people said earlier, it is a much-loved companion and a comfort to people in need, people who are isolated in rural communities, and other people who are perhaps disabled, elderly or at home on their own. It is a wonderful medium, particularly for older residents. It is hugely valued and should not be forgotten.

I will briefly pay tribute to all those who work on our local radio. As was said earlier, it is very far from the glamorous world of Radio 4. It is utterly unglamorous. It is doing shifts early in the morning and late at night, and going to local fêtes and local events, but it is essential for local communities across the country, wherever they may be, in the many diverse parts of this wonderful country. Let us hope that this wonderful service can continue far into the future. I urge the BBC to rethink, to get out of its ivory tower, and to listen to local needs.

4.3 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this timely and necessary debate. As others have said, I hope that the BBC is listening. A few constituents in my time have told me that I have a face for radio, so I have been particularly grateful for BBC Radio Devon. It has given me an opportunity to talk about local issues and—perhaps more importantly than projecting what I think—to hear from local people and local businesses about the local issues in and around Devon. I stand here on behalf of all Devon MPs, because we all share the view that the cuts, and the decision to make these changes, are outrageous, and we need to ask the BBC to pause.

I pay tribute to some of the extraordinary radio presenters in Devon, from John Acres to Michael Chequer, David FitzGerald, Pippa Quelch, David Sheppard and Toby Buckland. Last year, we lost one of our great radio DJs in Gordon Sparks, who was a lifelong Argyle supporter. He ended up using the radio to talk about that local football team to such a level that he had a lifetime of followers, and when he died there were extraordinary tributes to him across all of Devon.

This debate is not just about the presenters but about the extraordinary production teams, who work tirelessly to ensure that we are up to date with local information. I cannot express how important that is in enabling us to do our jobs well and accurately, and to be challenged and scrutinised. Representing the issues that people care about in our respective constituencies in this place is made all the easier by the existence of fantastic local radio services.

[Anthony Mangnall]

Just a few weeks ago, my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), who cannot be here today, took the director general Tim Davie to task. He asked about the consultation, and the director general's response was, "We are always talking to people." That is not a good enough answer when making such extraordinary cuts. I have only one request of the Minister. If the BBC will not do a fully formed consultation, we must ask it to do one, so that we can see the impact and motivate our constituents to recognise that what they hold dear may well be taken away from them.

We have heard from hon. Members across the House about the purity and the necessity of the local. Localism is important to us all—we talk about it nearly every day, in every speech and on every topic. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) spoke about the merging together of Gloucestershire and Wiltshire—exactly the same is happening between Devon and Cornwall. I do not need to tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the rivalries between Devon and Cornwall will only be exacerbated if the merger goes ahead. Joking aside, how does a Devon and Cornwall service ensure that we can report on local events, local news, local problems and local businesses that are suffering in myriad ways? It does not provide what we are asking for, and it certainly does not provide the service that people are asking for.

If an element that people contribute to through the licence fee is to be taken away, why are those people not being engaged? It is perfectly legitimate to ask people, "Are you happy with this service being removed?", and to engage and consult them on that. The idea of having all-England reporting in Devon and Cornwall over the weekends does not fill me with joy.

A couple of colleagues from different parts of the House made the point that those in the BBC who are extremely concerned about the moves were faced with gagging orders—an inability to speak out when faced with losing their jobs. I cannot understand how a public body has been allowed to behave in that manner and to remove a service, all the while restricting its own employees from speaking out about it. They have called me and colleagues across Devon about these issues. We have all spoken about it together and we are utterly appalled by the BBC's behaviour. The BBC must modernise, of course. No one says that it should not change, and there are ways in which it should, but it must retain its heart and soul. To me, its heart and soul is local radio.

4.7 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate.

Having engaged with constituents and those impacted by the change who have been supported by their trade union, the NUJ, and having met regional and national management, my clear conclusion is that BBC local management has failed in the process and in the decision. It has failed to consult and it has been insensitive to listeners and staff—this shameful episode has left them ignored and hurt. The BBC must apologise. All this for the sake of less than £200,000 across the whole of North Yorkshire—25p per person, or tuppence a month. The BBC could more than fund that from its licence fee. If the BBC saw itself as social prescribing—which it

is—that would be value for money. However, licence fee payers have never been asked. I say to the BBC, "Never forget who you are there for." I say to Ofcom, "Do your job."

In writing to the BBC, Ofcom highlighted that over-65s would be impacted the most. Why is that okay? It is not. The House clearly believes that older members of our communities—the frailest and the most isolated—matter, although I have to say that the Government have not helped by taking away free licences for older people. Ofcom went on to say,

"We question how shared programming which will cover such large areas will still be relevant to audiences."

Ofcom has to act. It is not a bystander but a regulator. With more people becoming isolated and 9 million people experiencing loneliness, having a friend—that reliable voice just down the road—matters. My goodness, it matters. Through covid, we learned what many people live through every day of their lives. That local connection is the thing that makes us belong. It gives us value, identity and hope. That has now been stolen.

This debate it is not just about community interest. Power, politics and decision making are shifting away from the Westminster bubble to local areas: not to Yorkshire, but to North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire—each one distinct. The new area will cover a distance of 150 miles. That is the length of a quarter of the country, so do not tell me that that is local. Digitalisation is all about diversification, not centralisation. The BBC local teams around the country understand that, because they are not in the London BBC bubble but integrated and immersed in our communities with their listeners. Well BBC, today we are here to speak up for our communities, so stop laughing at us and start listening.

In writing to the BBC, Ofcom expected the "BBC to review the impact of its changes to local radio in England as they are implemented to ensure they are meeting audience needs".

How can it do that if it is not talking to its audiences—audiences who are never consulted and never included? There is no baseline. In 2011, BBC local failed to consult its audiences on its "Delivering Quality First" proposals. However, it was ordered to and it must be ordered to again.

As for the presenters, many are very experienced, at the top of their profession and choose to remain in local radio because they care more about journalism, their communities and telling real stories than following the circus in Westminster or climbing the tree in London. They have been put to the test. The process determined that those journalists had to make demo tapes and talk about themselves. How utterly humiliating. Some just walked and we lost brilliant people from BBC Radio York's family, notably Jonathan Cowap and Adam Tomlinson. I pay tribute to them today and trust that they will be back once this charade is behind us. Whoever thought up such a crass, insensitive process has no idea how to run a people-centred service. It is not a gameshow; this is about livelihoods and careers. It is not good enough for the BBC to just press on. It has got to stop.

The BBC breaches its responsibilities, ignores its listeners and insults its employees. With a 93% loss of confidence in the director general, it is seriously time for those responsible for this fiasco to consider their future. I say to Ofcom, "Do your job"; to the BBC, "Sort this out"; to the Government, "Act"; and to all who work in BBC local in York and beyond, "Solidarity".

4.12 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I fully support the motion and I call on the BBC to reconsider this incredibly poor decision to cut news output locally. I wrote a letter to BBC bigwigs about the plight of BBC Radio Solent and I am glad that seven other colleagues from across the House signed it. Instead of cutting back local BBC coverage, we should be investing in it and expanding it. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for this incredibly timely debate. It is a privilege to be a part of it and to listen to some great speeches. I want to make three points and I will do so relatively briefly to make sure that all Members can get in.

Despite representing just 3% of the BBC's total spend, local radio reaches 5.7 million people every week, which is an extraordinarily high figure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) pointed out, it shows significant reach. It also shows very significant value for money. BBC Radio Solent, for example, covers 1.9 million people across the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and Dorset. Like many other BBC local radio stations, it broadcasts to a relatively large audience at, as I said, relatively low cost. I would also make the point that it is already an amalgam. In a perfect world, we would have our own BBC Isle of Wight, as we do not share that much in common with Dorset. What on earth we will share with Oxfordshire news-wise I do not know, because it is 100 miles away and on the mainland. We cannot have a further regionalisation of so-called local services.

The cuts will affect £19 million of spending, against a licence fee of some £3.8 billion. For me, local radio is entirely the wrong thing to cut and the wrong place to start a reorganisation of services, especially when we consider two of the BBC's major costs. First, people always complain about its bloated management structures. There seem to be people on six-figure salaries whose purpose at the BBC is unclear, at a time when we pay junior BBC reporters just over £30,000 a year. The BBC has not got its priorities right in any way, shape or form.

Secondly, as is already well-known, rich people earn between £400,000 and £1 million a year from our national broadcaster. If they want to earn more money working for Sky or ITV, that is fine—they are commercial stations and can choose the market rate they want. I do not think that BBC audiences understand why some of those people are paid so much money when those who work for the BBC's heart and soul—its local radio—struggle to get by on modest salaries.

I know my local BBC reporters, such as Peter Henley and Emily Hudson. I do not always agree with them, but I respect their integrity and the fact that they really care about the places they represent. They live there, and what happens in their communities in the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and Dorset matters to them. One of the BBC's strong points is that it still cares and that local BBC reporters who serve their communities have a passion and a drive to report what they see as the truth about the workings of the council, the NHS and their MPs. They even report what happens in dull planning committees because they take the bread and butter of democracy seriously. Long may that continue.

We need to invest much more in local BBC. It seems me that one purpose of paying the licence fee is not to fund Gary Lineker's lifestyle, but to pay for a few more

£30,000 or £40,000 journalists from Southampton or the Isle of Wight to do a good job covering what happens in our area. Like others, I have written to the BBC—I thank my seven fellow Solent Members of Parliament. I hope we get an answer from the bigwigs and that they will reconsider. I hope that the Minister can impress on Ofcom the need to get a grip of the situation, because what is happening is wrong.

4.17 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I am secretary of the NUJ parliamentary group, and I thank all Members who came to the lobby and briefing with the NUJ a few weeks ago. It was a very successful event. I also thank all those who have offered support and joined us on the picket lines. I welcome the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) to revolutionary syndicalism. It has been interesting to see that conversion.

It is depressing for most of us who are advocates of public sector broadcasting to have to come back to this debate so often. There is genuine anxiety among many staff that we are seeing a whittling away of local radio services so that eventually BBC management will prove the point that it wants to prove: that the services are no longer supported and therefore unnecessary. It will then close them down altogether. That seems to be the strategy: to make the service unsustainable, cut by cut.

As a London MP, I will talk about services in London. Radio London produces 133 hours a week. That is being cut to 85 hours. That represents a cut from 79% to 51% in our local output. Industrial action has meant that we have won some gains in London. We are keeping the London afternoon show from 2 pm to 6 pm, but the rest will be combined with Kent, Surrey and Sussex. To be honest, that is not good enough. As everyone is saying, local radio should be truly local, which means it should be locally produced.

London needs a specific service due to its range of ethnic diversity, its differing levels of affluence and poverty, and the scale of its vulnerable audiences. In all our discussions with the broadcasters, we have made the point that local radio is not just about news; it is about companionship as much as anything. There has been no acknowledgement in our discussions with the BBC of the digital divide, which has been brought out by the data. People are angry that this has been driven through without consultation, as the director general admitted in front of a Select Committee.

We have talked a lot about presenters today, and we all have relationships with our local presenters—good, bad or indifferent—because they rightly hold us to account, but there are many more people behind them. There are producers, production assistants and others, many of whom are on even lower wages that the union has been arguing for some time are unacceptable. Since the announcements, management has told some of these people that they will not know their future until October. A sword of Damocles has been hanging over their head for nearly a year, which has had an impact on people's wellbeing and mental health, as evidenced when we met staff.

If Members remember the briefing session, they will know that what staff find really insulting is the argument that this is all about a shift to digital. These staff do digital, with no help from the BBC. A lot of the time, these people trained themselves on digital so they could enhance their programmes and provide the BBC with a

[John McDonnell]

range of services. Many of the staff found it completely disingenuous and, actually, insulting when Tim Davie, Jason Horton and Rhodri Davies argued as if they were archaeological exhibits who do not provide the digital services of the future.

Sir Julian Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman is making such a strong case that the House deserves to hear an extra minute. Does he agree that, in our 26 years in the House, it is hard to think of an occasion when the House has been more united than on this cause? Does he agree that, although the Minister will inevitably point to the independence of the BBC in policy terms, the Minister can nevertheless perform a useful role in taking a message to the BBC that the House feels immensely strongly on this matter?

John McDonnell: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely valid point, although I do not think I need the extra minute. We all respect the BBC's independence, but the BBC should reflect the community it serves. What has come out of all these debates is that, on this particular issue, the BBC has belligerently ignored the views of local communities. Members of Parliament are meant to be the voice of our constituents, and we are saying with a strong voice today, and the motion says it all, that the BBC needs to think again, on behalf of our communities, on behalf of our constituents and—I say this as secretary of the NUJ parliamentary group—on behalf of the staff who have served the BBC well over the years.

When we met the staff who came to the lobby, I was moved by how many of them have long service and how many of them have dedicated their life to the BBC. They love the service they provide. I caution the BBC that the strikes will be back if it does not listen, because the staff are not going to sit back and take this. At the same time, it is interesting that there has been overwhelming support within our communities for industrial action. Our communities agree with the staff. Where else can they go? What else can they do to save this service when the BBC is not listening? Let us hope the BBC will listen to this debate.

4.24 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I am deeply disappointed that the BBC is continuing with its plans to cut local radio services for my constituents, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this important debate.

BBC Radio Essex is a hugely trusted and valuable resource for my constituents, not only because it reports the news and travel news, and deals with so many local issues, but because of the source of comfort that our local radio provides, as has been said by so many Members. I would go as far as to say that the voices of Sadie Nine, Sonia Watson, Ben Fryer, Simon Dedman and Andrew Sinclair, and those of our sporting commentators, Glenn Speller, Dick Davies and Dave Monk, are some of the most trusted voices in our county. Those people also do a fantastic job of holding me to account.

We have talked a lot about local radio being a lifeline and a comfort, which it undoubtedly is, but our local radio, BBC Radio Essex, also does so much work for charity and so much community building. It is about

not just the fantastic local radio shows, the interviews and getting people on, but the extra things it does. One highlight of my past 16 months in this place has been the Christmas lights being switched on in Southend, and that was hosted by BBC Radio Essex. Thousands of people were out enjoying themselves and having a fantastic evening as a result of its hard work. Our local radio hosts the “Make a Difference” awards, where it celebrates community heroes all around the country. It also does its everyday work in raising money for incredible charities, such as those we have in Southend, including the Endometriosis Foundation, Prost8 UK and the unbelievably amazing, award-winning Music Man project, among so many more.

The thing I wish to stress is how important our local radio stations are in enabling people to enjoy our local football teams. With these services stopping at 2 pm, many people will not be able to follow the fortunes of Southend United, which are on the way up—

Sir Mike Penning: No they're not!

Anna Firth: They will be, I assure Members of that; we just need more people listening and more people supporting. It was such a pleasure for me to hold a centenarian tea party and have 100-year-old Annie Maxted telling me what a fan she is of Southend United. At that great age, she is glued to the radio—apart from when we took her to watch in person. That was an incredible afternoon; she was glued to what she was seeing through the window and understood a great deal more than I did. The point is that these people cannot go online and watch it live, so radio is key for them.

I have talked about the importance of our local radio to the elderly and how ludicrous it is for the BBC to be excluding its best audience, the one that is the most loyal and loves it the most. I also want to mention how important our local radio is to our disabled and partially sighted community, of whom I wish to mention one brilliant example—our blind campaigner Jill Allen-King OBE. I have talked about Jill many times in this place. She is now in her 80s, but she has been a BBC Radio Essex fiend ever since she went blind on her wedding day more than 50 years ago. On a Saturday night, she is a regular listener and she regularly calls in, and she is now a regular guest, as she campaigns for more guide dogs, so that the 1,000 people in the country who are still waiting, as she is, for a new guide dog can have one. For the Jills of this world the radio is an essential resource and it should not be removed.

I conclude by going back to the fact that the BBC was founded on the principles of informing, educating and entertaining people, as we all know. BBC Radio Essex is the very epitome of all those principles. My constituents need a local radio station that is relevant to their lives, and I urge the BBC to reconsider its proposals, recommit itself to providing a service for the very people who deserve it the most—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. To give the Front Benchers 10 minutes each, we need to stick to the time limit of four minutes.

4.29 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this popular debate. Local radio matters.

It matters for community, for inclusion and for democracy. We all know that it is a foolish politician who underestimates local radio journalists and their ability to hold power to account.

As we have heard from other hon. Members, local radio matters particularly in the north-east, where we have the highest figures for digital exclusion in England and where there is a strong sense of local identity, with local culture embedded in the lives of all my constituents. A 2021 Institute for Public Policy Research report estimated that 40% of the north-east population has no or a very low level of digital engagement. Local radio is a vital way for many people to get involved and be informed about many aspects of public life.

For many, local radio is also a source of connection, crucial to combating loneliness and instilling a sense of local community. We must not forget that point about loneliness. It is really important that we work together to address that issue, and not to make it worse. We have heard from others how important it is to local people that they have that local radio connection.

Some 92% of over 55s listen to some form of radio every week, with around 5.4 million people listening to BBC local radio weekly. Those figures tell a tale about those who rely on local radio for news and companionship. If that is to be stripped back, it will have a dire effect for all those listeners. It is the BBC's intention to cut up to 50% of its local radio output across 39 stations in England. Clearly that fails in representing the values that those 5.4 million listeners look for in their local radio content.

Briefly, I want to talk about the issue of "local". In the north-east, there may be a debate between Tyne and Tees for people's local radio preference, but having that very local knowledge is important to many people in our communities. I know that from my own experience.

The question of accessibility has also been raised. Local radio is a great way of communicating. People who are blind or have other disabilities may find it very difficult to use new digital services. I worry that that has not been taken into account and needs to be looked at.

As we have heard, the changes bring about casualties among our fantastic local presenters, who are being pitted against each other and, frankly, being treated badly by their employer as they look for alternative jobs. They are being given the impossible task of competing against each other and facing uncertain circumstances. The story that local journalists and staff have told us is that there has been a managed decline by the BBC. I commend all those local journalists who are taking action to support their local station.

Others have mentioned the role of Ofcom, which has been calling for the BBC to better resonate with viewers and listeners. It is important that the BBC looks again at those provisions. I urge the Minister to work with us to get the BBC to pause this plan, and engage with the public on the restructure through the consultation, which has been sadly lacking.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We have to move on.

4.33 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It will come as little surprise that I find fault with the handling of this situation by the BBC. I always seek to look to the good,

with the glass half full, and to find a solution. However, the decision by the BBC hierarchy to remove local services in a cost-cutting exercise, while continuing to pay BBC stars exorbitant amounts of money, is not something that I can agree with. I speak not just for myself as a licence fee payer, but for the vast majority of my constituents when I urge the BBC to rethink this decision. I will give a Northern Ireland perspective and add to the chorus of others who have said the same.

I am on the record as having major issues with the enshrined BBC bias—from Brexit to Northern Ireland, the BBC had it all. I could literally stand here all day—I will not do so, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I know that I have only four minutes—raising my concerns about the BBC's lobbying on single-minded narratives, and its pushing of an agenda that hurts victims and justifies the unjustifiable, but that is not what this debate is about.

There have been occasions when the BBC has made mistakes, such as when its staff have refused to name Northern Ireland appropriately in events, or even to display our flag. Sometimes they even say that our flag is the tricolour—it is not; in Northern Ireland our flags are the Union flag and the Ulster flag, and sometimes they seem not to understand that. Its coverage of the 12 July is disgraceful. That is one of the biggest occasions in the year—it is coming up now—but the BBC cannot give it the coverage it should get; it gives it just a snippet.

The reason for this debate is simple. Gary Lineker gets £1.35 million a year, Zoe Ball gets £980,000, Alan Shearer gets £450,000, and Stephen Nolan gets £415,000. At the same time, 36 staff at the local Foyle Radio will lose their jobs as a result of these cuts, which will save £2.3 million, with further redundancies expected next year. The combined audience for BBC Radio Foyle and BBC Radio Ulster is almost 470,000 people a week—equivalent to 30% of Northern Ireland's population. That is significant and should not be ignored, yet we find it is.

Clearly the likes of "The Nolan Show" will draw bigger audiences than Radio Foyle, but I believe there is a duty of care to the smaller programmes, to ensure that local people have a local voice and not simply a Belfast voice. It seems that the light of the BBC has dimmed to such an extent that we will hear only the narrative of the big hitters, such as Stephen Nolan or William Crawley in Northern Ireland, or Gary Lineker. I agree with local BBC staff that cuts should first be made to the pay brackets of senior management—those stars that I have been referring to—before entire programming is cut.

We talk about marginalisation and diversity, yet the first response to diminishing fees is to scapegoat local broadcasting, rather than rightfully looking at why people are turning BBC radio shows off and choosing instead to listen to GB News or other shows. It is not solely because young people are listening to podcasts; it is also because those who were listening to the BBC have determined that the only time they hear their views on the BBC is when they are being ripped apart by commentators. I say that from a Northern Ireland perspective. Clearly there is an issue to be addressed.

In conclusion, people now have a wide range of choices and it is clear that the voice of the BBC is no longer drawing the crowds. This will not be rectified by closing the smaller local stations that appeal to local

[Jim Shannon]

populations. Serving the people may be the only way of rebuilding trust in the BBC, and this decision will certainly not build that trust.

4.37 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Today's debate has illustrated the power, benefit and importance of local radio across the UK. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on opening the debate so powerfully. He was absolutely right when he said that local radio is trusted like no other.

To see that in action, we need look no further than Radio Sheffield. There are so many examples of how this is done. There was an interview this week with Tomekah George from Sheffield, who designed one of the special stamps issued by Royal Mail to mark the 70th anniversary of Windrush. Then there is Toby Foster, who held Sheffield City Council to account on the tree-felling inquiry. This week, Sheffield City Council issued a full and unreserved apology, which was covered on "News at Ten" on Tuesday evening. But for years it was Radio Sheffield that was holding the council to account and providing a voice for concerned residents. That is the powerful role that it plays in local democracy—from helping to force an important policy change to interviewing Barnsley's youngest councillor, Abi Moore, who was elected to serve the Dearne South ward at the age of 20. Then there are the super local traffic updates, such as on the recent roadworks on Summer Lane in Wombwell. This is the local granular information and content that my constituents in Barnsley find invaluable.

The changes that the BBC have proposed put such content at risk, potentially marking the beginning of the end for local radio altogether, as the NUJ has warned. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) rightly paid tribute to the hard work of the NUJ in representing workers. He also rightly pointed out that there has been little attention paid to the digital divide, a point echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist).

It has now been eight months since the BBC announced its intention to reshape those crucial services so that content on local radio stations is regionalised after 2 pm and on weekends. In that time, despite appeals, strikes and multiple debates on the Floor of this House, the BBC has shown no sign of pausing to assess that approach. Instead, it has repeatedly insisted that those reductions, alongside a boost to online services, are the right thing to do.

It is in that context that I join my colleagues from across the House, on behalf of our constituents, in urging the BBC to finally look at the true cost of the plans and to reconsider its decision. Of course the BBC is rightly both impartial and independent, but we are elected to this place to give voice to the concerns of our constituents, and that is what everyone in this debate has done, right across the UK, from Great Grimsby to Kingston upon Hull, Worcester, the Isle of Wight, Southend West and Strangford.

The BBC's independence should also not keep it from making decisions that are informed, transparent and in the interest of our communities. It is one of the BBC's public purposes to reflect, represent and serve the diverse

communities of all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, yet when proposing the changes to local programming that would directly threaten the delivery of that purpose, the BBC has failed to consult any of the communities that would be impacted, as the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) rightly pointed out. I echo the calls he made in his speech.

Likewise, the BBC remains unable to present any assessment of the impact of the changes. The National Federation of the Blind of the UK has directly requested the BBC's equality impact assessment and the public value test regarding the plans, but the BBC said it was exempt from sharing them. As a public service broadcaster, funded through the licence fee, the BBC owes more to the public on how and why such decisions are made about its programming, particularly when they disproportionately impact marginalised groups and those with protected characteristics. It is largely older people, those with disabilities, the lonely and those who are digitally excluded who will be heavily impacted by these changes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said.

It is important that the BBC listens directly to those people, and I would therefore like to share some of their stories today, starting with Sarah from Leicestershire. Sarah is visually impaired and says that the changes to local radio would isolate and exclude many visually impaired, blind and disabled people such as her. Sarah is fortunate to be able to access the internet and is comfortable using technology, but if the text on any given website is not spaced properly—as she claims it often is not on the BBC website, despite the BBC's insisting otherwise—her text-to-speech function does not work, leaving her to describe the pages as not accessible in any shape or form. BBC local radio is therefore an essential information service for Sarah and it was vital in protecting her during the pandemic—as many others said, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

Like Sarah, Annette, who is a volunteer for the charity Gig Buddies, said that many disabled people cannot or do not want to access information online or using digital devices. They just want to be able to tune in through their FM radio, which often has accessible buttons and switches rather than touchscreens, at any time of day and hear local community information. Neil from Dronfield is blind, housebound and suffers with a head injury. He says that his local radio station, BBC Sheffield, is extremely important to him for accessing information and hearing local accents each day. As it stands, the BBC is looking to take that away, with nothing to offer as a replacement. For people such as Neil, Sarah and Annette, there is no alternative.

For others, such as Angela in London, local radio has long provided companionship that simply cannot be replaced. For a few years, she says, BBC Radio London was her only entertainment and, for several months, her only communication. She speaks so powerfully about the experience that I would like to share it with the House, saying, "I heard no other human say my name other than when Jo Good or Robert Elms read out an email I'd sent in. Local radio has the power to make another less alone, to have your voice heard and to feel part of something when the world has forgotten you." Angela also says that the presenters felt like her friends and that there is an innate intimacy about hearing

discussions about her local area and the streets that she and those before her grew up in. Clearly, truly local programming means something to people such as Angela—something that the BBC fundamentally failed to grasp when announcing the changes.

The changes to local radio are also having a profound impact on the BBC's workforce, with roles in audio teams reducing by more 100. As well as the loss of experienced talent and local knowledge from forcing out radio presenters and producers, the changes will also see a key pipeline for broadcasting and journalistic talent cut off.

Members across the House—the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), and my hon. Friends the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell)—have expressed concern about the treatment of workers by the BBC, and I add my voice to theirs.

Local journalism is a fragile ecosystem. The BBC plans to increase digital output in place of local radio, but that will put undue pressure on the system, as I have said in this House before, by providing unwanted competition to local papers and other media outlets that are, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, already struggling to stay afloat. That is not to mention the significant impact on local democracy: local radio currently holds councillors, MPs and national politicians to account in a way that no other outlet can.

While Tim Davie, the director general of the BBC, describes loyal local listeners as only “13% of the population”, we recognise that 5.4 million people are not a fringe group but an important audience made up of people who do not have an alternative way of accessing their community or local news. That is what the BBC has failed to understand: people truly value and need their local radio. These changes are the thin end of the wedge in taking it away. Once local radio is gone, it will be gone.

This debate has shown that there is strong feeling across the country that the BBC should think again about its decision, or, at the very least, pause and review it. It seems that the only person who thinks it a good idea is the director general himself. My local paper, the *Barnsley Chronicle*, quoted staff who described the BBC as either ignorant or arrogant. The fact that it has come to that stage is a reflection of how poorly this whole situation has been handled, and it is an incredibly sad state of affairs.

I hope that Tim Davie has listened to the calls and contributions made today. If he will not listen to our constituents up and down the country, I hope that he will listen to Sarah, Annette, Neil and Angela, all of whom rely on their local radio. I hope that he will listen to the representatives of his hardworking staff who are facing cuts and redundancy. I hope that he will listen to the charities that are concerned about the lack of local consultation and disability impact assessment. The director general can convince himself all he likes that his decision is the right one, but I am afraid that everyone else thinks he is wrong.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the Minister, may I say that Mr Speaker and I share Radio Lancashire, an excellent local radio station that we value greatly for the reasons we have heard in this excellent debate. No pressure, Minister.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Shame it's Lancashire, though.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for calling the debate. It is the second time that he has invited DCMS Ministers to participate in a debate on the BBC and local radio in the past year, and I thank him for his commitment to revisiting this important issue.

The fact that we have heard contributions from Hemel Hempstead, South Shields, Bootle, South Swindon, Great Grimsby, Kingston-upon-Hull North, Worcester, Wansbeck, Waveney, Reading East, Totnes, York, Hayes and Harlington, Southend West, Strangford, New Forest, Watford, Isle of Wight, Slough, North Shropshire and Blaydon shows the nationwide concern on this issue. I am taking this debate on behalf of my colleague the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale). I know that he is incredibly passionate about local radio, and he rightly made the point during our last debate on this topic that BBC local radio is an essential and widely trusted information service, and it is hugely valued by a large number of listeners.

We recognise the strength of feeling about the importance of BBC local services—it would be impossible not to do so after this debate—and the concerns raised about the impact that the planned changes will have on audiences, many of whom rely on local radio programming for news and entertainment. Many Members have spoken about its importance to local democracy.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way and apologise for not being here at the start of the debate—I was in a Bill Committee. I agree with Mr Deputy Speaker that BBC Radio Lancashire is at the heart of our communities. We have well-known and well-loved presenters in Mike Stevens, Stephen Lowe and Graham Liver. A key thing—one that the Minister has just mentioned—is audience engagement with the presenters of shows. The staff are all key. The BBC do not seem to be doing very well at ensuring that there is consultation.

Stuart Andrew: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It has come across strongly in the debate how much local communities value their local services and how much we, as Members of this House, rely on that service too. I am glad she made that point.

Ministers at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have consistently made clear to the House that we are disappointed that the BBC is planning to reduce its local radio output in England. We are also disappointed that the BBC has announced proposed changes to its radio output in Northern Ireland, to which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred, including cuts to BBC Radio Foyle, which is a vital part of Northern Ireland's media landscape.

Since our last debate on this in December, the BBC has also announced cuts to BBC Scotland, including the opt-out services in Shetland, Orkney and the highlands and islands. We remain clear that, while it is up to the BBC to decide how it delivers its services, it must ensure that it continues to provide distinctive and genuinely local radio services.

Lia Nici: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: I had better carry on, because of time; sorry.

Since the BBC's announcement, Ministers have met the chair of the BBC board and the director general to express our shared concerns. The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), has made clear that the BBC must continue to provide distinctive and genuinely local radio services, with content that represents communities from all corners of the UK. She has also emphasised that we expect the BBC to consider the views of this House when it makes the decision over whether to proceed, and we are committed to raising this issue again with the BBC's director general.

The BBC has heard loud and clear Parliament's views on these changes. BBC executives appeared before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in December last year to answer further questions on the impact of the planned changes, particularly for staff and audiences. The issue was explored again just last week by the Committee when it invited the director general to come along to talk about it. I welcome the important role that the Select Committee is playing in this area.

As Members have highlighted, one of the crown jewels remains the 39 local radio services around England that reach 5.8 million listeners a week. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said, BBC local radio provides a service to our constituents and communities that commercial radio cannot provide. It brings communities together and plays a vital role in reflecting local experiences. As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington highlighted, BBC local radio has a track record of providing a reliable source of local news on which all our communities depend. Indeed, BBC local radio is a lifeline for many older people, particularly those living in rural areas, and it is a conduit of important information in times of emergency, which is part of its public value.

There have been some changes since the BBC made its initial announcement. It says to us that BBC local radio provides vital companionship to many listeners, and that remains a central part of its plan. The BBC has reassured us that audiences will continue to find presenters and programmes that can understand the issues that shape their lives, reassure them in times of crisis and comfort them if they are lonely.

Since its initial announcement in October last year, the BBC has confirmed to us that all 39 BBC local radio services will continue to be entirely local from 6 am to 2 pm each weekday. Outside those hours, the BBC will share some programming across county boundaries. All stations will retain the ability to break out of shared programming and respond to breaking local news stories, including extreme weather conditions and public health emergencies. It says that live local sport will be protected and all existing local news bulletins will remain. However, I have heard the many examples raised by Members today and will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Minister responsible for media, tourism and the creative industries has those at his disposal at his next meeting.

The BBC says that it has listened to feedback from audiences and Members of this House over recent months and adapted its plans in response to what it has heard. In response to feedback that some of the areas

proposed for programmes are simply too large, the BBC has added additional programmes on weekday afternoons, weekend breakfasts and weekend daytimes. It has also confirmed that it is reprioritising around 10% of existing local spend from broadcast to online. Using that redeployed funding, the BBC says that it will open up 130 additional local journalist posts across England, which it believes will strengthen its local online news services across 43 local areas, with new services launching in Bradford, Wolverhampton, Sunderland and Peterborough. Again, though, I have heard many of the points that have been raised, and I will make sure that they are relayed.

On the role of Ofcom, the BBC has acknowledged that it made mistakes with regards to the handling of communications around planned service changes. We are very clear that we expect the BBC to be far more transparent with audiences and the Government about changes to its content and services. That is a requirement in the BBC's updated operating licence, which came into effect in April. We expect Ofcom, as the regulator of the BBC, to robustly hold it to account, especially in the delivery of its mission and public purposes. Ofcom has set out what it expects the BBC to do in reviewing the impact of the changes and meeting the audience's needs, and is commissioning new research to understand audiences' needs and the value they get from these local services. As the Minister for Equalities and for loneliness—areas I have great passion for—I will certainly pay further attention to this issue.

The BBC's recent decisions do appear to fundamentally impact important BBC local services, particularly BBC local radio, which is an essential part of its public service remit. It is right that this House continues to scrutinise the BBC's continued provision of local services. We all agree that the BBC has been entertaining and informing us for 100 years. We want it to continue to succeed over the next century in a rapidly evolving media landscape, and are clear that BBC radio has a significant role to play in that success. In light of the concerns that have been raised in this debate, the BBC needs to clarify how it will manage the long-term tensions involved in modernising and becoming more sustainable while maintaining its core public service function and output. Although I recognise that the BBC faces difficult decisions in reforming its services and becoming a digital-first organisation, today's debate has highlighted the concerns shared across the House about the BBC's proposals to reduce its local radio output.

I stress again that the BBC is independent from Government. It is for the BBC to reflect on the concerns that have been raised about its proposals, in this debate and elsewhere. I thank all Members for their contributions today and for an enlightening debate, which has even seen my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) think about joining a picket line.

4.57 pm

Sir Mike Penning: This is what Parliament is about. On a Thursday afternoon, Parliament has come together on a motion to tell the BBC that what it is doing is wrong. It has been very enlightening. I will join my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) on that picket line—as a member of the Fire Brigades Union, I have been on many.

The point we have been trying to make is that this weekend, when I was in Corton, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous),

and the road was flooded, I would not have known that had I not had BBC Radio Suffolk on. Similarly, if my bins were not collected in Hemel Hempstead this weekend, my hon. Friend's constituents would not be the slightest bit interested. It is the localism that matters. The motion before the House is not just "We have had a chat"; I hope that in a moment, we will have made a formal decision on a motion on the Floor of the House. If colleagues in the House want to disagree with the motion, we could divide, but if it goes through on the nod, that cannot be ignored by the BBC. The BBC is independent of Government, but it is not independent of this House. This House created the mandate for the BBC to exist, and it cannot ignore the motion that is before the House today. If it does, it will be at the BBC's peril.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the BBC to reconsider its decision to reduce local news output from local radio journalism which will have a negative impact on communities across the UK, reduce access to local news, information and entertainment and silence local voices.

PETITION

BUPA Dental Care York Facility

4.59 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of York and North Yorkshire. At the end of next week, York's third largest dental practice will close. That is going to impact on 6,200 patients, 4,200 of whom are NHS patients. Residents of York are already waiting seven years to get an appointment for dental care, and this will exacerbate matters considerably. I am therefore pleased to present a petition on behalf of 127 of those impacted by the changes as the BUPA Dental Care facility in York is due to close. The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call on BUPA to stop the closure of the BUPA Dental Care York facility and provide adequate dental care to residents in the area."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of York and North Yorkshire,

Declares that the closure of BUPA Dental Care York facility on 30 June 2023 at 5 Station Business Park, Holgate Park Drive, will affect the dental care of 6,200 patients including 4,200 NHS patients which receive an excellent level of dental care in a friendly and supportive environment; further notes that this closure has been met with opposition by the residents of the area; further notes that current waiting lists for NHS dentistry in York have risen to 7 years.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call on BUPA to stop the closure of the BUPA Dental Care York facility and provide adequate dental care to residents in the area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002840]

Professional Rugby: West Midlands

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I see that a couple of Members here are doing some overtime.

5.1 pm

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to debate Government support for professional rugby in the west midlands. Last year, I secured what was almost certainly the most closely watched Adjournment debate I have ever had to raise concerns about the dire situation at Worcester Warriors rugby club and to ask Ministers to intervene. I do not propose to detain the House by repeating all the points I made in that debate about the huge value of that club to the community I represent, its passionate following and the role it has played in bringing families and generations together, but all that remains as true today as it was then. It is still the case that locally there is deep hurt about the threat to a key element of the late great Cecil Duckworth's outstanding legacy to the city. The difference now is that we do not currently have a professional men's rugby team in Worcester, and that is a matter of great concern to me and to thousands of my Worcester constituents. I remain as determined as ever to bring back professional elite rugby at Sixways, and to see the name Worcester Warriors back at the forefront of rugby union in this country.

Along with the Warriors, we have now seen more of the greatest names in English rugby union enter administration—Wasps and London Irish. In the context of this debate, it is worth noting that the west midlands has gone from having a choice of two teams in the rugby premiership to having none. The only remaining professional rugby union side in the west midlands is Coventry in the championship, and the sustainability of that league is being questioned almost daily.

That is not to say that rugby or even professional rugby is dead in Worcester. It is worth celebrating the ongoing success of the Warriors women's team, and the remarkable band of local businesses and supporters that have come together to keep them going. It is fantastic that the Warriors women remain in the top flight of women's rugby—the Allianz Premier 15s—and their victories over the DMP Sharks and Loughborough Lightning and the draw against Harlequins attest to the fact this remains a brilliantly competitive team. I am hugely grateful to Cube International, EBC, Adam Hewitt and others that have made that possible through their sponsorship, and to the brilliant Jo Yapp and Josh Payne, who held things together amid the most difficult circumstances imaginable to ensure that the team could first return to the competition in November last year and then secure its place for next season, as was announced in March. I congratulate the entire team on the example of resilience and true Warriors spirit that they have shown.

That we had a stadium for the Warriors women's team to play in, and that this team and the men's team survived the pandemic at all, was partly thanks to the vital support that the Government provided to get sport in general and rugby union in particular through the pandemic. In talking about Government support for professional sports, it is worth noting that without the

[*Mr Robin Walker*]

£600 million sport survival package overseen by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, £88 million of which went to premier rugby clubs, very few clubs would have survived that generational challenge. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge that, in its aftermath, there remain very significant challenges to overcome.

I do not have time in a short Adjournment debate to run through the whole saga of mismanagement and the journey to administration that we have been through, nor to go into the detail about the very different situation, with the same tragic end result, at Wasps. What is clear is that the financial model of professional rugby union is going through a period of profound challenge, and it is vital that the regulators of the sport show that they recognise the extent of this and take rapid action to address it.

I welcome the commitment that the Rugby Football Union made in the aftermath of Warriors and then Wasps going into administration to keep both academies going and to run them as two different streams going forward. The Warriors academy is a really important organisation, with a fantastic track record of producing international players and some valuable links in local education—many of which I have spoken about in education debates. To be sustainable in the long run, however, it needs a professional club to feed into.

I recognise the pressures on the RFU to treat clubs equally and to stand by the precedents it has set, but I am deeply concerned that its decision in the case of both the Warriors and Wasps that the only way back into professional rugby is to go all the way down to the bottom of the amateur pyramid is self-defeating. It risks removing the prospect of professional rugby from large areas of the country, most notably the west midlands, and disincentivising investment, which is vital in meeting its ambition of growing the game.

Investors who are keen to make a commitment to professional rugby are likely to be deterred by such a long journey to get there, and it seems bizarre that in rugby union—unlike in almost any other sport or sector of the economy—new investors who want to take a business out of administration are treated in the same way as related parties to those who took it in. I query the logic of the RFU's position that any club that goes into administration should henceforth be treated as a phoenix. Most of us with experience of the business world would understand a phoenix situation to apply when, and only when, the former owners of a business or related parties to them seek to bring a business out of administration, but the current RFU guidelines require any new investor, even when they have no relation to the previous ones, to spend a long period in special measures and with extra supervision. A level playing field for supervision and greater transparency with the regulator is absolutely right in professional rugby, and the saga of the Warriors under the previous ownership very much demonstrates the need for it, but I worry that in creating extra hurdles for new investors to take a club forward and provide the investment to keep a club in professional rugby, the RFU is shooting itself in the foot when it comes to the sustainability of the professional game.

The requirement to go all the way down to the bottom of the amateur pyramid has resulted in the loss of some great names from professional top-flight rugby

before, but never before has it denuded a whole region of its premiership representation. With both Wasps and Worcester out of the top flight, we face exactly that.

In the case of Worcester, there is an additional challenge in that we have a strong and well-established amateur rugby side that split from the Warriors when it went professional—another key part of Cecil Duckworth's legacy to the city. Worcester rugby football club, which was first established in 1871, is alive and well and flourishing at its Offerton Lane home, just up the road from Sixways, but it has no desire to compete for players with any Warriors side on its way back up the pyramid, and while it constantly shows good will to efforts to bring professional rugby back to Sixways, it would understandably be concerned about any route to do so that put it directly in competition with another local team going up the leagues.

The consequences of losing professional men's rugby union in a community like Worcester are severe. There has been the loss of jobs for players and staff alike, who moved heaven and earth to keep the show on the road during the last season but through no fault of their own have been unable to return to work. There has been the loss of income to the excellent Warriors Community Foundation, which has recently had to announce its departure from Sixways and its decision to move to a more costly city centre location. There are the fans of the professional game who have to travel far further to watch rugby, whether down the motorway to Gloucester or across to Coventry. Fans are united in saying they want the Warriors back, and MPs, councils and local businesses have all come together in stating their ambition to see professional elite rugby return to Sixways as soon as possible.

Recently, at a meeting held at Offerton Lane, Worcester Warriors fans set up a supporters trust with a view to bringing back professional rugby as swiftly as possible. Supporters trusts have played a crucial role in getting many football clubs back into contention, with Wimbledon and Wrexham being notable examples, and many supporters of the Warriors are keen to see if the model can be used in rugby.

The new owner of the club and stadium, Atlas, has itself stated that it wants fan ownership to play an increased role in the future of the club, and I strongly urge Atlas to sit down with the newly formed supporters trust to see how they can work together to achieve this. If a supporters trust can get a share of the ownership at a club such as the Warriors, I hope the Minister will consider how the Government can support them.

It is fair to acknowledge that there has been much concern about the plans of the new owners. Fans, who underwent a deeply traumatic period in the run-up and during the club's administration understandably want more transparency from the new owners as to their future plans for the stadium and their club.

There has been much debate and huge scepticism about proposals for a rebrand or to take over another local club and bring it to Worcester. For my part, I am clear that we need to see the Worcester Warriors brand maintained, and fans made that abundantly clear to the new owners at the forum they held in February. At that time, they did seem to have listened, and I hope that shortly they will be more forthcoming about what their plans are for building back up to professional rugby in the shortest possible timescale. There have been suggestions

of touring sides or demonstration matches, and rumours of concerts and other public events, but fans need clarity and they need it soon.

I remind the new owners and any prospective investor in Sixways of the clear statement by councils—including Wychavon, which is the planning authority for the stadium—MPs and key supporters of the club that the only way development will be approved at or around Sixways will be if it benefits the professional elite sport and the community.

For any investor to put money into rugby, there needs to be clarity about the proposition, and right now there does not seem to be that clarity. With three premierships sides already lost to administration and widespread concerns about the viability of the championship, there are deep concerns about the future of professional rugby in England. To attract new funding, investors in rugby need clarity over the future league structure after a period of turmoil, and that clarity is needed as soon as possible to attract the long-term investment that the game needs. What can the Minister do to ensure that we get that clarity as quickly as possible?

I know that the Minister will say that it is not his job to run the sport and that the RFU and Premiership Rugby Ltd between them have that responsibility, but they need to move swiftly to provide much-needed clarity to show how investors can bring teams into professional rugby and make it sustainable, and to ensure that there is a footprint for professional rugby union across all areas of the country where it has support. In Worcester, there are thousands of supporters—between the Warriors and Wasps, there are tens of thousands of supporters—who want to be able to support and follow the professional game. The game cannot afford to lose them. If the RFU does not act fast to provide a route that enables those supporters to get their game back and their teams back to the top flight, I do not believe that Ministers can stand back.

When I was approached by Worcester City Council with the proposal of adding rugby union to the fan-led review of football, I rejected that proposition, because I believe that the two sports are fundamentally different and face different challenges. The challenge facing top-flight football has too often been too much money and the distance that creates between management and fans. The challenge facing rugby union has been too little money and unsustainable finances. The game of rugby union would benefit from its own fan-led review, and having discussed that with my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), the Minister's predecessor, I know that he has come to the conclusion that that needs to be explored.

The Minister has already given a great deal of time and effort to addressing the future of rugby union in general and the situation of the Warriors in particular. I have been pestering him over a long time on this issue. I have no need to remind him of his commitment to try to ensure that there is a positive outcome for the rugby offering in Worcester, and of my commitment as MP for Worcester and a personal friend of the Duckworth family to secure the remarkable legacy of elite professional rugby that Cecil Duckworth left the city.

I hope the Minister can use his influence with the Rugby Football Union to make clear to it that the current situation is not tolerable. The loss of much-loved, well-supported local sides and the jobs, investment and

pride they bring to a community, as well as the inspiration and opportunities they offer to young people, cannot just be treated as par for the course. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the RFU and Premiership Rugby Ltd need to work with investors to ensure a future for the Warriors and for professional rugby in the west midlands.

When we debated this situation almost a year ago, it seemed that administration was a route to keeping the club and its assets together, attracting new investment and supporting a return to the top flight. Today, there is a real risk that there will be no top-flight team in Worcester or anywhere in the west midlands for many years to come. After millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have been invested to support the sustainability of the sport, and all the many community benefits that it brings, that would not be an acceptable outcome.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to respond to this debate, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing it to show the important role that professional rugby clubs play for fans and communities across the country—nowhere more so than in the west midlands. I know that my hon. Friend will agree that rugby has made an overwhelmingly positive contribution to sport and culture in our country. There are plenty of reasons—even now, with the challenges facing the professional level of the sport in England—to celebrate rugby in this very important bicentennial year. Indeed, I was delighted to join my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for the launch of the celebrations at Rugby School earlier this year.

The sport of rugby football, both union and league, has had a huge impact in the United Kingdom. Whether through inspiring moments at elite level or bringing people together at grassroots level, rugby enriches lives. Rugby continues to be one of our biggest participation sports, bringing communities together and helping to keep people active. We should be very proud that a sport that was born in England—in the west midlands, no less—is now a truly global one that is making a positive impact in local communities all over the world. The sport already has a great legacy, which the Government want to continue to support and see grow and develop further.

That extends beyond the men's game and includes the growth of women's rugby. The inspirational endeavours of the Red Roses at last year's women's rugby world cup caught the imagination of the country. Despite not bringing the title home, they performed valiantly in reaching the final.

We know how important professional rugby clubs have been to communities in the west midlands. The role in the region of Worcester Warriors and of Wasps evolved in very different ways, yet both clubs provided entertaining elite-level sport and brought communities together. Even during the pandemic, when players and fans were unable to engage with clubs, Worcester Warriors and Wasps stepped in to provide crucial services to their communities. Both clubs opened their doors and hosted covid-19 testing centres, and charitable foundations of both clubs supported their communities when they needed it the most during lockdown.

[*Stuart Andrew*]

It was indeed during the pandemic that the whole nation recognised the value of professional sport. That is why the Government stepped in to provide critical funding to ensure that clubs across a range of sports would still be there when the restrictions were lifted. Through the sport survival package, we helped to ensure the survival of rugby union. The sport received generous financial support to ensure that clubs at all levels would still be there for the players, the fans and the wider community once restrictions were lifted. We also worked hard to enable the safe return of the grassroots game as soon as possible, despite the challenges presented by the sport being close-contact.

Even with that support, those clubs continued to experience significant financial challenges as the country emerged from the pandemic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester mentioned, sadly Worcester Warriors entered into administration in September last year. I know that he has been working incredibly hard on behalf of the fans and all those interested in his constituency on the issues surrounding the club. As a committed fan, he saw the club rise through the pyramid under the stewardship of Cecil Duckworth, as he mentioned, first reaching the top tier in 2004.

Beyond its endeavours on the pitch, and as attested to during the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee sessions last year, the club played an important role in supporting the local community. Not only did the administration of the club have an impact on players, staff and supporters, it threatened to end the fantastic work of the Worcester Warriors Foundation. I am delighted that that vital asset to the people of Worcester is embarking on a new phase of its history.

The demise of Worcester Warriors was sadly followed, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, by the administration of another famous club, Wasps RFC, in October. Since relocating to Coventry in 2014, the club had worked hard to establish itself in the west midlands, to provide fans in their local community with exciting rugby of the highest calibre, and to add more success to the club's history. The fact that Wasps, a club with a track record of domestic and European success, could find itself in such financial distress that it entered administration emphasises the need for action now before more clubs are lost.

Losing one elite-level club would naturally have a significant impact on a region, so I recognise how painful it must be for the west midlands to have lost two clubs in quick succession. That loss was compounded by the recent administration of London Irish, another top-flight team, further reducing the provision of professional rugby to players, staff and fans in England.

The past months have been exceptionally challenging for the fans, players, staff and supporters of Worcester Warriors, Wasps and London Irish. There is an urgent need for action from the rugby authorities to address the challenges facing the top tier of the sport. I am pleased that they recognise that challenge. I was pleased to see Premiership Rugby launch its new sporting commission, which brings together leading independent figures from the world of sport and business with Premiership Rugby Ltd executives to enhance the organisation's governance structures.

As a Government, we stepped in when no one else would to ensure the survival of the sport through the pandemic. That was primarily through loans on very generous terms, recognising the fragility of many clubs. However, the Government cannot keep stepping in. We are clear that all sport, including rugby, needs to be economically viable and financially stable. We expect to see governance reforms that include stronger financial regulations to improve the state of the sport, which will militate against the loss of other clubs in future.

We are continuing to work with the Rugby Football Union and Premiership Rugby on their plans to secure the future of rugby union as we look ahead to next season. Last month we took the decision to appoint Ralph Rimmer, the former CEO of the Rugby Football League, and Chris Pilling, the former chief executive of Yorkshire Building Society and a non-executive board member of UK Sport, as independent advisers on the future stability of rugby union. Their work will complement that of the rugby authorities as they work towards a sustainable solution. They will provide recommendations to me and the Secretary of State at the end of July. We do not intend to establish an independent regulatory body for rugby union as we are doing with football. The appointment of Ralph and Chris will provide an additional level of rigour to the ongoing efforts of the rugby authorities to find a sustainable solution to the issues facing the game.

Beyond that, the Government are committed to supporting the wider provision of rugby in England, including the growth of the women's game. I am particularly excited about the next two rugby world cup tournaments, starting with the men's tournament later this year in France, and then the hosting of the women's rugby world cup right here in England. Both tournaments are important occasions for existing and perhaps new fans of the sport to come together and experience the game at the highest level. We are looking to support women's sport more broadly at every opportunity, pushing for greater participation, employment, commercial opportunities and visibility in the media.

It is vital that other sports beyond rugby union learn from the difficult experiences of the past years. The Government are committed to supporting the sustainable growth of the sports sector, and encourage sport to build mutually beneficial relationships to share learnings, particularly when it comes to governance and economics. Our sports strategy will emphasise our commitment to supporting the sector in achieving those aims.

This is a big year for the sport of rugby union in more ways than one, and is befitting of its 200th anniversary. On the one hand, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the game at Rugby School. In September and October we will see the men's rugby union world cup final take place in France, which will see nations from across the globe vying to take home the cup that bears that name of the Rugby schoolboy who started it all. On the other hand, it marks the end of a season in which three clubs at the highest level in England entered into administration, with major ramifications for the state of domestic rugby union.

I hope that the sport continues to play an important role and that professional rugby union returns to the west midlands in the near future, as we have heard today how much the sport is loved by communities in the region and across the country. The Government will continue to work with the rugby authorities, including

the Rugby Football Union and Premiership Rugby, as well as Sport England, to support rugby in all its forms. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester that I know how passionately he cares about this issue. We are exploring everything and working closely with all those involved to ensure we do not go through the painful experiences we have seen in the last few months again.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 June 2023

[MRS PAULINE LATHAM *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Mariana Dam Disaster

1.30 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to open the debate, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. I have been informed that there is a group action in the High Court relating to the Mariana dam incident, so I remind hon. Members that they must not refer to any specific cases currently before the courts and that they should exercise caution with respect to any specific cases that might subsequently come before the courts in order not to prejudice these proceedings.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the Mariana dam disaster.

I spoke to the Clerks beforehand and I understand the issue very well. I will not refer to specific cases and I am sure that others will not either.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate and say that it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Latham. I am grateful to have the opportunity to lead this debate and to raise my concerns about the ongoing situation in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. It is deeply concerning and requires urgent attention by the United Kingdom Government and the wider international community.

The debate is about how British companies conduct themselves around the world and whether they should implement the high environmental and safety standards overseas that we expect of them at home. It is also about how we hold companies headquartered in London to account when they do not live up to the standards that they claim to uphold, as well as accountability and the process in relation to a disaster that happened many years ago, and how we can help the people who are still seeking justice.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I understand that today's matter is not in his portfolio and that he is filling in because the relevant Minister is overseas, but it is always a pleasure to see him. I know that he, his Department and the officials who are here will carry back the questions that we ask. I am sure that all those who participate will have their questions answered directly by the relevant Minister on his return. Even though this issue is not in this Minister's portfolio, I know that he shares my passion for doing the right thing by our neighbours and using resources in the best way.

I want to bring to the House's attention the 2015 collapse of the Fundão tailings dam at the Samarco Mariana mine complex in the state of Minas Gerais, which killed 19 people and released 40 million cubic metres of tailings that polluted waterways, spanning an area the length of Portugal—more than 600 km. That puts it into perspective when we think of the distance of the impact and the people affected. It is more than the

distance between where we are sitting in Westminster Hall and my Strangford constituency, and my journey from Belfast City airport to Heathrow on Monday and returning tonight. I travel on that plane at massive speed and the flight takes an hour, from Northern Ireland across the south-east of England.

The Mariana dam disaster was the biggest environmental disaster ever inflicted on the people of Brazil. One company, BHP, was headquartered in London at the time and played a key role in the dam disaster.

I thank the Library for its information—I realise that it is not always easy to prepare for these debates—and I wish to quantify the serious ecological damage that the disaster produced. There were mass die-offs among fish: once the mud reached the open ocean, a total of some 29,000 fish carcasses were collected and recorded by the federal police. The death of the fish also resulted in hundreds of birds dying from starvation, and probably also from eating infected fish. A Wilson Centre article explains that, in addition to the loss of native fauna,

“80 percent of the native vegetation located near the tributaries and main channel of the Doce River was destroyed, leaving the river with only 13 percent of the Atlantic forest's original vegetation.”

Reuters reported in November 2021 that a study undertaken by a company contacted by the Brazilian prosecutor to measure the cost of the disaster estimated the “socio-environmental” damage to be between US\$6.73 billion—or 37.6 billion reais—and US\$10.85 billion. That gives some idea of the impact and shows that it affected not only people's lives and jobs, but the environment.

The disaster severely affected the indigenous communities, including the Krenak, by irreparably damaging their river source—the communities' lifeblood—the Rio Doce. Like others, I had the privilege of meeting victims from the Krenak indigenous community earlier this year in Parliament. With the help of global law firm Pogust Goodhead, they are bringing a case against BHP in London, alongside more than 700,000 victims affected by the Mariana dam disaster. The claimants include individuals, Brazilian municipalities and local churches, all of whom suffered loss as a result. Those human beings lost all they own, their schools, their education, where they worship and their normal lives. The disaster has changed their lives forever.

Right hon. and hon. Members may ask why this disaster should be debated in this House. It is for a simple reason: this is an important step in bringing real justice for the victims of the Mariana dam disaster, and it will create a precedent for victims abroad to initiate claims against UK-based parent companies for environmental damage and human rights abuses before English courts. That would make the companies accountable and responsible, and that is the way it should be.

The tailings dam that collapsed was owned and operated by Samarco, a Brazilian company jointly owned by Vale and the Anglo-Australian mining company, BHP. At the time of the accident, BHP was dual-listed in London and Sydney—a fact that allowed the victims the necessary legal standing to begin proceedings here in London. After all those years, it is only right that the matter should be spoken about.

Moreover, as representatives of the Krenak community told me, this case is not just about BHP and the disaster; it is a more general story. For too long, some multinational corporations based in the UK, the EU and the US have damaged the environment and communities in other

[Jim Shannon]

parts of the world without providing full compensation. I cannot help but feel that if British or Australian communities had been impacted by such a disaster, they would not have been treated in the same way. Indeed, it would have been sorted a long time ago.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. We have to be very careful about taking about specific cases. They are going to the courts, or are in the courts, and therefore we must not talk about them.

Jim Shannon: I believe it is important not just to highlight the legal case but to fully recognise the victims. Nineteen people lost their lives, and as I said to the officials before the debate, I want to read out their names to honour the victims of the Mariana dam disaster. You will have to forgive me, Mrs Latham, because my Ulster Scots accent means that the pronunciation may be a challenge for me, but it is only right to do this. I will just mention their first and last names; the names in between are a challenge, and I want to be respectful. I hope hon. Members see past my stumbling and hear what is meant to be heard. These are people whose families are grieving at this very moment in Brazil.

The names are: Cláudio Fiúza, 40 years old; Sileno de Lima, 47 years old; Waldemir Leandro, 48 years old; Emanuely Vitória, five years old; Thiago Santos, seven years old; Marcos Xavier, 32 years old; Marcos Moura, 34 years old; Samuel Albino, 34 years old; Mateus Fernandes, 29 years old; Edinaldo de Assis; Daniel Carvalho, 53 years old; Maria Lucas, 60 years old; Maria Celestino, 64 years old; Claudemir Santos, 40 years old; Pedro Lopes, 56 years old; Antônio de Souza, 73 years old; Vando dos Santos, 37 years old; Ailton dos Santos, 55 years old; and Edmirson Pessoa, 48 years old.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and for speaking to those who petitioned us earlier this year. I thank Members for listening and recognising those names for the record. For the people of Brazil and around the world, such disasters must never be forgotten, lest we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The people of Brazil believe that the disaster could have been avoided. The London Mining Network's 2017 report, "The River is Dead", states:

"Since the beginning of the operation, in 2008, the Fundão Dam had presented several anomalies related to drainage defects, upwelling, mud and water management errors and saturation of sandy material. In some cases, emergency measures had been required."

But the project continued and production levels were kept high until the disaster.

This lawsuit is one of the largest of its kind in terms of the damages to the victims in Brazil, but so far, only £2.8 billion has been ringfenced to cover the liability for the disaster. In the past three years, there have been a further 12 incidents at mining sites around the world involving the collapse of tailings or waste facilities. Progress has been made in setting a global industry standard for tailings management, but only a third of companies with tailings dams have committed to implementing it. This is while the industry continues to make ambitious sustainability commitments and claims over environmental, social and governance credentials.

A report by the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum, after some of its members visited Brazil, registered concern about appropriate levels of "accountability and responsibility" and "affected communities" and how the companies deal with local people, including those affected by tailings dams. The report also said:

"Nearly seven years after the dam collapse, the end of these reparations and compensation is nowhere in sight."

I know the Minister cannot answer this directly, but I am hopeful that he will be able to help the victims and ensure that, after seven years, the issue of cost, reparations and compensation can be addressed. I am also pleased to see both shadow Ministers—the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) and the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton)—here and I look forward to their contributions.

Companies running large operations worldwide need to be accountable, including through subsidiaries. My first question to the Minister is this: does he agree that the handling of the Mariana dam disaster is a model for company crisis management? If the Minister cannot answer that, I am happy for him to write to me. Many of the companies refer to social value as bringing people and resources together to build a better world. The continued reluctance of some companies to provide compensation for this disaster and for other disasters across the world must be rectified. We are asking for that through this debate. This has a clear impact on the lives of those people and on the environment of the country. As I said, the impacts of the disaster travelled an area equivalent to the length of Portugal.

I believe that the UK has an important role here. It can lead the way by including stronger accountability mechanisms for UK corporations operating both domestically and internationally to help protect against human rights abuses and protect our fragile environment. We all love our environment and wish to see it retained. It is also imperative that, as the host country to large companies, investors and markets relevant to mining and metals, the United Kingdom enshrines in law the global industry standard for tailings management.

It is vital that changes are enforced to prevent such terrible disasters from happening again and causing such devastation to the world's natural environment. The after-effects will remain for a long time; indeed, some are changed forever. Will the Government recognise that the UK has a vital role in stopping such disasters ever happening again? Will my Government and my Minister take action to crack down on British companies that fail to live up to their social and environmental credentials at home and abroad?

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I remind Members that they need to bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

1.46 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee, right hon. and hon. Members from across the House who have been involved, and my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for securing this emotive and hard-hitting debate. It is about how British companies conduct themselves around the world and whether they implement the highest safety standards, which we rightly expect of them. It is also about how we hold companies

headquartered in London or elsewhere in the UK to account when they do not live up to the standards that they claim to uphold.

The House's sub judice rule—as you rightly pointed out, Mrs Latham—prevents me from commenting on any ongoing court action relating to the hundreds of thousands of claimants seeking compensation for damage caused by this horrific incident. However, as the hon. Member stated, the Mariana dam disaster has been called

“the worst environmental disaster in Brazil's history.”

The disaster severely impacted indigenous communities including the Krenak people by irreparably damaging the river source and the community's lifeblood, the Rio Doce. It is important that we recognise the victims and their grieving families, with 19 lives lost because of the disaster. For the people of Brazil and other fair-minded, good people around the world, such disasters must not be forgotten, or we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The people of Brazil believe that the disaster could and should have been avoided. Indeed, the 2017 report “The River is Dead” by the London Mining Network states:

“Since the beginning of the operation, in 2008, the Fundão Dam had presented several anomalies related to drainage defects, upwelling, mud and water management errors and saturation of sandy material. In some cases, emergency measures had been required.”

However, the project continued, and production was kept at high levels until the disaster.

A recent report published by the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum, after some of its members visited Brazil, found:

“Nearly seven years after the dam collapse, the end of these reparations and compensation is nowhere in sight. Consequently, affected community members have suffered for over seven years, and the companies and investors continue to accrue costs associated with the delayed provision of reparations and compensation”.

Companies running large operations worldwide cannot be allowed to hide behind their subsidiaries when things go wrong or when there is an ecological and environmental disaster. The UK has an important global role. It can and should lead the way by exploring ways to introduce stronger accountability mechanisms for UK corporations operationally, both domestically and internationally, to help to protect against human rights abuses and protect our fragile environment.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise to my hon. Friend and to you, Mrs Latham. It is one of those days when there is a lot going on in the other Chamber that we take an interest in, so I will need to go, but I want to raise one point first.

I completely understand why the Chair is twitchy about sub judice issues, but the whole point of having this debate is so that maybe some good can arise from this tragedy. There is potential for our Government to lead on legislative reforms, which can then be developed internationally to ensure the accountability of companies, prevention of human rights abuses and environmental protections. It is about directors' responsibilities as well. There is an agenda that the Government could seize to turn this tragedy into something beneficial globally.

Mr Dhesi: My right hon. Friend speaks with a great deal of authority. He has eloquently explained the importance of today's debate and why many of us are hoping that the Minister and the Government will take corrective action to ensure that we learn from the mistakes of the past and put legislation in place so that there cannot be future environmental disasters without the necessary repercussions.

In conclusion, the only question is: will the Government now recognise that the UK has an important role in preventing similar disasters from ever happening again?

1.51 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this hugely important debate. Not only is it timely because of the ongoing challenges facing those affected by the disaster, but it relates to the wider topic of how we ensure that UK-based companies uphold the social and environmental standards that we expect of them at home and abroad.

As we have heard, the Mariana dam disaster was a devastating event, killing 19 people and destroying homes, towns and countless livelihoods. The collapse has affected around 700,000 people. I am particularly concerned to hear about the impact on indigenous communities such as the Krenak people, and about the long-standing pollution of the River Doce. For many, including the Krenak people, the river was a source of fishing and livelihoods, as well as a sacred resource. Reading the testimonies of the victims of the disaster, I was astounded by the sheer scale of the devastation it has caused. For example, Cristiane Fachetti, a farmer from Colatina, wrote:

“There are days when you sit down in the afternoon and you don't have one Real, knowing that you have water, electricity, energy, everything to pay and you couldn't pay it...Today when someone says, ‘it's raining up there’ everyone says ‘there's more mud coming’.”

What is perhaps even more distressing than the disaster itself, as other Members have mentioned, is the lack of accountability, the lack of justice and the lack of adequate compensation for victims from the mining giant BHP. It is clear in the aftermath of the disaster that these huge companies are simply shrinking from their responsibilities and passing on the blame to one another. Not only is the lack of responsibility morally wrong and reprehensible, but it undermines the trust that society places in these companies to act in the best interests of the communities in which they operate. An impartial observer would say that they simply cannot be trusted to do the right thing.

As others have said, the recent study by the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum detailed ongoing concerns about

“the slow pace and inadequate nature of reparations”.

It noted that

“only a fraction of the houses had been built in the resettlements and the communities were awaiting a range of other compensatory and reparations measures so that they can start to rebuild their lives.”

The report also said that there is

“a general concern that Anglo American, BHP, Vale, Samarco, and Renova Foundation have not accepted an appropriate level of accountability and responsibility for the impacts of their business practices on a range of stakeholders, including affected communities.”

[John Mc Nally]

As other Members have said, the reparations and compensation are nowhere in sight.

British-listed companies should not be able to hide behind their subsidiaries when things go wrong. It is shocking that almost eight years after the disaster we still need to have this conversation. While we learn about the truly terrible conditions that many in Mariana still face to this day, BHP continues to wax lyrical about its social value targets and stewardship of the environment, local cultures and economic development. It appears to me that they are hooded crows masquerading as peacocks.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, what assessment have the Government made of the recent Local Authority Pension Fund Forum report on BHP's failure to help victims of the disaster? Secondly, what assessment has the Minister made of BHP's strong environmental and social value claims in the light of that report? Thirdly, will the Government take steps to ensure that all British listed companies operating at home and abroad are bound to the high standards that we expect of them?

1.56 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Latham. I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), because he has raised an issue that I have been grappling with since I took on the brief for Latin America in our shadow Foreign Office team. I have found it distressing, fascinating, shocking and appalling. I was privileged to host the Krenak people when they came to London, but I will say a little more about that in a minute.

The scale of the disaster that the hon. Member for Strangford rightly points out is shocking and appalling: 600 km of pollution. He mentioned the birds and fish affected by the pollution in the Doce river, which literally means sweet river. It is not a sweet river any more, sadly. It is in south-east Brazil and stretches over 530 miles, which in the UK would be a huge distance, but is minuscule in the massive country of Brazil, which is 33 times bigger than the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said something very important: he said that this is a debate about how British companies live up to the high standards that we expect of them. That is at the heart of our debate this afternoon, so I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for securing it.

The Mariana dam disaster occurred on 5 November 2015. As hon. Members have said, it was the worst environmental disaster in Brazilian history. We need to be clear that the situation and the ongoing legal case must not be allowed to set a precedent for the future that pits multinational corporations against the will and needs of indigenous populations and environmental activists. I was shocked to learn that 60 million cubic metres of iron waste poured into the Doce river when the Mariana tailings dam collapsed. It is in nobody's interest for something like that ever to happen again. We must highlight the shocking injustices wherever and whenever they occur, as we have done in this debate.

At the beginning of this year, I met victims of the disaster from the indigenous Krenak community when they came to London to have their testimonies heard at

the Court of Appeal. I hosted them in Parliament to give Members the opportunity to hear their harrowing experiences of how over 60 million cubic metres of toxic mining waste had wrecked their homes, livelihoods and communities, and about those who lost their lives, as the hon. Member for Strangford has said, as a result of the disaster. One thing that struck me was how humanity is so diverse that there are people in the House of Commons with whom we have very little in common apart from our shared humanity.

The Krenak people looked so extraordinarily different, yet they had wonderful names such as Maria and Umberto and they spoke beautiful Portuguese—a language I am not privileged to speak, unfortunately, but they had a very good interpreter. They told their human stories of a land far away, a lifestyle we have no real familiarity with, and yet they touched our hearts. Everybody there was moved by the testimonies that were given of their first-hand experience. I will not reiterate here today the experiences and first-hand testimonies that we heard—obviously I cannot, anyway—but it is important to recognise that this disaster did not affect just Brazilians. There was even a Yorkshireman in that area. He lived a modest life, which he adored, but he was forced to leave his home after the disaster. The truly global impact, which is the point that has been made this afternoon, of this appalling event can never be fully understood, or overstated. It has ruined the lives of many Brazilians as well as those from abroad wanting to make a life for themselves in that beautiful, stunning country and landscape.

I believe that the company in question, Anglo-Australian mining firm BHP, has behaved appallingly since the disaster struck. It has failed properly to engage and work with the victims. As was mentioned by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally), the Renova Foundation—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. Could we not stray into giving too many names and being too specific, because of the impending court case?

Fabian Hamilton: Of course, Mrs Latham. I sourced this information from publicly available sources, which are on the websites, but if you would rather I did not mention any specific names, I will not.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I think it would be prudent not to.

Fabian Hamilton: Okay. That is fine.

The organisation set up to remediate and compensate for the damage caused by the failure of the dam has come under increasing criticism for its lack of transparency in the way it was spending financial resources, as well as the way it excluded affected community representatives from decision making related to the resettlement. Again, we must not let that behaviour set a precedent whereby companies are able to treat indigenous populations like cattle. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether he believes that that kind of behaviour points to a worrying and wider targeting of indigenous populations, and environmental activists, by multinational companies. It is the same attitude that led to the murder of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in Brazil a year ago; and farmers from the El Bajío community in Mexico had their livelihoods destroyed through illegal mining by a FTSE 100 company.

We must note that there has been a radical change in Government in Brazil since the disaster occurred. I would like the Minister to tell us what discussions he has had with his Brazilian counterpart regarding this case and how he is working with the Brazilian Government under President Lula, as well as Governments across Latin America, to prevent man-made disasters like this from destroying communities. I recognise that the Minister here today is not the Minister generally responsible for the region, but perhaps he has some answers to these questions on behalf of his colleague.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend the shadow Minister has referred to environmental activists and the damage being done environmentally in Brazil, as well as across the globe. When we look at the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest, and given that we have just passed the one-year anniversary of the brutal murders of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, it is important that while we protect our environment and the people, we also prevent those excellent environmental activists, journalists and indigenous activists who are fighting the good fight—not just on their own behalf, but on behalf of all of us—from coming to harm. It is important that our Government work with the Brazilian Government to ensure that the perpetrators of those brutal murders are brought to justice.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. In a way, it is precisely what I wanted to ask the Minister today about how we can work more collaboratively and co-operatively with the Brazilian Government to lend our expertise, to show our support, to do what we can, along with other nations across the world, to preserve the Amazon rainforest and, of course, to protect environmental activists and indigenous people in those countries. It would also be helpful to hear whether the Brazilian Government's attitude towards these disasters, and the prevention of them in future, has changed since President Lula took office. Obviously, our Government would know that and notice that.

We must of course champion those many excellent British companies that do good work abroad—there are many—but it is also right that we hold them to account for any wrongdoing. Given the tragic stories and experiences we have heard about today, does the Minister agree that British companies should be held to account in British courts for their actions across the world? No company should be able to greenwash its image by painting itself as a net zero leader while at the same time mining the minerals needed for the energy transition in the way that some have done. They simply cannot give with one hand and take away with the other.

I was appalled to learn that this disaster and the actions that followed it disproportionately hurt indigenous peoples and many people of colour. A community in the municipality of Marinara that is closest to the dam and was most affected by the disaster has a population that is 84.3% comprised of black Brazilians.

Will the British Government collaborate on an international law on ecocide to make damage to our ecology, our planet and our environment an internationally recognised criminal offence? The Opposition certainly support that, and it would be good to collaborate with the British Government.

Finally, I pay tribute to Pogust Goodhead, the firm assisting the victims with their case—but mainly to the over 700,000 victims, a few of whom have shown outstanding courage by travelling to the United Kingdom to let English courts know the true extent of the disaster. For the sake of Bento Rodrigues, the town destroyed by the disaster, the Doce river, which was severely polluted, and the 39 municipalities that felt the environmental catastrophe on their doorstep, this injustice must be put right.

2.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I am grateful for his contribution and for those of the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) and for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), and I will address their question. I am standing in for the Minister with responsibility for South America, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), who is in North America as I speak, but I am pleased to be here on his behalf.

This November marks the eighth anniversary of the worst environmental disaster in Brazilian history, the bursting of the Mariana dam. We have heard a moving evocation of the human impact and the scale of it in the state of Minas Gerais. The dam failure released some 60 million cubic metres of toxic waste, which claimed 19 lives, wrecked towns, villages and livelihoods and deeply affected indigenous communities, as has been discussed at length. The flow of waste travelled 600 km to the Atlantic ocean, destroying water supplies, natural habitats and livestock, with effects that are still being felt today. I add my condolences to those that have been expressed in the Chamber today to all those affected, particularly the families and friends of those who died.

There is, understandably, much interest in the compensation made available to those affected by the catastrophe. As has been mentioned, there is an ongoing legal case against the mining company BHP—it operates in Brazil through a company called Samarco, which managed the dam. It is not appropriate for me to comment on matters pertaining to those legal proceedings, but I can share with the Chamber how the UK has been working to promote the safe management of tailings dams in Brazil since that calamitous disaster.

In 2016, the trade and investment team at the British consulate general in Belo Horizonte, the state capital of Minas Gerais, took responsibility for the mining sector. From day one, it prioritised the promotion of improved technology, governance and safety standards for tailings dams. The consulate has held annual public events to showcase UK innovation and expertise in this field to Brazilian stakeholders, including from private companies, the Government, academia and civil society organisations. Those efforts have raised awareness of the critical need to improve safety standards, and they generated discussion among key players about how best to do so.

A further calamity took place in Minas Gerais state in 2019, when the collapse of the Brumadinho dam killed 270 people. In the aftermath, the Department for International Trade supported an initiative led by the Church of England Pensions Board to publish the world's first global industry standard on tailings management to improve safety worldwide. The initiative was a

[*Leo Docherty*]

collaboration with Sweden, the International Council on Mining and Metals and the United Nations. It included input from communities affected by the Brumadinho disaster, plus leading international experts and Government and mining company representatives. In 2021, the British consulate general in Belo Horizonte held workshops in partnership with the Brazilian Government and the United Nations environment programme to promote this new global standard in Brazil. More than 1,000 participants joined the online workshops, convening leading figures from the Brazilian mining sector, academia and civil society.

Also in 2021, the British embassy in Brasilia signed a memorandum of understanding with the prosecutor's office in the state of Minas Gerais to collaborate on technology and transparency standards for the management of tailings dams. That led to the launch in May 2022 of the world's first independent tailings dam monitoring centre in Brazil, in collaboration with the UK Government, using British satellite monitoring systems. That was an important moment with potentially global implications. The centre applies British satellite monitoring systems, in partnership with the UK's satellite applications catapult, to monitor a growing number of tailing dams in Brazil, thereby improving safety and transparency in their management. The learnings and best practice developed at the centre are playing, we hope, a trailblazing role in raising global safety standards and reducing the risk of similar disasters.

The Mariana dam and Brumadinho catastrophes must not be forgotten. They should serve as stark and tragic reminders of how critical it is that we work together to improve safety standards across the globe. I was interested in the question posed by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East, on ecocide law. I will not pre-empt any judgment of my colleague the Minister for the Americas, but I will ask that he write to the hon. Gentleman with an update on his judgments about the utility or otherwise of such ecocide law. We are reassured by the work that has already begun, with the UK at the forefront in collaboration with Brazil and working alongside the Brazilian Government to increase safety in these sorts of environments together with international partners.

2.12 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions. If we were to put together all our thoughts, they would be that regulation is needed across the world, not just for companies here in the United Kingdom but globally. Hon. Members referred to the need to speak up for those who have no voice, and it is important to ensure that that happens; the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) outlined that very well. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), in an intervention, said that the UK can lead; we could and we should, and we look for that to be the case. The hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) reiterated the important issue of how we can work better together on behalf of people who have been maligned and affected by this. As always, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) encapsulated the issue very simply but directly. We must stand up for the indigenous people. The world must also get together, and we must work in tandem.

I thank the Minister, who was standing in but has understood what we are requesting. I have written down what we are looking for. He reminded us that this was one of the worst disasters in the world, but that others have taken place as well. He told us about the effect on livestock, animals, people, houses and the environment. He referred to how safe management must be the conclusion we wish to have, and said that there must be a new global standard across the world. He referred to a satellite system as well, which is another way of monitoring what is going on and keeping better track of it. He also reminded us, at the end, that it must never be forgotten. The reason we are here today is simply that it will not be forgotten. We have asked our Government and the Minister to take forward the issue where they can to help and assist those people—we met them in January or February this year—who sometimes think that nobody knows about them. Well, today in this House we have ensured that the world knows about them and their quest, and the role that our Government can perhaps play in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Mariana dam disaster.

2.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

Volumetric Concrete Mobile Plants

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered volumetric concrete mobile plants.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I place on record my appreciation of the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us time to debate an important, if hopefully not the most contentious, area of political regulation.

We are doubtless all familiar with the sight of large conventional drum mixers carrying concrete around our streets and roads. Those drum mixers operate at 32 tonnes and carry loads of 8 cubic metres to building sites. They carry concrete that has been prepared in a fixed location and then loaded on to the mixers. Drum mixers are the dominant force in the market, and there are something in the region of 20,000 of them.

Volumetric concrete mixers are a much smaller part of the concrete sector but can operate in circumstances in which the conventional drum mixers do not, most notably in rural areas or where smaller batches are required. They can legally weigh up to 44 tonnes on five axles and 38.4 tonnes on four axles. That is at the heart of the matter that I wish to discuss. They deliver concrete to individuals and smaller businesses and mix concrete on site. They are particularly useful for reaching remote areas and tight urban sites, and compared with larger traditional concrete carriers they have a range of other benefits, notably their lower carbon usage.

There is a large element of time-sensitivity at play here. Once mixed, concrete has a shelf life of only two hours, which means that drum mixers must get to their construction site and pour the concrete within that two-hour period or it goes to waste and to landfill. The need for VCMs in rural areas—where there are fewer plants mixing concrete at scale, if indeed there are any at all, and hence longer road journeys to sites—is obvious, but the place of VCMs in the sector goes beyond that. They are particularly useful for emergency road and rail repairs, where the mixer may have to wait around. For a drum mixer, an expensive batching plant must be set up to avoid concrete becoming unusable at the two-hour mark, but VCMs have no such issues, which shows their benefits in such situations.

There is a very real danger that, if the Government's regulation of the sector gets the balance wrong, the whole volumetric concrete sector could be placed at risk and a small but very important part of the construction industry could be lost, for little discernible benefit.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing today's debate on volumetric concrete mobile plants and for allowing me to intervene. Having worked in the construction industry for about two decades, and having gained a dumper driver ticket to take ready-mixed concrete on a dumper to various parts of the construction site, I could not resist taking part in today's debate. More to the point, my constituency is home to Mixamate, which is a ready-mixed concrete business. Mixamate highlights to me not only the impact on livelihoods but the environmental

and economic damage that policy could create. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is incumbent on the Government to undertake a full impact assessment of current legislation?

Mr Carmichael: Had I known that the hon. Gentleman had that level of expertise, I would have had him on the all-party parliamentary group for lower carbon construction vehicles a long time ago. I agree with him. I do not want to reheat old debates, but we are where we are today because there was not a proper economic and environmental impact assessment at the time. I hope the Minister will indicate that the Government are willing to revisit the issue. If we go through the process properly, we will find that there is a better way of dealing with the issue, but I will let the Minister speak for himself.

VCMs operate right across the United Kingdom. Their manufacture and use are estimated to contribute £380 million to the economy and employ more than 15,000 skilled workers. They operate the length and breadth of the country, and in communities such as those that I represent they are of prime importance to the local construction sector. Businesses such as Andrew Sinclair Ltd in Orkney and Tulloch Developments in Shetland tell me regularly about the desperately detrimental impact that the proposed changes will have on them.

Companies with VCMs operate in at least 134 constituencies and are a truly integral part of the country's construction industry. For almost 50 years, they have operated within a proportionate regulatory environment. Until 2018, VCMs on four axles could run at the manufacturer's design weight, which is often about 41 tonnes. However, in 2018, the Department for Transport decided to impose a 32 tonne limit for all VCMs, enacted through the Goods Vehicles (Plating and Testing) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2017. The limit forces VCM operators to phase out their current VCMs by 2028, replacing them with the 32 tonne model, which is equally expensive but less effective. Lighter vehicles mean more journeys on the road and more carbon emissions as a consequence.

That is despite the fact that Highways England's 2017 report endorsed the operation of VCMs at about 44 tonnes on five axles and 38.4 tonnes on four axles. That proposal had the support of the then Transport Minister, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). To be less than generous, this is a classic example of an obscure regulation changed by civil servants that causes a massive headache for businesses in the real world.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman said that, if the proposal goes through, there will be more journeys by lighter vehicles. Has his APPG looked into how many additional drivers will be needed to drive those additional vehicles? Is there a surplus of such drivers in the construction industry? The advice I am getting is that very few parts of the construction industry have too many workers just now.

Mr Carmichael: Yes, indeed. I think the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question. The truth of the matter is that heavy goods vehicle and lorry drivers are in scarce supply, and that is being felt not just in the construction industry but throughout the supply chain for just about every possible sector. That is another of the operations of the law of unintended consequences.

[*Mr Carmichael*]

The frustration that brings us to the debate is that there has been strong opposition to the plans, led by organisations such as the Batched on Site Association, which feel that, until today, they have not been able to get a hearing. I very much hope that, after the Minister's response, they will feel that they are at last being heard.

The change has no support among the operators, will yield no benefits to the construction industry overall and threatens the very future of VCMs in this country and the benefits that come with them. The most direct consequence of the Government's plan is that VCMs will be limited in the amount of concrete they can carry. Operators continuing after 2028 will have to carry less weight, which is inefficient for them, their customers and the overall economy.

Traditional drum mixers and VCMs can produce something in the region of 8 cubic metres of concrete. However, because VCMs carry all the extra equipment that turns them into mobile plants, including conveyor belts to mix the sand, mixing equipment, cement, water and aggregates, they weigh notably more. Forcing VCM weights down to 32 tonnes cuts their capacity to between 6.5 cubic metres and 7 cubic metres of any mix of concrete on one trip. That has a significant impact on their efficiency, with knock-on effects on cost-effectiveness and the viability of the industry to continue at its current capacity.

The industry predicts that the changes coming in 2028 will have a dire impact on the sector. The Minister will have heard dire predictions from sectors affected by change before—we all have—and scepticism when such interests bring forward their concerns is healthy and necessary in Government. There is, however, significant and objective evidence that points to the industry's predictions being well founded, and possibly even understated. After the Department announced the weight limit reduction, sales of VCMs fell from 55 million in 2017 to 9 million in 2020—still some eight years ahead of the deadline. Operators have already started voting with their feet—or, more accurately, their wheels—to the detriment of the sector and the construction industry as a whole. If the industry suffers and shrinks because of the regulations, many of its benefits will be lost.

Furthermore, traditional drum mixers can carry only one strength of concrete at a time, whereas VCMs have the benefit of carrying multiple if required. Take this simple example: if a customer needs only 4 cubic metres of strong concrete and 3 cubic metres of medium-strength concrete, they will have to pay for two concrete mixers if heavier VCMs are banned. VCMs mix concrete on site and can do so at whatever strengths are required and, crucially, all on one lorry. Without VCMs, such situations would be much more difficult to manage. That is why VCMs are such an important, if small and perhaps slightly niche, part of the concrete sector and the construction industry.

I have had representations from right across the country since securing this debate a mere eight days ago. The message from every corner—from those who are charged with representing the sector as a whole, to individual companies—remains the same. Sonny Sangha, founder of iMix Concrete, who operates a 32 tonne VCM as well as his current fleet of four traditional 38.4 tonne VCMs, talked to me about the estimated impact of the Government changes. He said:

“We estimate an annual loss of turnover of around £100,000 per VCM at 32 tonnes. The loss of capacity also means the need for purchasing more vehicles to accommodate the workload now that we have VCMs on both weight limits...We can see a huge difference in output and economic performance between the vehicles. The new 32T vehicle is only able to carry around 6/7m³ of concrete (depending on mix type), whereas with the other vehicles we can carry a comfortable 8m³ of concrete.”

The root cause of the problem is that there has not been an adequate economic or environmental impact assessment. The consultancy group Regeneris was brought in by the Batched on Site Association to calculate the impact of cutting the weight of VCMs to 32 tonnes. It found that a 27% cut on a 44 tonne VCM and a 16.6% cut on a 38.4 tonne VCM is likely to add 14 million more lorry miles to UK roads and 598,000 more lorry journeys each year. There will be 200 more VCMs on the roads to make up for the carrying of smaller loads, pumping 120,000 additional tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. There will be a 20% increase in CO₂, nitrogen oxide and particulates, generating extra carbon costs in excess of £7 million per annum. That will also require an additional 200 HGV drivers at a time of shortages. On top of that, because drum mixers have a two-hour production life for concrete, much of the concrete going to landfill comes from drum mixers.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is the two-hour issue not absolutely critical? Some communities, particularly in remote constituencies across Scotland and rural parts of England, are simply outwith the two-hour distance, and therefore the concrete will end up hardened and generating more waste in landfill.

Mr Carmichael: It is absolutely critical, and it adds massively to the already significant extra costs for construction projects in those remote communities. Indeed, as the MP for Orkney and Shetland, I probably know that better than most.

I am not going to steal the Minister's thunder; he has kindly been in touch with me.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Before the right hon. Gentleman concludes, I want to congratulate him on securing this debate. We have a presence of VCM operators in Knowsley, which is important to our local economy. I endorse the powerful he has made, and I hope that when the Minister responds, he acknowledges the force of that case.

Mr Carmichael: I very much hope so, too. The Minister's office has been in touch with me to very kindly give me notice of some of what he intends to say. This may be a new way of introducing disappointment into my life after 22 years as an MP, but for once I approach this debate with a smidge more confidence and optimism than usual. The Minister has given me notice of some of what he intends to say in his speech, but I suggest that there is substantial evidence out there that would support a different approach if the Department were minded to harvest it in a systematic way.

There is also important context involving other HGV regulation. In February, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) announced the abolition of the 32 tonne limit for electric HGVs, allowing them to run up to 34 tonnes. On 23 April, the Minister announced that the

4 tonne increase in weight for HGVs—taking the limit from 44 tonnes to 48 tonnes—was being trialled to cut lorry numbers and to save carbon. On 10 May, the Minister announced that the Government are allowing haulage lorries an additional 2-plus metres in length, with the aim of cutting the numbers of such HGVs on the road by 8%, and reducing 70,000 tonnes of carbon emissions. All that suggests to me that the thinking of the Department may have been different in 2018, and that there is now a need for the approach to VCMs to catch up with that new thinking and to benefit from the same approach.

As I have said, I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me this debate at such short notice. I am grateful also that a good number of colleagues from around the House are present on a Thursday afternoon. I place on record that I have received a lot of apologies and representations from Members right around the country, including the hon. Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), the right hon. Members for Ashford (Damian Green), for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and for Warley (John Spellar), and the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford). They would all have been here had they had a bit more notice, but we all know that when a Member gets an offer of time to debate something like this, they do not quibble; they take it. That is what we have done. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

3.17 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate under your chairship, Mr Efford, and it is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), although I hope someone has noticed that the annunciator has been displaying the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) as speaking in this debate for the last 10 minutes. When *Hansard* is produced, I trust that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland will get the credit for his contribution and that it will not be inadvertently attributed to a Member who is not present.

I will speak very briefly because the case has been made so powerfully, and I cannot wait to hear the Minister, given the spoiler alert in the previous speech. I will speak on behalf of Mixamate, which operates in my constituency in south Leeds. I have looked at all the documentation that it has produced, and it seems to me that it has made a really powerful case. This is an innovative product. Anyone who, for their sins, has tried to mix extremely small amounts of concrete with a spade and shovel will know what a boon it is to have machinery that can do that. It has the flexibility to deliver for longer than the two hours to which drum mixers are confined. It has different strengths and can produce different quantities for different places. It is a great innovation, so I say well done on that.

A factory in Sheffield has been responsible for production, but, as we have heard, orders have decreased. I am perplexed as to why we are in this situation. Like the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, I have looked at the Department for Transport news release that announced the weight increases, including, interestingly, for the longer semi-trailers—known in the trade as LSTs—which will be subject to a 44 tonne weight limit.

At the same time, the Government are saying that the weight limit for VCMs has to come down. All of the arguments in the briefing material that the VCM sector, including Mixamate, has given to assist us in today's debate are also made in the Department for Transport's press release. That includes arguments about fewer journeys and carbon reductions if the vehicle weighs more. Let us not forget, either, that if a VCM does multiple drop-offs, its weight will go down once it has delivered the first part of concrete. I note with interest that Denmark had proposed to do the same, but it has now reversed its approach.

Is this about weight? As I understand it, National Highways said that 44 tonnes on five axles, and 38.4 tonnes on four axles was not a problem. If the issue is weight and the impact on road surfaces, bridges and so on, why on earth has the Department for Transport made three recent announcements on increasing the weight limits, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland in his powerful speech? I can only echo everything he said, and, like others, I look forward to what the Minister has to say.

3.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I apologise for being late, Mr Efford; I was in the debate on contaminated blood. I speak on behalf of Ve-Tech Concrete Ltd, a company in my constituency that operate VCMs. As has already been covered by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), there are lots of different reasons why there are advantages to VCMs. He highlighted the fact that they can deliver concrete over distances in rural areas that are more than two hours away from a concrete mixing plant. That is an absolute; if someone is further away, a drum concrete mixer cannot serve them. VCMs can cover parts of the UK that others cannot.

VCMs can also wait until the concrete is required. When utilities need to make repairs, even in the middle of the night, or when a repair takes longer, the VCM can wait until the concrete is required. They can deliver multiple small loads of different strengths of concrete to different consumers. Those often include farmers who need a small amount of concrete to make an adjustment around the farm. In rural communities such as mine—farming covers most of my constituency—VCMs are vital.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) that it is hard to understand what the 2018 decision was about. If it was about damage to roads, there are other, heavier vehicles allowed on the road. If it is about what VCMs carry, and the suggestion that they should not carry more goods than a goods vehicle, then there is a failure to understand that they are actually plant. They mix the concrete, and therefore have all the equipment required in mixing the concrete. They also have pumping equipment, so that a separate lorry is not needed to turn up and work with a drum mixer to pump the concrete where it is required. I read in the briefing that, because of access issues, it is a VCM that Westminster is using for some of the repairs to the estate. It is about time that we heard a slightly updated approach to VCMs.

Why was the decision made? It is hard to understand if it was on the basis of road damage when there are heavier vehicles. It is certainly hard to understand if it is

[*Dr Philippa Whitford*]

about climate, when it is clear that VCMs reduce journeys, increase flexibility and keep other trucks off the road. I too hope that maybe there is a change of mind in the Department for Transport, and that the Minister will give hope to the companies in our constituencies, or serving our constituencies, across the UK.

3.24 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Before I start my summing up, Mr Efford, with your permission I will briefly mention the passing of Winnie Ewing—probably the greatest politician that we have ever sent down here. I hope that in due course the House will have the opportunity to pay a fitting tribute to a giant on whose shoulders many of us are proud to stand.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has set out the arguments very powerfully indeed. If there were powerful arguments against his case, he is the kind of person who would have introduced them to his speech. The reason that he has not given us those arguments and explained why they do not carry any weight is that there does not seem to be any argument now. There might have been an argument in 2017-18—I do not know what it was, but there might have been. I cannot see what the argument is now, and I do not think the Government can, which is why they are going in the opposite direction in relation to the weight limits on a lot of other kinds of HGVs.

I can understand that there will sometimes be an assumption in the eyes of the public that anything that reduces the weight of a lorry on our roads is a good thing, but the public often forgets, as do politicians, that reducing the maximum weight of a vehicle does not necessarily reduce the total amount of stuff that it can carry on our roads. As has been pointed out in this case, if we reduce the maximum weight of a cement-mixing lorry that is allowed on the roads, only two things can happen: either there are many more journeys or far fewer things getting built and repaired.

The construction industry in Scotland generates about £17 billion for the Scottish economy and, in 2021, employed 158,000 people. It is also one of the biggest producers of carbon emissions in Scotland, as I have no doubt it is in the rest of the United Kingdom, so there is clearly a huge necessity for Governments and industry to work together. We will not get to net zero unless we work with the construction industry towards a net zero future for that industry. But I do not think that a change in the weight that we are talking about here is a part of that. As we have heard, if anything, it might make the problem even worse.

It would be reasonable to ask the Government to not necessarily announce immediately that they are going to drop the decision, but to ask them to at the very least come up with a more up-to-date and more relevant impact assessment on the economic and environmental impact, based on how the world is today, not how it was in 2017 or 2018, because the world has changed in a lot of ways since then.

As I indicated in my question to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland earlier, it is all very well saying that businesses will just have to buy more slightly less heavy vehicles, operate them in a different way and lose more money, but who will drive these things?

We do not have enough HGV drivers in the United Kingdom as it is—thank you very much, Brexit. That is one of the benefits we were not told about before 2016. Where do we think all these other drivers will come from? What impact will that have on the construction industry's costs if it gets caught up in a wage war with other users of heavy-goods vehicles?

What account are we taking of today's interest rates increase—the highest we have had since the end of the banking crash in 2008? That makes investment in new homes, for example, a lot less attractive than it was. We need the impact of that to be built in to any further assessment.

We will need the construction industry for the changes in our infrastructure. Not all infrastructure development is good by any stretch of the imagination. There is a need, for example, for a massive hospital and school rebuilding programme. That is already happening apace, but there is still a lot more to be done. We still need to build more homes for people to live in. We have far too many homes for people to use as holiday homes once in a while, but not enough homes that are suitable for people to live in in the places they want to live—for example, close to their work.

There will be a significant amount of new-build construction as well as rebuild, repair and maintenance construction needed for as long as any of us will be here, and probably for several lifetimes after. We need to help the industry to address the issues that it has just now with its impact on the environment. I think the industry is ready for that discussion and is willing to change.

But I think the change that is being discussed here is one that the industry is resisting, not just because industry tends to resist anything that it does not like, but because it can see that that will significantly threaten the viability of a lot of small businesses across the United Kingdom, and because it can see that the problem that the change is supposed to address is likely to make it even worse. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

3.29 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Efford. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this debate and for explaining quite a complicated subject in a way that most of us, including me, could understand—almost.

Volumetric concrete mixers have been in operation in this country for nearly 50 years. At the time of their arrival, they were a groundbreaking concept: they allowed all the ingredients for concrete to be stored separately, with operators then mixing the concrete on-site. It must have seemed quite magical, back in those times, to have that scientific breakthrough. It enabled manufacturers to circumnavigate the shelf-life issue faced by drum mixers, which need to deliver and pour their concrete in two hours—as we have heard from many speakers today—or the entire batch is wasted, and deposited in landfill.

Over the years, there have been major innovations in the VCM industry, culminating in the invention of the combined VCM plus pump, which eliminates the need for two lorries, helping to reduce congestion and emissions. VCMs may also provide benefits to the consumer. For example, if a customer underestimates or overestimates

the amount of concrete needed, a VCM can adapt and increase the quantities, without relying on a second delivery, or produce a smaller batch, preventing the dumping of wasted concrete in landfill.

The ability to batch on site may also be beneficial to those who live in rural communities. We have already heard the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talk about that, particularly in the context of her own constituency. We all know how many rural areas have difficulties in all sorts of ways whenever there are delivery issues. This seems to be something that it is quite important to take on board.

However, I am aware that by 2028 the VCM industry will be subject to the same weight limits as drum mixers and other heavy goods vehicles. I have met operators of these vehicles multiple times to discuss their concerns about what they see as an existential threat to their industry. Due to the extra equipment that VCMs carry in order to batch the concrete on site, being subject to that weight limit could cut their capacity and impact on their business models. That may result in operators having to send out multiple VCMs for a job, whereas before it could be managed by one vehicle. I am concerned about the impact that it could have on British VCM operators, as well as on air pollution and congestion.

There are already weight exemptions and allowances for certain vehicle types. Indeed, VCMs currently have such an allowance, albeit on a temporary basis. Surely the simplest thing to do is to extend the exemption and make it permanent. I really sympathise with the points raised by all right hon. and hon. Members today that VCM operators require certainty if they are to continue to operate.

I encourage the Minister to engage meaningfully with the concerns of the VCM industry and consider the points raised in this debate. There seem to be many issues there that the Government have pledged to sort out—for instance, climate change, the carbon footprint, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises, which we know are the backbone of this country. That would seem only right. I know that the Minister has already spoken to the operators about their concerns. I hope that those discussions, and the contributions that he has heard today, will lead to a long-term solution that will protect jobs and encourage British innovation.

3.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a delight to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I apologise to the Chamber that the roads Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), is unavoidably detained, but I was involved with this issue when I was roads Minister, so I hope that I can bring some degree of understanding.

I very much associate myself with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) in relation to the just announced death of Winnie Ewing, who was by any standards a great politician and a great spokesman for her party and her views.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for this motion and for the work he has done on this issue. Let me start by making a fundamental point. In 2017 and 2018, legal changes were made in relation to volumetric concrete mixers in

two areas, as he highlighted. One change was to include volumetric concrete mixers in the operator licensing system, which ensures that VCMs are in the same regulatory regime as most large goods vehicles. As far as I understand it, there is no request to revisit that change. The second change concerned the inclusion of volumetric concrete mixers in the annual heavy vehicle roadworthiness testing regime. They were previously exempted, in part because of the difficulty of accommodating large vehicles in testing stations. However, as VCMs are based on a standard HGV chassis, it became clear over time that they could be accommodated on that basis.

It is important to say, however, that no changes were made to the maximum permitted weights for volumetric concrete mixers by regulation. It is also important to see that in context. The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) asked whether some of these recent announcements really should be ignored because, as he read it, they were about higher weights. The answer is that no increase to axle weights was announced, and we are principally concerned with axle weights.

Inclusion in the annual heavy vehicle test requires a plate displaying the maximum on-road weight of the vehicle. This displays beyond doubt what is the legally accepted maximum weight on roads of a heavy goods vehicle. That is often different from the maximum weight a vehicle is permitted off-road, or on private land, and which the vehicle chassis can bear.

The Department recognised that there had been a significant period previously of operations on public roads by some volumetric concrete mixers at higher weights than these unchanged maximum on-road weights, a situation that it and others regard as illegal. Therefore, the Department sought views and checked the feasibility of a limited temporary period of operation at higher maximum permitted weights for volumetric concrete mixers. Of course, this is not an uncontested issue. There are other parties—whether they be local authorities, mayoralities, or other players in the relevant market—who have views that may not directly accord with all the views held and discussed in this debate.

Following engagement with parts of the industry and a written consultation, Ministers decided to allow an exceptional temporary weight allowance for volumetric concrete mixers for up to 10 years. Other possibilities were considered, and discussions were held at that time with parts of the industry, but no other exceptions were ever approved by Ministers.

The exceptional temporary weight allowance is a significant adaptation for VCMs, which comes despite the extra wear and tear that they impose on road surfaces. Load modelling done by the Department in collaboration with National Highways—which, at that time, was Highways England—highlighted a particular risk to bridge structures, which affects the durability of this exceptional arrangement. It is therefore not true, as I think was implied in one contribution to the debate, that in some sense National Highways has signed off higher weights. On the contrary, it found in its report that those weights sit outside the bridge load model and therefore are likely to increase wear on bridges.

Peter Grant: The Minister mentions the particular issue of bridges that might not be able to sustain a higher weight. Why is a weight limit not placed on individual

[Peter Grant]

bridges, so that the heavier vehicles can be allowed on the parts of the road network that can sustain such loads?

Jesse Norman: That is a separate question, and, of course, local authorities may or may not choose to do such things. This is about what the view of National Highways was, and as I have said, its view was that there was a particular risk to bridge structures and that that was one of the constraints on the durability and longevity of this arrangement.

An initial assessment into road wear by the Department suggested that increasing the weight limit for four-axle volumetric concrete mixers from 32 tonnes to 38.4 tonnes could increase average road wear by between 110% and 220% per vehicle. The exact impact is heavily dependent on the vehicle's loading.

The Department recently announced the introduction of longer semi-trailers into general use because many operators run out of trailer space before reaching the permitted maximum gross vehicle weight. These longer semi-trailers are up to 2.05 metres longer than a standard trailer, but are designed to carry the same weight as standard trailers. Therefore, there is no increase in the normal maximum weight or axle weights for vehicles using the longer semi-trailers.

The Department recently announced regulations to implement an increase in weight limits for certain alternatively fuelled or zero-emission vehicles. The weight limit increase is up to a maximum of 1 tonne for an alternatively fuelled vehicle and a flat 2 tonnes for a zero-emission vehicle. In all cases, the maximum weight limit for individual axles—again, the key measure—remains unchanged. The vehicle types that are having their weight limits changed by this regulation include articulated lorries and road train combinations with five or six axles normally limited to 40 tonnes and four-axle combinations normally limited to 36 or 38 tonnes. No additional weight allowance will apply to the heaviest articulated lorry and road train combinations of 44 tonnes or four-axle rigid motor vehicles of 32 tonnes.

Mr Carmichael: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister because a number of people in the debate have said, "We do not understand how the decision was reached", and he has given us an insightful account of how that happened. Those of us who have served in Government know how it often works: the focus is on the process rather than the outcome. That is exactly what has happened here. If he were to compare the outcome—the consequences of the changes that were made—with the consequences of the previous regulations, on any cost-benefit analysis, would it not look like a slightly unusual move to make?

Jesse Norman: It is not true to say there has been a focus on process rather than outcome. On the contrary, it is specifically the concern that there may be an adverse outcome on road wear and tear and safety that sits behind the concern to maintain the position as it is, or has been, on vehicle axle loadings.

Let me come to the wider point that the right hon. Member touched on. I note the points about the value of the industry and that the use of VCMs has important

commercial advantages over alternatives, such as allowing an exact quantity of concrete to be produced. That has influenced the implementation of the temporary weight arrangement. However, the 32-tonne maximum weight for four or more axle goods vehicles used in normal service is important in the context of maintaining the roads. It is not possible to allow the general circulation of large numbers of overweight rigid goods vehicles freely on the roads. That would risk substantial structural damage and failure.

For heavy loads, some other construction-related vehicles, such as tippers, are available as six-axle articulated combinations. They can carry higher loads legally. For VCMs, there has been some design development. Part of the earlier reason for the exemption was to allow a period in which there could be design development, but I appreciate that the unladen weight cannot be reduced by the difference between the temporary arrangement and the standard weight limit.

The Department recognises the high level of concern expressed in the debate about the businesses of those operating VCMs. I do not think it is true to say that those businesses have not received a good hearing. They have been extremely effective in making their case over the years, in my experience. The number of colleagues referenced by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland testifies to the effectiveness of the APPG and the sector in mobilising political opinion. Those concerns rightly include the viability of what are, in many cases, small businesses, and we understand that. It is important to recognise, as many Members have today, the contribution made by the industry more widely in the construction sector.

The Department proposes—the right hon. Member alerted us to this key point—to seek evidence about whether the current temporary arrangements for special maximum weights for VCMs should be amended. That comes just over halfway through a temporary 10-year period. The intention is to review the temporary weights and the criteria for them, including how long they will last. The volumetric concrete mixer arrangement is, after all, unique.

In conducting that call for evidence, it will be important to consider whether there are other situations that are in any way similar to the one we have discussed today. National Highways will be commissioned to properly re-examine the bridge load assessments, which have been raised in the discussion, as they relate to VCMs. It is important that all potentially interested parties are able to comment and are reached. We therefore intend that a public call for evidence should be launched during the autumn, and I expect a wide range of parties to be interested and potentially to make submissions.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister reassure us that the call for evidence will be wide-ranging and not just focused on weight on roads? We have highlighted that ending up sending two lorries—a pumping lorry and a concrete lorry—doubles the weight carried by roads, but we have also highlighted the issues of environmental pollution, congestion and reducing carbon, which are even more important these days.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that those are important issues, and it is very important that a call for evidence does not become a general trawl

through the literature but retains its focus, and its focus will be on whether the current temporary arrangements for maximum weights should be amended. I suspect, although I cannot predict—we will leave this for the Minister and officials who are doing the final work to decide—that any proper consideration or evidence that bears on that question will be potentially submissible.

It is important to say that running at higher than usual weight is not without risk. It increases road wear, and some of that road wear increases very rapidly—indeed, up to the power of four—with axle load. Of course, there are also risks associated with braking and tyre wear. Volumetric concrete mixers are used heavily in some urban areas, including central London, alongside cyclists. As I have said, before 2018, and despite the law, some had operated at higher weights for many years. There is a concern that overloaded or heavy volumetric concrete mixers may be liable to have a higher centre of gravity, which could create safety risks. In some recent examples, VCMs have been stopped and found to have severe defects, including being loaded to a weight exceeding that of even the higher temporary arrangements.

All those issues and evidence will have to be taken into account as part of this proper process of consideration, but I hope that hon. Members present will regard it a useful step forward that the Department has decided to hold a call for evidence. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate these issues today.

3.46 pm

Mr Carmichael: First, I very much echo the comments of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) about the sad passing of Winnie Ewing. Winnie Ewing was

the first elected parliamentarian I ever saw in the flesh, probably in 1981. She turned up—I was never quite clear whether it was at her invitation or the invitation of the school; either was possible with Winnie—and addressed the assembled school. Even as a 12, 13 or 14-year-old—however old I was—her passion and commitment for standing up for the communities across the highlands and islands that she represented was obvious, almost palpable. Her passing is a sad loss to all of us in Scottish politics and, indeed, politics across the whole of the United Kingdom.

All those who have contributed to the debate have made powerful and compelling cases. I am grateful that the Front-Bench spokespeople acknowledged that and for the call for evidence that the Minister announced. That is the way that Government should work, and I am delighted that we now have the opportunity to make this case. I have no doubt that the companies whose effective lobbying has led to the setting up of the APPG—Nigel Griffiths is spearheading that in his professional capacity—will continue to do their work. I see this as an opportunity and not as a conclusion, and I hope that what we have taken here is the first step along the road. If it is, we have done something that will benefit all our constituencies and the wider construction industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered volumetric concrete mobile plants.

3.49 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 22 June 2023

TREASURY

Legislation Day: Finance Bill

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins):

In line with the approach to tax policy making set out in the Government's documents, "Tax policy making: a new approach", published in 2010, and, "The new Budget timetable and the tax policy making process", published in 2017, the Government are committed, where possible, to publishing most tax legislation in draft for technical consultation before the legislation is laid before Parliament.

The Government will publish draft clauses for the next Finance Bill, which will largely cover pre-announced policy changes, on 18 July along with accompanying explanatory notes, tax information and impact notes, responses to consultations and other supporting documents. All publications will be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS876]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Marine Biodiversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction: Agreement

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): My noble Friend the Minister of State (Overseas Territories, Commonwealth, Energy, Climate and Environment), Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park, has made the following written ministerial statement:

On 19 June 2023, an agreement that will mean much greater protection for the two-thirds of the global ocean that lies beyond national jurisdiction was adopted by consensus at the United Nations.

The agreement under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) is known in short as the BBNJ Agreement.

It will be opened for signature on 20 September 2023. Sixty countries need to become parties to the Agreement for it to enter into force.

This is a historic agreement for biodiversity and will play a key role supporting the delivery of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, including helping to achieve the target to effectively conserve and manage at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. For ABNJ, it will establish a mechanism to designate Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and other Area Based Management Tools (ABMTs), establish new obligations to share the benefits of research into and utilisation of Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs), build upon provisions in UNCLOS on Environmental Impact Assessments for new activities and strengthen capacity building for developing states, along with broader technology transfer.

The agreement is important not only for ocean protection but is also a demonstration that UN multilateral diplomacy can still succeed in reaching an ambitious agreement on issues of shared interest and concern. It helps to reinforce the role of the UNCLOS as the cornerstone of international ocean governance.

As set out in the 2021 Integrated Review of UK Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy and its refresh in March 2023, the UK's vision is that by 2030 the ocean will be effectively governed, clean, healthy, safe, productive and be biologically diverse, linking resilient and prosperous coastal communities around the world, and supporting sustainable economic growth for the UK, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies. To deliver this vision, we will combine our work on maritime security, the environment and trade. Fundamental to this will be an absolute commitment to upholding UNCLOS in all its dimensions, as an essential enabler of global prosperity, security and a healthy planet.

The UK played a significant and proactive role in achieving the success of the BBNJ Agreement in over 10 years of negotiations. Under the leadership of the FCDO, we plan to take the necessary steps to ratify the agreement as soon as possible, working closely with Defra and other UK Government departments and the devolved Administrations to consider legislative measures necessary to comply with new obligations under the agreement.

The UK will continue to be at the forefront of international efforts to deliver effective ocean governance and will work with others to support ratification and implementation of the agreement, particularly by developing countries. This will include preparatory work to develop a new institutional framework and Secretariat for BBNJ, ensuring close co-ordination with existing regional and sectoral bodies such as the International Maritime Organisation, securing funding for early capacity building and arrangements for the first meeting of the conference of the parties once the agreement enters into force. We will work to ensure that the best available science and evidence underpins proposals to establish ABMTs, which include MPAs, under the Agreement and that UK researchers and innovators can contribute fully to new provisions on MGRs.

[HCWS875]

Petitions

Thursday 22 June 2023

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Local post office closure

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South

Declares that local Post Offices provide a vital service for the community, further declares that it is particularly important that they are nearby and easily accessible for older people and people with mobility difficulties, notes that the closure of Daventry Road Post Office in Cheylesmore, Coventry, resulted in the loss of this service in the area.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to support better provision of Post Offices in the community, and specifically for the Post Office on Daventry Road to serve the community of Quinton Park, Cheylesmore, Coventry.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Zarah Sultana, *Official Report*, 18 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 216.]

[P002828]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake):

While publicly owned, Post Office operates at arm's length from Government as a commercial business with its own board. The management of the branch network is an operational responsibility for Post Office Limited. It would therefore not be appropriate for Government to intervene directly in this situation.

However, the Government recognise how important post offices are to their communities, and thus fully appreciate the impact a Post Office branch closure can have on a community. The Government-set access criteria ensure that however the network changes, services remain within local reach of all citizens. The access criteria ensure that 90% of the population are within 1 mile of their nearest post office branch and that 99% of the population are within 3 miles of their nearest post office branch.

The nearest branch from the recently closed Daventry Road post office is the Styvechale post office, at 82 Baginton Road, Coventry CV3 6FQ, which is located just over a mile away from Daventry Road. The Government understand that Post Office Limited has received an application for a new post office located in Daventry Road. This application is currently being progressed.

TRANSPORT

East Putney station

The petition of residents of the constituency of Putney,

Declares that the latest available figures show a footfall of 6.18 million passengers a year through East Putney station, more than neighbouring Southfields and Putney

Bridge stations yet there is currently no step-free access to the station platform, notes that this makes it impossible for many people with mobility issues to use the station and very difficult and dangerous for parents with wheelchairs, anyone with luggage and during peak usage times, and further declares that step-free access at East Putney Station is urgently needed to increase accessibility for all those wishing to use it.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to consider East Putney tube station for step free funding and deliver step free access at East Putney station.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Fleur Anderson, *Official Report*, 8 June 2023; Vol. 733, c. 953.]

[P002835]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden):

Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor and TfL, and this includes decisions with regards to accessibility on the TfL network. It is up to them to determine where best to deliver step-free access and identify the funding for it.

The longer-term funding settlement agreed between Government and TfL of 30 August 2022 supports almost £3.6 billion-worth of projects, secures the long-term future of London's transport network, and brings Government's total funding to over £6 billion since the start of the pandemic.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Incorrect child maintenance assessments

The petition of Craig Bulman,

Declares that many Non-Resident Parents (NRP's) Paying Parents (PP's) have been incorrectly assessed by the Child Support Agency (CSA)/Child Maintenance Service (CMS); further that these incorrect assessments followed by wrongful enforcement has caused the NRP's/PP's loss harm and injury, financial loss and an impact on their mental health, further declares that there is no proper way to compensate the victims who have been affected.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently compensate those affected by incorrect child maintenance assessments.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 27 April 2023; Vol. 731, c. 18P.]

[P002831]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies):

The Child Maintenance Service (CMS) calculation process is simple and efficient; it uses income information for the latest available complete tax year, provided by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) which ensures transparency in the process and consistent use of data across Government. Access to income information reported by HMRC also allows the CMS to capture a wide range of income types, including income from property, savings and investments (including dividends), and other miscellaneous income. Calculations are reviewed annually so they stay up to date, and parents can report a change in their income at any time. If the change is significant enough, the CMS can amend the maintenance calculation.

The calculation is designed to be fair for both parents whilst ensuring the paying parent contributes a reasonable amount of their income to support their children they don't live with. It takes into account the number of qualifying children, any other children that the paying parent is responsible for, and the number of nights the paying parent has overnight care of the qualifying children. The calculation represents an amount of money that is broadly commensurate with the amount a paying parent would spend on the child if they were still living with them.

Child maintenance calculation rates are set out in legislation. If a parent disagrees with a calculation decision made by the CMS, they can ask for a mandatory reconsideration. If a parent is unhappy with the outcome of the mandatory reconsideration, they can appeal to the independent Social Security and Child Support Tribunal within one month of the mandatory reconsideration decision.

Where the paying parent fails to pay on time or in full, the CMS will attempt to regain compliance. Paying parents are given warnings of the consequences of

non-compliance and caseworkers will seek to establish reasons for missed payments, help parents get back on track with their payments and put a repayment plan in place. If a paying parent is experiencing financial difficulties, CMS caseworkers can signpost parents to financial support and debt advice.

Enforcement powers are used as a last resort and are designed to get money flowing quickly, prevent the build-up of arrears and ensure children get the financial support they deserve. These powers are important to deal with the minority of parents who do not pay, and to deter others from trying the same. Decisions about enforcement actions are made on a case-by-case basis, considering the welfare of all parties, and what will have the greatest chance of securing money for children.

The CMS must consider the welfare of any children involved in any decision regarding enforcement action. Safeguards are in place throughout the process to ensure enforcement action is reasonable and proportionate, and that paying parents are given adequate opportunities to challenge any decision.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 22 June 2023

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Bill

The following is an extract from the Tenth sitting of the Energy Public Bill Committee.

Andrew Bowie: The clause contains a power for the Secretary of State to amend or modify the threshold for capacity in excess of which these measures can be applied. Capacity refers to the tonnage of oil that the

operator has handled in the previous calendar year. This **would not change** the person to whom the powers under this part could apply.

[Official Report, Energy Public Bill Committee, 15 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 299.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie).

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on clause 243.

The correct information should have been:

Andrew Bowie: The clause contains a power for the Secretary of State to amend or modify the threshold for capacity in excess of which these measures can be applied. Capacity refers to the tonnage of oil that the operator has handled in the previous calendar year. This **would change** the person to whom the powers under this part could apply.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 22 June 2023

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