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

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 11 September 2023**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 11 September 2023*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

2.34 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Before we start today's business, I want to make a brief statement about a security matter.

Members and others will have seen media reports yesterday about a security issue relating to the Chinese state and access to this House. I understand that the Metropolitan police have now confirmed that two men were arrested in March on suspicion of offences relating to espionage and that they are on police bail until early October.

As you know, we do not discuss the details of security issues on the Floor of the House, for reasons that are well understood. This is an ongoing, sensitive investigation and Members will of course understand that public discussion of it would be wholly inappropriate. However, I want to reassure Members that the House follows the same vetting procedures as the Government; that issues raised by the media stories are being addressed; and that our security are working closely and effectively with other relevant authorities. We keep our security arrangements under review at all times in order to deal with the evolving threats.

The extremely small number of people who needed to know were immediately briefed, on a strictly confidential basis, given the national security of this sensitive matter. At this stage, I do not wish to say anything further about this issue, and I would remind all Members of the importance of not discussing security issues on the Floor of the House. That is particularly important in this case, where commenting on the identities of those alleged to be involved, engaging in speculation about the case or discussing other details runs a serious risk of prejudicing any further prosecutions—the comments made in the media were unhelpful—something for which I am sure no Member would want to be responsible.

I do not intend to take any points of order on this matter. If Members have security concerns, they are, of course, welcome to raise them outside this Chamber with me or with the House security professionals, or with both.

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### NEW WRIT

*Ordered,*

That, on the fourteenth day of September 2023, Mr Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County Constituency of Tamworth in the room of Christopher John Pincher, who since his election for the said County Constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of His Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Simon Hart.*)

# Oral Answers to Questions

## DEFENCE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

### Service Personnel: Retirement Age and Conditions for Service

1. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the retirement (a) age and (b) conditions for service personnel. [906293]

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** The thoughts and prayers of the whole House will be with the Secretary of State and his family during sitting shiva.

It is right that we record here today the anniversary of 9/11, a terrible act that changed our world. Let me also say that the UK is standing with the Kingdom of Morocco; we are engaged on the ground already and stand by to help in any way that we can.

Defence recognises the need to evolve so that we continue to attract and retain the very best. To that end, the MOD commissioned the Haythornthwaite review into armed forces incentivisation, which was published in June. I will respond formally on behalf of the Department in the coming months, but it is supportive of the recommendations. On retirement ages, I have committed to work with officials and the single services to review rigid cut-offs and to consider establishing an assessment framework to be used on a case-by-case basis.

**Christine Jardine:** May I associate myself with the earlier remarks of the Minister, whom I thank for his answer? As he is aware, I have already taken an interest and written in about this issue. I have a constituent who came to me recently having spent a good number of years in the armed forces. He is very proud of what he has given to keep our country safe but is concerned that the armed forces, particularly the Army, are losing institutional memory. He feels that the cut-off age of 55 for reservists is too young, certainly for more administrative roles. Will the MOD take that into account in the review and consider allowing reservists to stay longer in those roles?

**Dr Murrison:** I am really happy to declare my interest at this point, as I am in my 63rd year and I remain a reservist. I am sympathetic to the points that the hon. Lady makes and we will certainly factor them into our review.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): We know that the Defence Secretary is with his close family today, and we in the Opposition extend our deepest condolences.

I also offer the Secretary of State our warmest congratulations. Over the years and in different roles, I have shadowed him and he has shadowed me, and we both know that the first duty of any Government is to keep our country safe. I will always look to work with him on that basis in his new job.

On personnel, levels of satisfaction with service life have plunged a third over the past 13 years. What is the plan to lift those record low levels of military morale?

**Dr Murrison:** The right hon. Gentleman paints an overly gloomy picture of life in the armed forces for most people. It is a rewarding career and they take with them the skills that they need into civilian life and prosper. However, we are aware of our need to compete in the workplace in the years ahead and, to that end, we have commissioned Rick Haythornthwaite's review, which we broadly agree with and will respond to very soon.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome the SNP spokesperson to his place.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me also associate SNP Members with the words of the Minister for the Secretary of State at this sad time. We also think of Morocco and all those New Yorkers who are remembering today.

We know that the cost of living crisis is affecting us all equally. The Minister has said some fine words today, but we know that for his party, there is often an inverse relationship between rhetoric and action with regard to our personnel. Will the Minister tell the House and members of the armed forces what his Government will do to remedy the shameful reality of armed forces personnel being given the lowest pay rise among public servants—a paltry 5%?

**Dr Murrison:** I think the hon. Gentleman may be in error: the lowest paid members of our armed forces were awarded 9.7% by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, a recommendation that we accepted in full. Seniors got 5.8% and those of two-star rank and above got 5.5%. That will give the best pay award to the least well paid in our armed forces.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I disagree on the numbers. Let us talk about the rhetoric from the right hon. Gentleman—unless his Government are willing to deal with pay and housing conditions for the armed forces properly. As the armed forces personnel leave the forces for better-paid jobs, could it not be time to consider the reason that the police were able to secure an almost 50% higher pay rise than our other uniformed public servants? Was it because they have a statutory body to represent them in dealing with the Government, and why do his Government not support that action?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Gentleman has ignored what I have been saying. He also did not make reference to the freezing of charges for accommodation and food, wraparound childcare and a whole raft of measures that we have introduced to help with the cost of living crisis.

### RAF Quick Reaction Alert Stations

2. **Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the RAF quick reaction alert stations. [906294]

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey):** Royal Air Force pilots and ground crew are poised on quick reaction alert 24 hours a day, seven days a week,

all year round, ready to scramble within minutes. My hon. Friend would point out quickly that it would be remiss of me to say that that is solely the endeavour of fast jet pilots. Equally poised are those in his constituency who crew the tankers that must also deploy rapidly to support. QRA has been launched on five occasions in 2023 with every incident resolved successfully.

**Robert Courts:** I thank the Minister for his kind words about my constituents. He will no doubt have read the report from the Select Committee on Defence, "Aviation Procurement: Winging it?", which warns of an unacceptable gap in combat air mass. With the retirement of the Hercules placing even more demands on the air mobility force, and the Voyagers—to which he rightly pays tribute—being asked to do more and more each month, what confidence does he have that, if required to do so, those forces have enough men, women and machines to defend the UK in a peer conflict?

**James Heapey:** I have complete confidence that quick reaction alert will be resourced. The highest priority of the air force is to defend the homeland. I also have complete confidence that the combat air force, as currently structured, is capable of performing a very wide range of duties around the world. I pay tribute to the work of the Air and Space Commander and his team, who, through work on agile deployment, are finding that we can deploy Typhoon and F-35 ever more quickly to ever more austere operating environments. That drives the productivity of the force even further.

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** There is, of course, no question over the quality of combat aircrews, but there is a big question mark over the quantity of aircraft that they can fly. I want to challenge the Minister on the confidence he has just articulated, because there are serious concerns that our combat aircrew are engaged almost universally in transit and air policing, and have very little aircraft availability to practise proper combat air. What is his assessment of that concern?

**James Heapey:** We take very seriously the work that the Defence Committee does; we enjoy reading the Committee's reports and, as I hope members of the Committee and of the House recognise, often take the findings into policy. I do push back gently, however, because in addition to the incredible work of QRA and the support the Royal Air Force has given to NATO missions over the last 18 months, since the start of the war in Ukraine, they have also been able to support carrier strike deployments, deployment on Exercise Red Flag, and indeed the deployment of a squadron, below full strength, all the way across to Australia. That gets to exactly what I told my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts): that this ability to deploy air force with greater agility, further from home, in more austere settings, is a step change for the Royal Air Force, allowing it to operate from more austere environments rather than solely from its home bases.

### Defence Sector: UK-based Jobs

4. **Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help increase the number of UK-based jobs in the defence sector. [906296]

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):**

The latest estimates suggest that Ministry of Defence investment supports over 200,000 jobs in industries across the UK. I believe that the best way to keep growing jobs in defence is to back the British defence industry. That is why I am delighted to confirm that, this week in London, we are hosting the biggest ever DSEI—Defence and Security Equipment International—showcasing the very best of the British defence industry, with companies large and small. We should remember that they provide not only prosperity in every part of our country, but the means to defend ourselves in an increasingly contested world.

**Mr Sharma:** The Defence Secretary's predecessor rightly prioritised British jobs over buying off-the-shelf from America, but *The Times* recently exposed a difference of opinion with the Prime Minister, who insisted on buying American helicopters. Can the Minister assure the House that the Secretary of State will stand up for British jobs and research and development, or is our only hope to replace him with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey)?

**James Cartlidge:** Debate is ongoing in defence procurement, and has been for many years, about the difference between buying off-the-shelf and having our own sovereign capability. The fact is that, until we brought out the defence and security industrial strategy in 2021, arguably the default position of the MOD was to go primarily for value for money. Since DSIS, we have a more flexible and balanced approach, seen in many specific procurements, where we give much greater weighting to social value and local content. This is illustrated in many procurements because, above all, we want to support British jobs and have our own sovereign capability.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My condolences to the Secretary of State.

Babcock is one of the largest defence employers in the country, but as reported in the Sunday press, its record on refits of surface ships is woeful. It took over four years to refit the Type 23 frigate HMS Iron Duke. Its record on submarines is even worse, taking seven years to refit a Trident boat. According to the journal *Navy Lookout*, which said this online, so presumably the Russians and the Chinese could have read it, a few weeks ago not a single one of our attack submarines was at sea; they were all tied up alongside. This is deeply embarrassing to the Department and to the Royal Navy, whose admirals are tearing their hair out. It is Babcock's fault. Will Minister get the senior directors of Babcock into the Department for an interview without coffee, and ask them to raise their game for the benefit of the Navy and the defence of the realm?

**James Cartlidge:** I have the greatest respect for my right hon. Friend, but he will appreciate that we do not comment on the operational availability of submarines, which is a particularly sensitive matter. However, he is absolutely right that we need to focus on the time it is taking to bring ships and all aspects of our fleet back into service. I confirm that I regularly engage with Babcock, and I will visit Devonport very soon.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome the shadow Minister, Maria Eagle, to her role.

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The Government have wasted £15 billion through the mismanagement of defence procurement, while failing to deliver vital equipment and overseeing the loss of 30,000 highly skilled jobs in the defence and aerospace industry since 2010. Does the Minister accept that preventing another 13 years of Tory failure is key to increasing the number of UK-based jobs in the defence sector, backing British industry and British military resilience?

**James Cartlidge:** I welcome the right hon. Lady to her new position as my ministerial shadow. We are very proud of our record, because in the past year or so we have been faced with a war on our doorstep in Europe, and procurement has risen to the occasion. Defence Equipment and Support in Abbey Wood has delivered kit to Ukraine in record speed. We have seen the acquisition of equipment such as the Archer on a quick basis, to fit our requirements. I absolutely confirm that we are committed to maximising the number of jobs that come from our procurement, while balancing that with the need to give our armed forces the best possible capability.

### Support for Veterans

5. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans. [906297]

11. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent steps Veterans UK has taken to support veterans and their families. [906304]

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** The MOD delivers a range of services to veterans and their families, including the administration and payment of armed forces pensions and compensation, and tailored advice and assistance through the Veterans Welfare Service, Defence Transition Services and integrated personal commissioning for veterans. The independent reviews of those services were published in July, and we will respond in full to the recommendations later this year.

**Maggie Throup:** Last October my constituent, a disabled veteran who served with distinction in Afghanistan and Iraq, applied to the war pension and armed forces compensation schemes. Despite his supplying all the information required, and medical evidence, he is still waiting for the determination of his case almost 12 months on. Will my right hon. Friend look into the case as a matter of urgency and carry out a review of the waiting times for the schemes to make sure that nobody else has to wait such a long time to get their due rewards?

**Dr Murrison:** If my hon. Friend is able to provide further details of that specific case, I would be happy to investigate. The latest armed forces compensation scheme quinquennial review was published on 17 July 2023. The review process aims to ensure that the scheme remains fit for purpose and to identify opportunities for improvement of the sort that my hon. Friend highlighted. The review's recommendations are currently being considered—I think timeliness is foremost among them—and a Government response will be published later this year.

**Debbie Abrahams:** The Royal British Legion's recent report showed that only 8% of disabled veterans who applied for employment and support allowance had their service medical records considered in their work capability assessment. I extend my condolences to the Defence Secretary, but what discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about this matter, and on disregarding all military compensation awards for means-tested and income-based assessments such as for housing benefit?

**Dr Murrison:** Such conversations are live in the context of the work I previously described. We will take into account the hon. Lady's points, which have been made by several people in the defence and veterans community. I know that people feel strongly about such issues. Ultimately, of course, it is a matter for the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury.

**James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con):** This House as a whole provides vociferous support for our veterans of all kinds, particularly through the mechanism of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces. Perhaps I can take this opportunity to pay tribute to Miss Amy Swash, who has now run the APPG for me for eight years, but will sadly leave us shortly for other jobs. I thank her for all the work she has done for a superb amount of time, in particular to raise the plight of veterans.

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I add my tributes to his. I also express my admiration for the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which does a fantastic job in informing and educating colleagues.

**Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab):** In July, the Government published a review of the treatment of LGBTQ+ veterans. The previous Secretary of State's response to that won him many plaudits and his reaction was welcomed, but he did say that he would take his time to ensure we got things right. Can the Minister give us an update on when we can expect a response to the recommendations?

**Dr Murrison:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is right to raise that. At the time I said that the community should allow us time, but not too much time, and I am sure they will hold us to that. We will respond in full to the large number of recommendations, but we are broadly supportive of Lord Etherton's work and there is much in it that we utterly agree with, plus some that we would like to add in the way of changes for the future.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** On that theme, the loss of livelihoods and the long-term suffering endured by LGBTQ+ veterans due to the cruel and unjust ban on homosexuality in the armed forces has been enormous. The Opposition welcome the Etherton review into the ban, and its recommendations, which represent the beginning of a long-overdue healing process. The Secretary of State's predecessor promised that the Government would provide a full response to the review's recommendations after the summer recess, which the House would have an opportunity to debate. Will the Minister confirm when the Government will respond to the recommendations and that the House will still be provided with time to debate that response?

**Dr Murrison:** Clearly, we will be debating this at some length; I hope the House, when it sees the Government response to Lord Etherton's recommendations, will be pleased with it. At the moment, we are working with the community, particularly Fighting With Pride, to ensure that what we put in place is right and is acceptable to those who have been done down by the events between 1967 to 2000.

### Nuclear Test Medals

6. **Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to deliver nuclear test medals. [906298]

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** I am pleased to say that the nuclear test medal is now in production, and we are ensuring that as many as possible of the more than 2,000 veterans and families who have applied for the medal will have it in time for this year's Remembrance events.

**Dr Evans:** The Minister will know that I take an interest in the veterans issue, and I declare an interest as the president of Hinckley's Royal British Legion. A constituent, Alfred Roy Davenport, served in the RAF medical team from November 1956 to November 1959, stationed on Christmas Island. He is 85 and concerned about the delay there has been in the awarding of these medals, so can my right hon. Friend confirm that all veterans will have these awards ready for Remembrance Sunday, so that our servicemen and women can be congratulated on and recognised for their service?

**Dr Murrison:** As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans' Affairs stated in the House on 7 September, the Government are doing everything possible to ensure that as many nuclear test veterans as possible receive their medals in time for Remembrance Sunday. I appreciate the importance of that. A presentation event to award the first medals is actively being considered by the Office for Veterans' Affairs, but it is a balance between issuing the medals for Remembrance Sunday and ensuring that they are awarded in an appropriate manner to this cohort.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** In a written question to the Minister, I asked whether any files had been removed from the MOD's health records of nuclear test veterans. He assured me that the Department was "not aware" of any removal, but many nuclear veterans continue to report finding large gaps when requesting their medical records. Can the Minister therefore clarify, if the files have not been removed, how nuclear veterans and their families can gain full access to them?

**Dr Murrison:** They will need to apply for a subject access request. I reiterate what I said in my answer to her written question: we of course do everything we can to locate records when people request them, and I assure her that we could find none on this occasion.

### Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

7. **Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help support Afghan nationals eligible for resettlement under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. [906299]

12. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Afghan nationals eligible for resettlement under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. [906305]

18. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Afghan nationals eligible for resettlement under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. [906311]

19. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Afghan nationals eligible for resettlement under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. [906312]

22. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help support Afghan nationals eligible for resettlement under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme. [906315]

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey):** The Ministry of Defence's priority remains the relocation of ARAP-eligible Afghans to the safety of third countries at best pace. His Majesty's Government continue to accommodate and support ARAP-eligible people in third countries while they await relocation to the United Kingdom.

**Chi Onwurah:** I am proud to have an Afghan interpreter for the British armed forces as a constituent, but I was ashamed to learn from him that his brother, who worked for six years directly for the Special Air Service in Helmand province, had applied under the ARAP scheme and been rejected without a proper explanation. He is now in hiding in Afghanistan. Will the Minister take up that case as a matter of urgency, and will he explain to the House why his Government are still failing to support those Afghans who risked so much to support our armed forces?

**James Heapey:** The hon. Lady mentions a specific role about which it would be inappropriate to speculate on the Floor of the House. I will, of course, look at the particular case that she mentions. However, it is worth reminding right hon. and hon. colleagues that the ARAP scheme was intended for those who had been in direct support of the UK military—interpreters, most often—and, beyond that, there is a very narrow opportunity for those with special circumstances who have come through under category 4. When colleagues write to the Ministry of Defence to raise a case, they often do so on behalf of somebody who might have served in the Afghan national security forces, not necessarily in the direct employ of the UK military. That is not to cast any judgment on the case that she raises—I will look at that specifically and write to her.

**Matt Western:** There is a deep sense of injustice among former serving officers and other military personnel that we have forgotten the moral obligation to Afghan military personnel and others who served alongside us. Will the Minister confirm just how many Afghan former military personnel are currently presenting as homeless in the UK, and how many are currently in hotels in Pakistan?

**James Heapey:** It seems that my initial reply might have been quite useful, but the hon. Gentleman may not have heard or understood it. ARAP is not explicitly for those who served in the Afghan armed forces alongside the British military; it is for those who served in the employ of the British military in all but a very narrow number of cases. I will write to him on his precise question about Afghan service personnel who are now homeless in the UK—I suspect that they are remarkably few—but Afghan service personnel are not the main target of ARAP. As someone who served in Afghanistan, I share the sense of many of my former colleagues who would have liked to have done more, but that is simply never what ARAP was designed to do. Neither is it credible that the hundreds of thousands of people who served in the Afghan national forces could all be relocated to the UK.

**Janet Daby:** In 2021, I held a public meeting shortly after the evacuation from Afghanistan. It was widely attended by worried and distressed residents, who all wanted help for their relatives' desperate situations in Afghanistan. Over two years have passed, and there are huge problems with ARAP. Can the Minister say why the Government are allowing people and their relatives to suffer for so long?

**James Heapey:** There is a known number of people who worked in the employ of the British military during our campaign in Afghanistan. Our priority has been to work through and match the lists of people we know have worked for us with those who are applicants. It is my understanding that only about 2,000 applications are outstanding, and that 58,000 decisions have been taken in the past two months alone. Overwhelmingly, those decisions are, I am afraid, to say no to people, but we are making good progress and are nearing the end of tracking down all those we know have worked for us.

**Catherine West:** I return to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western): how many applicants are still being kicked out of hotels in the UK, and how many are applying from Pakistan and in hiding?

**James Heapey:** The Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) asked a very particular question about Afghan service personnel, as the record will show. I answered it, but I will need to go away and confirm, because that is not something that ARAP is intended to meet and we will need to see if we can find those statistics. The hon. Lady asks how many applicants have been removed from hotels. The plan is to remove all ARAP applicants from hotels, because they are not here illegally; they have not arrived on boats across the channel. They are entitled to be here, they have access to full universal credit and housing benefit, and much more importantly, they have the right to work immediately on arrival. Our priority, unapologetically—I hope she agrees that this is the right approach—is to get people out of hotels and into houses where they can get on with the life that they so deserve here in the UK as legal citizens.

**Dame Nia Griffith:** It is hardly in the spirit of Operation Warm Welcome that, as the second anniversary of the evacuation of Kabul passed, Afghans who supported

our armed forces were still left crowded into hotels at the taxpayer's expense, or expected to move hundreds of miles from where they have managed to find employment and their children have settled into schools. When does the Minister now expect all Afghans in the schemes to be moved out of hotels and given suitable offers of accommodation?

**James Heapey:** I actually agree with the hon. Lady—her question stands in contrast with the previous one, because it was about the need to get people out of hotels, not suggesting that they should somehow be staying in them. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs has been leading on this task around Government. Few in this House have more emotional energy to drive that mission than he does. He sees it as of huge importance that people are moved out of hotels and allowed to get on with their lives as quickly as possible. I will ask his office to write to the hon. Lady with the exact detail of when he hopes to see the job done.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I commend to the Defence team and, indeed, the House the new book by Larisa Brown, "The Gardener of Lashkar Gah", which outlines in great detail the sort of debt we owe to the people who tried to help our forces. My specific question is not about people serving with the Afghan forces; it is about whether we have a proper database of all those who served with the British forces and are eligible under the scheme, and whether the Minister can guarantee that the scheme will not be closed while some of those people—probably a large number of them—are still in hiding in Afghanistan and thus unable to apply for it.

**James Heapey:** It will not surprise my right hon. Friend to know that the people who worked for the British armed forces over our extended period in Afghanistan appeared on many different lists, and part of the job of work over the past 18 months or so has been to consolidate those into an authoritative list of those whom we know to have worked for us. However, we do have very good records, as one would expect the military to have kept. That allows us to focus our search on people whom we know to be eligible within the pile of applications, and of late, to make rapid progress in informing those who are ineligible. We will, of course, keep the scheme open for as long as it takes to find all of those whom we know worked for us.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): I thank the Minister for his considered remarks. Will he join me in thanking both Colchester City Council and Essex County Council for their work in supporting many Afghan nationals locally who have been in hotels since last autumn? The councils have aided those people to get into housing; however, we still have six families and 40 individuals who need to be supported in temporary accommodation. As such, can the Minister give assurances to the House about the cross-Government work that is taking place to ensure that those families come out of hotels and become settled, and in particular the work that his Department is leading on, helping to get Afghans into employment so that they can settle in the United Kingdom?

**James Heapey:** I can absolutely give my right hon. Friend the assurance she asks for. Given her previous role in Government, she knows better than anybody

that those men and women who have come here have every legal right to start work and to settle in the UK. They deserve their journey here on the back of what they did in support of our armed forces, so we will support them while they are in hotels, and better still, once we have got them settled in more permanent accommodation, we will support them into employment. I will make sure that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs briefs my right hon. Friend on his work on that matter.

### UK Obligations to NATO

8. **Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the UK meets its obligations to NATO. [906300]

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey):** Our commitment to NATO is unwavering. We have strengthened our force posture in Estonia, stationed a light cavalry squadron in Poland, provided the NATO mission in Kosovo with personnel, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and provided specialist personnel to the NATO mission in Iraq. The national flagship, HMS Queen Elizabeth, sailed over the weekend, and will shortly fly the NATO flag as the NATO flagship while on operations in the Euro-Atlantic. We contribute to every NATO mission, declare our nuclear deterrent to NATO, and consistently spend at least 2% of gross domestic product on defence. We will maintain our leading position in NATO over the decades ahead.

**Valerie Vaz:** I place on record my condolences to the current Defence Secretary, and my thanks to the former Defence Secretary, whom we wish well in whatever he undertakes to do.

I thank the Minister for his full response. He will know that NATO's obligations are to work with partners, so can he say what discussions he has had with his counterparts in NATO about working with the African Union to ensure stability and security in that region?

**James Heapey:** Colleagues have rightly offered their condolences to the new Secretary of State, and remarked on the anniversary of 9/11, but the thing that has maybe fallen through the cracks is for us to send our regards to the former Secretary of State, with whom I had the great pleasure of working for three and a half years. His effort and contribution to defence was quite extraordinary, and I think he will be remembered in history as one of the great Secretaries of State. He should be very proud of everything he achieved.

The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that NATO's southern flank, Africa, is of enormous importance to Europe and the security of the Euro-Atlantic. It will not surprise her to know that, in the wake of the coups over the summer in both Niger and Gabon, conversations among European Defence Ministers and NATO Defence Ministers have been regular and urgent as people seek to understand what the response could be. It does not look like it is one in which NATO would be to the fore, but it is clearly in NATO's interests that a European response in Africa to these coups is forthcoming.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I send my condolences to the Secretary of State.



As my right hon. Friend knows, membership of NATO requires an expenditure of 2% of GDP. This is an arbitrary and paltry figure bearing in mind the threats that we all face. What discussions is he having with other NATO partners, many of which are not even spending the 2%, to increase their spending on defence?

**James Heappey:** I steer my hon. Friend to the communiqué from the Vilnius summit, which was very clear that NATO countries that are not yet spending 2% need urgently to increase their spending to do so. Our Prime Minister has gone further and indicated his willingness to spend 2.5% on defence once the economic circumstances allow. I think that that is the right order, because we cannot have physical security without economic security.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): After 13 years of Tory Army cuts, serious and senior military figures are now questioning the UK's ability to deliver our NATO obligations. While NATO is boosting the size of its high-readiness forces from 40,000 to 300,000 following Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, UK Ministers plan to cut the Army further to the smallest since the Napoleonic era. The last Conservative Defence Secretary told this House that the Government had "hollowed out and underfunded" our armed forces. Is that still the position of the Ministry of Defence, and will the Tory Army cuts still be forced through by this latest set of Ministers?

**James Heappey:** The former Secretary of State's comment, which the shadow Minister conveniently quotes in a limited way, was that successive Governments had failed to invest in the enablers that underpinned our war-fighting capability. It is to the credit of this Prime Minister and the two Conservative Prime Ministers who went before him that commitments have been made to grow our defence budgets, including under Prime Minister Johnson a £19 billion increase to the defence budget and under this Prime Minister another £5 billion in the last year or so. The shadow Minister also ignores this: when he says that NATO is increasing its rapid reaction force, that does not mean that in NATO armies are growing; it just means that the armies in NATO are committing ever more of the forces they have to NATO's high-readiness formations. The British Army is to the fore in that.

#### Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

10. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme is effective. [906303]

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey):** I said in May to the House that we aim to process all outstanding initial ARAP applications by the end of August. I can report that we have just 2,000 complex cases remaining from more than 93,000 principal applications that we received. We have issued over 58,000 decisions to applicants in the past three months, giving them the clarity they deserve, and we continue to move at best pace to process the remaining applications.

**David Simmonds:** I thank my right hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues for the work done over the summer, including with Hillingdon and Harrow councils in my constituency, on support for those who have served in support of our armed forces. In future, as Afghan bridging operations come to a close, can he commit to work with local authorities to ensure that those who have put their lives on the line supporting our military operations continue to be supported in their new lives here in the UK?

**James Heappey:** I certainly can, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): What liaising does the Minister do with the Home Office? I have an Afghan special forces interpreter who came here having done valiant work during Operation Pitting. His mother, father and siblings left Afghanistan and ended up in Ukraine of all places, and they moved to the UK last year. The Home Office gave them temporary leave to remain, only for them to receive a letter in the past couple of months saying that they would have to be deported back to either Afghanistan, Ukraine or Rwanda. In that case I interceded and the Minister's office helped, but what is going on between his Department and the Home Office?

**James Heappey:** From the question, I can see all sorts of ways in which that might present quite a confusing case to colleagues in the Home Office, especially if those in Ukraine proceeded to the UK under a mechanism other than the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. May I look at the detail of the case and come back to the right hon. Gentleman, rather than speculate?

#### Service Accommodation

13. **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of service accommodation for armed forces personnel. [906306]

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):** The Government continue to invest significant sums to improve the quality of UK service family accommodation, with £337 million invested over financial years 2020-21 and 2021-22 combined, and £163 million in 2022-23. The forecast for this financial year is £312 million.

**Emma Hardy:** Ofsted chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, has repeatedly said that she has "deep concerns" about the "continued failures" to improve service accommodation for armed forces recruits over the past seven years. Will the Minister explain why those concerns from neutral Ofsted inspector Amanda Spielman have fallen on deaf ears, and why those improvements are yet to be made?

**James Cartlidge:** This is an extremely important subject, and we care immensely about improving our estate. Such concerns do not fall on deaf ears. If that were the case we would not have put on the table a further £400 million for SFA in the defence Command Paper refresh. Precisely because of that additional funding, this year our spend will be almost double that of last year.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The Prime Minister said he was going to lead by example, and that when it came to the military base at Catterick, he was going to ensure that illegal migrants were housed there. We now understand that the generals have said they do not want a bunch of Afghans and Iraqis next to their squaddies, so nothing is happening with regard to illegal migrants being put there, although the Ministry of Defence is so determined that its soldiers should not be placed near migrants that it is moving them out of RAF Scampton. When will illegal migrants be placed in Catterick, as promised by the Prime Minister? I want a date and I want it now.

**James Cartledge:** I visited Catterick on Friday and I discussed precisely that matter with senior members of the armed forces based at Catterick. The characterisation that my right hon. Friend uses is not correct. These matters are being considered objectively and carefully, but that work is ongoing.

#### **Defence Infrastructure Organisation: Service Accommodation for Injured Veterans**

14. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in meeting the needs of injured veterans when adapting service accommodation. [906307]

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** The Defence Infrastructure Organisation provides additional needs and disability adaptations to service family accommodation. Those provide changes to SFA to meet a family's needs, as set out by a suitably qualified healthcare professional. Once the scope of any adaptation has been agreed with all parties, works will be delivered as quickly as possible. That gives service personnel reassurance that their families' needs can be met wherever they are assigned, regardless of the length and number of postings they have within their service career.

**Helen Morgan:** The Minister will remember that in June I asked about a badly injured veteran in my constituency. He has written confirmation from the former Defence Minister in 2021 that he would receive extensive adaptations to his home. Those adaptations have not happened, and the situation is so serious that Op Courage has instigated safeguarding proceedings against the Ministry of Defence to protect my constituent. In June the Minister requested that I write to him. I did so yet again, but I still have not received a reply. Will the Minister meet me finally to sort this out? In doing so, will he reassure the House that a Conservative Minister's word is worth the paper it is signed on?

**Dr Murrison:** I think that is a little harsh. I have discussed this matter with the hon. Lady, and I would of course be more than happy to meet her to discuss her constituent's case further. She will forgive me if I do not share the details with the House.

#### **Topical Questions**

T1. [906318] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families (Dr Andrew Murrison):** I was privileged to attend the Invictus games this weekend in Düsseldorf. It was truly humbling to meet inspiring individuals who have triumphed in adversity. I took the opportunity to discuss with my Ukrainian counterpart the care and rehabilitation of veterans and the UK's unwavering support for her country.

**Simon Jupp:** There are more than 265,000 former members of the armed forces in the south-west, many of whom reside in my constituency of East Devon. We must ensure that every veteran can access the services they need when they leave the service. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress being made towards delivering ID cards to all veterans by Remembrance Day this year?

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend will be aware that phase 1 of this project is already completed, which is to say that as people leave the armed forces, they are issued with their veterans cards. Those who left before December 2018 should get their cards by the end of this year. A veteran does not require a card to prove their status; there are several ways to verify service, and the lack of a card should not act as a barrier to accessing support, but I recognise the importance of this card for many, in particular as a form of proving their identity and accessing services.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**John Healey** (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): As Ministers know, UK unity on Ukraine stays strong and the Government will continue to have Labour's fullest support on military aid. Ukrainians are now urgently asking for more to help their current counter-offensive to succeed, and since January, the Prime Minister has repeatedly pledged to accelerate Ukraine's support. When will this happen?

**Dr Murrison:** The right hon. Gentleman will know full well that the United Kingdom is probably the lead nation on many fronts among our European peers—financially, in terms of kit and in supporting the people who are conducting the fight against Putin's aggression. We will continue to do that, and at the weekend in Düsseldorf, I reiterated that to my Ukrainian counterpart. I do not think anybody could be in any doubt that the United Kingdom is leading Europe on this front, and we will continue to do so.

**John Healey:** But I fear UK leadership on Ukraine is flagging. The UK Government have committed £4.6 billion, yet Germany has now committed €17 billion. The UK's 14 tanks have now been dwarfed by 324 from Poland, and last week's decision to proscribe Wagner as a terrorist group was taken by the European Union 10 months ago. Will the Minister accept that we must accelerate UK military support and redouble the UK's defence diplomacy to maintain western unity and solidarity?

**Dr Murrison:** The UK Government prefer action rather than words, and I point to the 20,000 Ukrainians we are training, to Storm Shadow and to the fact that kit is going out the door right now and being used on the ground. Rhetoric is one thing; action is another. In that way, I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman has to admit that the UK is continuing to lead Europe.

We will certainly do so going forward, and there can be no doubt that Ukrainians themselves appreciate the strength and rigour of UK—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is topicals; I decide how quick they will be. I do not need any help from those on the Front Bench. Can we please make sure we get Back Benchers in? If not, tell me which one you do not want to allow in.

T4. [906322] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): Continuity of education allowance is an important recruitment and retention facility for the armed forces, but it has not kept up with inflation in recent years. Can the Minister commit to ensuring that CEA levels are not eroded in the future?

**Dr Murrison:** CEA is an important way of making sure that the education of service children is not disrupted. To that end, I have asked for a review of CEA to make sure it is fit for purpose, and I will have the results of that review later this year.

T2. [906320] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): It is 41 years since the attack on the Sir Galahad in the Falklands conflict in which 56 died and many more were injured. Ever since, survivors have sought transparency about what happened, but they need documents declassified in full. Will Ministers commit, like the previous Secretary of State, to read the papers with a view to declassifying? Will they also meet my constituent Mike Hermanis and other survivors to discuss that?

**Dr Murrison:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Yes, I can commit to meet her and her constituent, if she wishes to do so.

T5. [906323] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): A key question from the Ukrainian theatre is about the effectiveness and lethality of emerging drone technology. What steps are being taken to ensure that NATO has world-class compatible, deployable drones to meet emerging threats?

**The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge):** My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. It must be clear to everyone just from what is available on social media that uncrewed air systems, as they are called, have an extraordinary impact in theatre. I reassure him that we are working on a strategy to look at how we can make the most of this capability to ensure that, above all, we have our own cutting-edge sovereign capability.

T3. [906321] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Ajax fighting vehicle is proving to be something of a stealth weapon. When will the Government produce or provide the House with a statement explaining where we are up to with the project and when it will be delivered to the frontline?

**James Cartlidge:** I did give a statement to the House—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was present—in which I confirmed that we would learn the lessons of the Sheldon review, but, above all, confirmed the good news that Ajax was with the field Army for regular training. I hear that that training is going extremely well.

T7. [906325] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Dealing with the challenges that armed forces families face is vital for strong defence. I made a promise to many of the families I was privileged to meet during the “Living in our shoes” review that the recommendations would not gather dust. How can I find out where we are on recommendations 36, 48, 68 and 96, for example?

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not know off the top of my head what those recommendations relate to. I can say to him that Defence is very fortunate in having him and his colleagues as co-authors of the report on the armed forces family strategy steering group, acting as critical friends and holding Defence to account against the strategy action plan. I would be more than happy to meet him to go through those recommendations one by one.

T6. [906324] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What assessment has been made of the extent of the use of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete within Defence estate buildings? Has any assessment been made at Faslane naval base?

**James Cartlidge:** At the moment, we are not releasing specific details because the work is ongoing, but I assure him and the House on two points. First, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has been undertaking a huge amount of work—in fact, there has been work on RAAC in the MOD context since 2019. Most importantly, we are not aware of any impact from RAAC on service family accommodation.

T9. [906327] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we back British military manufacturers? What steps is he taking to speed up delayed procurement decisions? Will he visit North Devon to meet some of the innovative suppliers manufacturing here in the UK?

**James Cartlidge:** It is good news on both fronts for my hon. Friend. First, yes, a lot of work is going on to improve the speed of procurement. I am also pleased to confirm that I have already a visit planned to her part of the world in a couple of weeks. I will liaise with her office about meeting those companies.

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

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): Today marks the anniversary of 9/11, and while our focus now has returned to state aggression, does the Minister agree that the threat of Islamic extremism—whether home-grown or from abroad—remains and that our defence posture should reflect that?

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey):** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although the focus of the MOD and so many other parts of the Government has increasingly been on hostile state actors over the last few years, today more than any is a reminder of the threat of violent extremism. I pay tribute to the hundreds of men and women around the UK armed forces who are deployed on missions countering violence and extremism as I speak.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): Will the Minister update the House on the progress being made to settle the claims of thousands of veterans and their families for what is commonly called Gulf war syndrome?

**Dr Murrison:** The hon. Member is right to raise that. The armed forces compensation scheme is up and running for them. I am afraid that there have been delays in some of those applications; I referred to that earlier on. On the science behind it, obviously, we in Defence comply with the best available, as assessed by the independent medical expert group, and we will make policy accordingly. I understand the point he is making and would be happy to discuss it with him further.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Ukrainian and UK defence companies are going up against barriers and bureaucracy when trying to set up joint working and joint projects. Could my hon. Friend update the House on how he is reducing that, so that bilateral collaboration can be made easier and quicker?

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend has been an absolute champion of all matters relating to our relationship with Ukraine. We have seen very rapid procurement, particularly in relation to urgent requirements going into Abbey Wood in his constituency. I understand that he will hold a meeting shortly with some major Ukrainian defence industrialists, which he has kindly invited me to, and I look forward to engaging with him and those companies soon.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Last September, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) announced £2.3 billion to be made available for Ukraine in this financial year. We are now in another September, with a new Secretary of State. When can we expect that sum of money to be made available to Ukraine?

**James Heapey:** The Prime Minister engages with world leaders all the time to discuss what is needed in Ukraine, and he has an extraordinarily close relationship with President Zelensky. Both my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and Prime Minister Johnson delivered on their commitments. The Prime Minister continues to do exactly the same; he will be at the Dispatch Box in about an hour and perhaps Ukraine might be mentioned.

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that our veterans make some of the best role models in society. Will he applaud my constituent Bill Cooksey, who at the age of 102 completed the Great North Run this weekend on behalf of NHS charities?

**Dr Murrison:** What can I say? I certainly congratulate Bill on completing the Great North Run at such an extraordinary age. I admire him hugely, and I congratulate him.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The previous Secretary of State promised that he would come to David Brown Santasalo in Huddersfield to see the wonderful work that the company does producing the defence equipment that we need. Will one of the team be able to fulfil that promise?

**James Cartlidge:** It is always a pleasure to engage with the hon. Gentleman. If I cannot visit that specific company, I intend to hold forums for small and medium-sized enterprises around the country—the next one is in Wales, but we will certainly hold them in his part of the world—and I will let him know the details.

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): While Ukraine continues to combat Putin's aggression on the battlefield, there is no let up in Russia's nefarious campaign of espionage and subversion against western democracies. That threat, and the so-called grey zone, spans the public, private and defence sectors, aiming to continually challenge our critical national infrastructure capabilities. What work is the MOD doing across Government Departments, and the private and public sectors, to combat hybrid threats?

**James Heapey:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is helpful that the Deputy Prime Minister is sitting on the Front Bench as I answer her question, because he leads the necessary cross-Government effort, of which defence plays an enormous part. The National Security Act 2023 has been passed, as has the National Security Investment Act 2021, and there is £2.6 billion of investment through the national cyber strategy 2022. Defence supports His Majesty's Government's activities, applying defence levers to protect UK crucial interests from state threats by denying and deferring adversary attack.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will get a sore throat if we carry on like this.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): One of the greatest problems that my veteran constituents have is housing accommodation. It is as scarce as hen's teeth, as we would say back home. What discussions has the Minister had with the Housing Executive in Northern Ireland to secure funding and housing for veterans who have just finished service or are retiring?

**Dr Murrison:** Clearly, we want to improve service accommodation all the time. However, 97% of service accommodation meets or exceeds the decent home standard. That is admirable compared with the record of many local authorities. We are investing in accommodation, and it is improving all the time. I very much regret the occasional report of accommodation that falls short of the mark, and we seek to rectify it as soon as we can.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): We have heard this afternoon how important the continuity of education allowance is for service families. Does the Minister assess that Labour's proposed attack on private schools will make it easier or harder to educate service children?

**Dr Murrison:** It would certainly make it far more expensive. It would also threaten small schools like Warminster School in my constituency, which relies very much on service families. I just reflect on the sacrifices made by all people I know who choose to send their children to independent schools, and in particular members of the defence community who are of course required to make a substantial contribution to their children's education in the event that they choose to educate them in the independent sector.

## Security Update

3.35 pm

**The Deputy Prime Minister (Oliver Dowden):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on claims relating to an ongoing counter-terrorism police investigation that were reported in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, Sunday 10 September. The story alleged that two individuals, including a parliamentary researcher, had been arrested on charges of conducting espionage on behalf of China.

These are serious allegations, and it is right that they are being thoroughly investigated by the police and relevant agencies. We must not hamper their work or prejudice any future legal processes by what we say today—as I believe, Mr Speaker, you said at the beginning of today’s proceedings. As you would expect me to say, it would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment on any specific aspect of the active investigation itself. I would, however, point the House to what the Metropolitan police said in their own statement:

“The investigation is being carried out by officers from the Met’s Counter Terrorism Command, which has responsibility for investigations relating to allegations of Official Secrets Act and espionage-related offences”.

Of course, any decision on whether to proceed with a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act, and related legislation, would be a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service.

It remains an absolute priority for the Government to take all necessary steps to protect the United Kingdom from any foreign state activity which seeks to undermine our national security, prosperity and democratic values. The Government have been clear that China represents a systemic challenge to the United Kingdom and to our values. That has been evidenced in China’s continued disregard for universal human rights and international commitments in Xinjiang, its erasure of dissenting voices and stifling of opposition under its new national security law in Hong Kong, and disturbing reports of Chinese coercion and intimidation in the South China sea. We are clear-eyed about that challenge, and we must be able to look the Chinese in the eye and call out unacceptable behaviour directly, just as our Prime Minister was able to do this with Premier Li at the G20 summit in New Delhi this weekend—an approach that has also been taken consistently by our Five Eyes allies.

Actions speak louder than words, and that is why I took the decision to instruct Departments to cease deployment of all surveillance equipment subject to China’s national intelligence law from sensitive Government sites in November last year. It is one of the reasons why I banned TikTok from Government devices; the Government investigated and called out the so-called Chinese overseas police service stations and, as the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), set out in a statement to this House in June, instructed the Chinese embassy to close them; we significantly reduced Chinese involvement in the UK’s civil nuclear sector, including taking ownership of China’s stake in the Sizewell C nuclear power project; and, as Digital Secretary, I took the decision to ban Huawei from our 5G networks.

This afternoon the Procurement Bill is being debated in the other place. The Bill will include national security debarment provisions that will enable us to act when we

see malign influence in our public procurement. In taking this approach, we are aligned with our Five Eyes allies and other G7 partners—indeed, every single G7 partner.

The UK will deploy, again, an aircraft carrier to the Indo-Pacific in 2025; we have announced AUKUS, a new security partnership that will promote a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable; and we will work with Italy and Japan through the global combat air programme to adapt and respond to the security threats of the future, through an unprecedented international aerospace coalition.

These Houses of Parliament stand as a monument to the freedoms of expression and belief that underpin our values, but just as these institutions have provided the paradigm for so many modern democracies, there are still those who fear such freedoms, and who seek to undermine them and to interfere in our society. We maintain constant vigilance in our efforts to understand and root out that interference, and we will always take action to address it, whatever its source.

In 2022, the Government established the defending democracy taskforce, a group that works to co-ordinate across Government to protect the integrity of our democracy from threats of foreign interference. It is engaging across Government, with Parliament, the UK’s intelligence community, the devolved Administrations, local authorities, the private sector and civil society on the full range of threats facing our democratic institutions. Those threats include foreign interference in the electoral process, disinformation, physical and cyber threats to democratic institutions and those who represent them, foreign interference in public offices, political parties and our universities, and transnational repression in the United Kingdom.

Earlier this year, the Government passed the National Security Act 2023, which has overhauled legislation applicable to espionage, sabotage, and any persons acting for foreign powers against the safety and interest of the United Kingdom. The measures in the Act will enable our law enforcement and intelligence agencies to deter, detect, and disrupt the full range of modern-day threats, including threats from China. New offences in the Act will enable the disruption of illegitimate influence conducted for, or on behalf of, foreign states, whether designed to advance their interests or to harm the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom Government will do whatever it takes to protect our national security and this nation’s democratic institutions, which have stood for centuries as a beacon of liberty—wherever the threat may come from.

I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Home Secretary.

3.43 pm

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and for advance sight of it.

Maintaining national security in the face of threats to our values and our democracy is the first duty of any Government, in respect of which Labour stands ready always to work on a cross-party basis to keep our country safe. I pay tribute to all those in our intelligence and security services and police, and those across

[ Yvette Cooper ]

Government and beyond, who work to protect our national security on the anniversary of the awful attacks of 9/11. As we remember those lost, we are in no doubt about the seriousness of the work that they do.

We recognise, too, the seriousness of the allegations involving espionage on behalf of China at the heart of our democracy. It is essential that the police, the intelligence agencies and the justice system are able to do their jobs, and we must support them as they do so. However, we need to know more about what action the Government are taking against attempts by other states to interfere in our democracy and undermine our security. MI5 issued an interference alert about the Chinese Communist party attempting to influence Parliament 20 months ago. The Security Service and others have also raised wider concerns. The Minister referred to the Prime Minister raising strong concerns with China about unacceptable interference. Did the Prime Minister do so at the time of those arrests, or has he only done so now, since they have been made public?

The Government set up the defending democracy taskforce to look at foreign interference, but what has it actually done? Is the Minister on it? Has it produced a report for the National Security Council as was promised? Has it looked at vetting levels and delays? The Government opposed the Lords amendment to the National Security Bill that was put forward to introduce stronger checks on donations to political parties, to ensure no foreign influence, and they opposed Labour's proposal to close the loophole on shell companies. Has the taskforce looked at those measures? Why is it not acting in that area?

What is being done about national security prisoners? It beggars belief that Daniel Khalife was charged with national security offences but was able to escape under a van. Can the Minister confirm that even though this individual had already evaded arrest for three weeks when the police first tried to apprehend him, he still ended up in a category B prison? Can he also confirm reports that in 2019 another prisoner was able to escape from Wandsworth prison, also by hiding underneath a van? Has the review been completed of all national security prisoners—those on remand and those convicted—to see what level of prison security is in place? If not, why not?

I want to ask the Minister about the wider issue of the risks to our national security from other states. He has rightly taken action on sensitive surveillance equipment and I am glad that Ministers have accepted Labour's proposals on procurement. In his statement, he rightly talked of the systemic challenge that China poses, including on human rights, but the statement says nothing about the work of the investment security unit. What is it doing? Nor does the statement say anything about the comprehensive approach we need to the risks to our critical national infrastructure, even though the head of MI5 has given a series of warnings and the Intelligence and Security Committee was extremely critical in its report in July, warning of the lack of a proper strategy on China and of short-termism. We need to engage with China on climate change and global issues, but we also need to be robust about defending our national security. That is why the shadow Foreign Secretary has called for a full audit of China's relationship and why

we have supported the National Security Act 2023 but also raised concerns about Iran pursuing kidnap and murder threats and Russia pursuing cyber-attacks.

We recognise that after 9/11 and the appalling terror attacks on 7/7, the country came together. The then Labour Government worked on a major counter-terror strategy—the Contest strategy—involving everyone across Government, the police, the intelligence agencies, local government and the private sector. The Contest strategy has endured and has strong cross-party support, but the Government have been warned for years about rising state challenges, so where is the Contest strategy for state threats? We will support the Government in producing one, and a Labour Government would work cross-party to produce one, but where is it? We need a Contest strategy on state risks, state challenges and state threats to protect our national security. National security is too important to ignore warnings; we need urgent action to defend our national security.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank the shadow Home Secretary for the overall constructive approach with which she has addressed this issue. It is important that we treat issues such as this on a cross-party basis in defence of our democratic institutions, and it is timely that this statement should be made on the anniversary of 9/11. I will endeavour to address the points that she has raised, and I will be happy to write to her on any points that I inadvertently miss out.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary regularly raise with their Chinese opposite numbers Chinese interference in democratic institutions. This is an ongoing approach that has been going on for some time.

The right hon. Lady asked about the defending democracy taskforce, which is led by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security. It reports into the National Security Council, on which I sit, and we receive regular updates on the work that he is doing, working with Departments across Government, not least the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which is responsible for large elements of electoral integrity, the devolved Administrations, local authorities and other matters. The purpose of the taskforce is to bring together all those different elements to pursue a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach when addressing those threats.

The principal purpose of the investment security unit is to provide advice to me, as the quasi-judicial decision maker, in respect of acquisitions that may invoke national security questions. I take advice from the unit on whether the Government should intervene, and we have issued 15 directions in respect of acquisitions in the past year. That is to say we are asking companies to take action, the hardest being to block the acquisition, but it could be some other remedial action. More than half of those directions are in respect of Chinese companies.

The right hon. Lady is entirely right to raise the question of critical national infrastructure, on which I have worked very closely with the head of MI5 and others. Countries around the world are looking again at their critical national infrastructure, particularly in relation to the threat of cyber-crime, which often has a blurred link with hostile states. I take cyber-crime very seriously, and I chair regular meetings on it. We are constantly upping the work we do, against a background in which the external threat continues to rise.

The Government will very shortly respond to the ISC's report. The draft is with Ministers, and it is about to be signed off. I hope it will be with the House this week.

The right hon. Lady rightly raises points about Iran and Russia, particularly in relation to cyber but also across a whole range of issues. As part of our overall approach, we have done two things. First, we have tried to give the agencies a public face with which to interface with businesses and private citizens in a whole-of-society approach. For example, GCHQ now works through the National Cyber Security Centre to advise businesses and individuals on cyber-risks. Equally, we have just created the National Protective Security Authority, which essentially enables MI5 to interface with businesses and individuals on protective security. Those agencies, working through the Cabinet Office and particularly with the Home Office and the Foreign Office, work across the range of issues that particularly arise in relation to Iran and Russia.

Although we take this investigation very seriously, and it clearly should be conducted independently, I reassure the right hon. Lady and the House that the Government are taking a whole-of-society approach across all these issues to strengthen our defences against rising threats.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the ISC.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Without referring to any specific case, may I gently remind the Government that their initial response to the ISC's substantial and wide-ranging report on the national security threat from China, published just two months ago, was to suggest that our findings might be out of date? Will the Deputy Prime Minister therefore confirm that the full Government response, when it comes—we gather it is coming very soon—will set out specific steps to address the threat of Chinese interference, particularly within our democratic system?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The short answer is yes. I have reviewed the response, and I am content that it does exactly that. It will be with my right hon. Friend shortly.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is timely that we are having a security update today. My thoughts and the thoughts of my colleagues are with all those impacted by 9/11 on its anniversary.

I am glad the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned the issues relating to sensitive Government sites and cameras, but Members on both sides of the House had to ask questions on Hikvision for months before the Government took any action. Will they commit to acting more quickly in future, and will the Procurement Bill, as he states, allow that to happen?

I am glad to hear that the response to the ISC report is coming. Will the Government also commit to implementing the recommendations of the ISC report on Russian interference in British politics? Hopefully that response will also come soon.

To turn to some specific questions, when did the Deputy Prime Minister himself learn of these allegations and arrests? Why did MPs only learn of this from *The Times*? Will the Government institute, as soon as possible, a review into the decision-making process that led to MPs not being told, in order that such critical updates are given to MPs in future and that this decision-making process is never allowed to happen again?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We have to be very careful here. This is a major security issue and it would be wrong to expect to break all that in order to brief MPs. The MPs who needed to be told were told and worked very closely on this. Please, be very careful. I think my earlier statement addressed some of the points, but, if need be, we can re-address things.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. On the first point that the hon. Lady raised, we take an evidence-based approach to action. It is right that Ministers take action not on a hunch or an intuition, but on the basis of detailed analysis provided to us by the agencies and by others. That is precisely the approach we took in relation to Hikvision and other China-based companies subject to China's national security laws.

On when I or others learned about this, as Mr Speaker said in a number of the points he made, Members would not expect me to give the House a running commentary on intelligence briefings that I have received, but the House would expect me to be briefed on all matters.

In conclusion, I will make a broader point about parliamentary security. We have the Parliamentary Security Department and it works very closely with the agencies to support Members of Parliament, including with general advice. If Members have specific concerns, they can raise those with the PSD. That is the correct approach, which respects the division between Parliament and Government, and the independence of the House.

**Elizabeth Truss** (South West Norfolk) (Con): These are extremely worrying reports about the level of infiltration of Chinese-supported forces into our democracy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to recognise that China is the largest threat, both to the world and to the UK, on freedom and democracy? Does he not agree that the Government should designate it as such?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** May I begin by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend for all the work she did in this space, particularly when she was Foreign Secretary? She is absolutely right to say that China represents a systemic challenge to our interests and values, and it is also, for example, the No. 1 state-based threat to our economic security. The Government are absolutely clear-eyed about the threats that this nation faces and we are robust in taking action. Indeed, that is why I personally took the decisions in respect of banning Huawei from our 5G networks, and in respect of Chinese CCTV technology and TikTok. We will continue to take whatever steps are necessary, based on appropriate advice, to provide that protection for our nation and our democratic institutions.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): A key part of democracy is the ability to scrutinise the Executive. As the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee said, No. 10's response to our China report was to pooh-pooh it and say that it was out of date. I understand

[Mr Kevan Jones]

that the Government response was due today but has now been put off. The defending democracy taskforce has been mentioned. We have asked for an update on that but are met with radio silence. The Prime Minister has on his desk our report on international partnerships. He has had it on his desk for nearly 10 months now. He usually has 10 days in which to respond, so when will we get that signed off? May I just say to the Deputy Prime Minister that if he is talking about security and democracy in the terms he has, that has to include proper scrutiny? There is a long list of examples of where this Government are trying to avoid it.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Proper scrutiny is provided by the Intelligence and Security Committee. I certainly take the reports produced by the ISC very seriously—*[Interruption.]* I am fully aware of the membership of the Committee, to reassure Opposition Members. It is precisely because we take the recommendations so seriously that the Committee will receive a comprehensive response addressing all these points, including an update on the defending democracy taskforce.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is appalling news that we have a potential espionage cell operating in and around Westminster. As a sanctioned individual alongside many of my colleagues, I am particularly perturbed by the news. Notwithstanding that, this should not perhaps come as a surprise, as the ISC, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), has warned that the Government were ill-prepared and that the necessary security measures were not available.

I ask the Secretary of State a specific question: when was the Foreign Secretary told about the investigation? Was it before he went to Beijing? If he went to Beijing with this knowledge, did he raise it with his counterpart there? It is important to know that. With respect, it is no good coming to the Dispatch Box and telling us that we do not talk about such matters; the Prime Minister did so yesterday, and the investigation is not complete. What did the Foreign Secretary do?

I say to the Secretary of State that the problem lies in the mess we have got into over whether we define China as a threat or not? If it is a threat, why do we not call it that, take the action that is necessary to deal with it on that basis, and sanction some people?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend, who is a former Cabinet Minister and current Privy Counsellor, knows full well that the Government do not provide a running commentary on updates and intelligence received by Ministers. I can assure him that the Foreign Secretary regularly raises electoral interference and interference with our democratic institutions with his Chinese opposite number. Specific cases, particularly those that are subject to an ongoing police investigation, would not, as is generally the case, be raised. On the wider principle, we have been robust and clear-eyed in addressing and raising these points with our Chinese opposite numbers.

On the action we have taken, I set out the steps that I took in respect of TikTok and Huawei, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's support for the

Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021, which we got to a very good place. There is not just that Act, but the National Security Act 2023, the National Security and Investment Act 2021 and the deployment of the carrier fleet. All those things have happened in the past short number of years. They are evidence of the seriousness with which the Government take this threat.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister said that he holds the Intelligence and Security Committee in very high regard. On that basis, will he commit to the recommendation that it made in its recent report on China about updating the guidelines of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments in relation to intelligence and security, particularly referencing China? How will he ensure that they are enforced?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** As I said in answer to a previous question, the full response to the ISC will be coming shortly. An important point has been raised in respect of ACOBA, for which I have overall ministerial responsibility in the Cabinet Office. I will take that away and discuss it with the chair of that committee, Sir Eric Pickles, formerly of this House.

**Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement and I support the action that the Government are taking. On the issue of transparency and accountability, will the data regarding the volume of prosecutions and convictions under existing legislation and the new National Security Act be collated and made available to the House so that we can track the scale of hostile state action? Also, have the Government decided on any necessary changes to the memorandum of understanding with the ISC, as they are required to at least consider under section 93 of that Act?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I do not think I have had chance from the Dispatch Box to pay a genuine, heartfelt tribute to my immediate predecessor as Deputy Prime Minister. Having done the job for a few months, I have a particular appreciation of all the work that my right hon. Friend did when he was in that post.

In respect of the volume of prosecutions and convictions, we seek to be as transparent as we can be with the House. I am sure it is something that we can take away and look at with a desire to do as my right hon. Friend asks. I cannot give him a firm commitment at the Dispatch Box, but if it is possible, I shall seek to do so.

We keep the MOU with the ISC under review. We do not have any current plans to change it, but we keep it under review.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Yet again, we are watching the horse disappear over the horizon and shutting the stable door behind it. Every time we act to take on China, everything the Deputy Prime Minister boasts about is always stated reactively. Just for once, could we get ahead of the curve and take action in relation to genomics and, as I and others have been urging for months now, designate it as part of our critical national infrastructure, so that in a few months' time, we are not again having to explain another failure?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that he did serve in government and in Cabinet for five years, from 2010 to 2015, so he and other



Members of his party need to bear some responsibility for the decisions made, although I would think that they would take pride in the decisions that we took. More recently, under this majority Conservative Government, we have taken a huge range of steps, including passing the National Security Act and the National Security and Investment Act.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate point about genomics and its relevance to critical national infrastructure. It is not currently designated as such, but in my role in the Cabinet Office, I keep the register of critical national infrastructure under review, and I am exploring the matter.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I thank you personally, Mr Speaker, for the care and support you have shown to those of us who have been sanctioned by China? We are in the frontline of this threat, but I have to say that neither before nor after these revelations has any of us been offered a briefing by the parliamentary security authorities, or by the Foreign Office or Home Office. In fact, I found out more about this character from my son, who happened to be at university with them, than from anything I have been told formally.

I do not want to mention the current incident, but do want to note that it is now a year on from when MI5 took the almost unprecedented step of issuing a security service interference alert about a character working within Parliament—for which there were no consequences. It is about a year on from the revelations about the activities of the Chinese consul general in Manchester, who thought it was his job to attack demonstrators—for which there were no expulsions, no consequences. It is months on from the recent revelations about the activities of the Confucius institutes, which the Government pledged to abolish; there have been no consequences, no abolition—again, nothing has happened. And it is just a couple of weeks since the Foreign Secretary promised that he would take up the case of the sanctioned MPs and of Jimmy Lai with the Chinese Foreign Minister, yet he came away with nothing—there have been no consequences.

Is not the problem that, for all the tough talk, there are no consequences and the Chinese know that there will be no consequences? May I ask the Deputy Prime Minister this: will China be in the enhanced tier of the foreign agents registration scheme?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** May I deal with the specific question first, and then reflect on the wider points? We are currently reviewing the countries in the enhanced tier. I think there is a strong case to be made, but my hon. Friend would not expect me to make that announcement from the Dispatch Box before we have gone through the proper process.

On my hon. Friend's wider points about the parliamentary security directorate, we as a Government stand ready to provide any further support that MPs feel they require. If my hon. Friend feels that he requires further briefing, I am very happy to help to facilitate that with the House.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): May I extend my genuine sympathy to the two Conservative colleagues who appear to have been targeted by a suspected Chinese

spy who was employed in Parliament and paid for out of public funds? I do know what they are feeling. The House will be aware—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am not sure that is the case. I think that is quite a bit of speculation. I would stick to a general question rather than trying to go into the details of what may have happened.

**Barry Gardiner:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I did say “suspected”.

The House will be aware that the subject of the security alert last year, Christine Lee, was never arrested, has never been charged with spying or, indeed, any other offence, and was said by the previous Home Secretary to have done nothing criminal. However, there is a court case pending. I understand that Ms Lee has taken out a civil suit against the Government; will the Deputy Prime Minister update the House on when that case is likely to be heard and what the Government hope to learn from it?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am not quite sure what to say in response to that question. In the light of the Lee case and others, that is precisely why we have taken enhanced powers through the new National Security Act. Although I have to hold back from commenting on individual cases, I am confident that we have much more robust powers under that legislation that will enable us to act.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In its China report, the ISC highlighted the efforts of the Chinese Communist party to influence, co-opt or coerce into silence potential critics of its regime in the UK. We acknowledged that the Government are waking up to this threat and taking it more seriously, but I highlight to the Minister the fact that we need more urgency. In particular, I highlight the fact that for years the ISC has been saying that we need a foreign agents registration scheme, and one is now on its way; does the Minister agree that it would have been helpful had it been in operation and on the statute book at the time of the relevant events we are considering today?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend raises some very important points, but I just observe that—this applies to a lot of the questions—we have a relationship with China that is very different from the one that we had just a few years ago. It is important that we are not naive about China, that we are clear-eyed about protecting our national security, that we are clear-eyed about the threats that it represents and that we are robust in taking action. My right hon. Friend rightly highlights the foreign agents registration scheme; the secondary legislation under that will come before the House very shortly, which will enable us to take the relevant actions under that legislation.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Actually, the people who have been really clear-sighted about China have mostly been on the Back Benches in this House, on either side and including the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and some of them have been sanctioned. I have been delighted to work with two successive Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committee, to whom I pay enormous tribute for the outspoken way in which they have pushed the Government towards a more sensible policy on China.

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

My anxiety is that we still flip-flop all over the place. This year already we have seen several Foreign Secretaries, apart from anything else, and we have seen them wanting to suck up to China one moment and the next wanting to have robust words with China. It simply does not work. Why oh why have we still not declared that China is a threat to UK national security? Why oh why have we still not seen even the redacted version of the China strategy which, according to the Government, the FCDO developed but which has not even been shared with other Government ministries?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, but I simply do not accept this slightly over-the-top characterisation of the Government's approach. We have been consistent. First, we must protect our national interests in relation to China. That is why we passed the legislation that I have outlined, why I banned Huawei from our 5G networks and why we banned Chinese technology from surveillance equipment and other matters.

Secondly, it is important that we align with our allies around the world. I spend a lot of time on this and know that the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for Security and others work very closely with nations around the world, particularly but not confined to the Five Eyes, to make sure that we share our understanding of Chinese intent and take co-ordinated action to protect us, not least through the military

It is also the case, though, that we must engage with the Chinese, as we do with many other countries around the world with which we do not share a number of their values. It is not a realistic position to take to say that we should entirely cut off from engagement with China. We should engage with China but be absolutely clear about where we disagree with it and clear-eyed in protecting our national security, which is precisely the approach we are taking.

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), I cannot wait to be able to discuss the merits of this case, although I understand the situation now. I want to raise a couple of issues with the Deputy Prime Minister. The Government are moving, they have done lots of new things and we are getting more coherence, but I do not understand why they keep thinking that we either bury our heads in the sand or effectively go soft on elements of the relationship with China. We can debate with and engage with China all we like, but we can also do so in an increasingly robust way that answers the threat it presents towards us.

Specifically, the Government keep avoiding the argument about the growing economic dependency that all western nations have on China. That dependency will mean that in the case of war in the Pacific in two or five years' time, which is what President Xi is planning for—he has said, “We are retaking Taiwan by 2027.”—we will not be in a position to do anything about it without collapsing the global economy. Effectively, in the next few years, our hands will have been tied by economic dependency. Every time I raise that issue, the Government are not even willing to produce an annual statement on it. Please can we take this issue more seriously? It is at the heart of security, and no freedom of action means we have no security.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I have a great deal of respect for my hon. Friend and he and I have discussed these issues on many occasions. I believe we are taking precisely that robust approach. The question of economic dependency is precisely why we passed the National Security and Investment Act 2021, which enables me as a Minister to take decisions to intervene where we feel that the acquiring of technology by any state could undermine our resilience and our ability to protect ourselves, or could enhance the capability of other states. I have taken the decision to intervene on a number of occasions, and more than half the orders we have issued have been in respect of Chinese-related companies.

On the resilience of supply chains, that is why the Prime Minister established the National Security Council resilience sub-committee, building on work by my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), the former Deputy Prime Minister. My hon. Friend is totally right to raise this issue, but I can assure him that the Government take this very seriously and are acting.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Deputy Prime Minister remind the House of December 2016, when the then Prime Minister David Cameron was in the Plough pub in Cadsden with President Xi? We were all urged to be very positive towards China. Indeed, when I expressed worries about the takeover by China of a global company based in Huddersfield, I was told to go away and be quiet. I have also consistently asked for an audit of how much of our British industry and interests are owned by the Chinese—a simple audit—but we have never had a positive reaction, or any reaction, to that suggestion. When will the Government do that?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that we have a changed approach to China, because the facts on China have changed. With its conduct in relation to Hong Kong and the national security law that it has passed, the increasing evidence of abuses in Xinjiang province and the increased aggression in relation to the South China sea, there is no room for any naivety about China. We have to be clear-eyed and we are being clear-eyed. That is why we have passed a host of legislation. It is why—to answer his point about what is owned by China—for the first time, we have now taken the power to intervene on transactions, whether in relation to China or to other countries, in the interest of national security and why I have not hesitated as a Minister to do so.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement. Does he agree that this latest episode shows clearly that it is vital that we do all we can to protect our democracy and democratic institutions? It is right that the Government continue with the “protect, align and engage” strategy, but actions speak louder than words, and the Chinese communist state needs to hear very loudly that we will do all we can to protect our democracy.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend's comments. That is precisely what the Prime Minister did at the G20 summit with Premier Li at the weekend, and why we have introduced a wide

range of legislation to address threats, including, among many other pieces of legislation, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill in relation to academia.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The integrated review refresh was announced on 13 March this year. At the time, it was welcomed that funding would be doubled for building Government expertise on China, but we have since learned that the doubling was from a base of 170 civil servants learning Mandarin in the previous year, of whom just 20 were to attend language immersion. Given that the UK hosts more than 150,000 Chinese students learning the English language and about British culture, does that announcement of perhaps 300 training places for British Government officials not now sound a little modest?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** First, the integrated review refresh was clear about China being the No. 1 state-based threat to our economic security. The hon. Gentleman cites the foreign language training; that is just one element of the action that we have taken to increase our capacity in relation to China. Clearly, he would not expect me to comment on what the agencies are doing in respect of China, but I can assure him that within the Cabinet Office and its structures, we are constantly increasing the amount of resource that we put in, as is the Foreign Office.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I have some sympathy with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister for wanting to strike the right balance. I very much welcome his recognition that we have come a long way from the ill-fated idea of a golden age with China, which was only eight years ago. Much of what has happened has been predicable and predicted, and we continue to predict what will happen, as he has heard this afternoon. Why are the Government so squeamish not just about talking about threats from China, but about calling China a threat? What is the difference between a challenge and a threat?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recognising the evolution and strengthening of our approach to China—I will not add to what I have said on that. We continue to enhance our capability in relation to China. I have outlined a number of the measures that we take; we continue to keep all those things under review. I want to reassure him and other Members on both sides of the House that we are absolutely clear about the threat that China represents, but at the same time, it is right that we engage with China, and that is the approach that we are taking, alongside working closely with our allies. I think that is a sensible and balanced approach that in no way underestimates the scale of the challenge in respect of China, as has been set out in numerous documents.

**Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): An attack on this place, including on Members, by any hostile Government intent on interfering with our democracy and its structures is a direct affront to British democracy itself. Given that several Members of this place have been sanctioned by China, can the Deputy Prime Minister give the House assurances that steps are in place to support and protect Members from hostile Governments, and will he make it clear that there are consequences, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) outlined?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Yes, I am very happy to give that assurance. Of course, we respect the independence of this House and provide support indirectly to the House through the parliamentary security directorate. I can assure the hon. Lady that we provide a considerable amount of resource to the House in respect of this threat.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): I sympathise with my right hon. Friend. On this Chinese matter, he will face countervailing pressures and arguments on the economic side and on the security side. In his statement, he made great play of the six welcome measures that the Government have taken to toughen Britain's stance towards the Chinese Government. Can he give the House any evidence that the Chinese Government have altered their behaviour in any way at all in response to that tough response from the British Government?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** It is never the case that the United Kingdom Government trade off economic security for national security. National security always comes first in the approach we take, and we have seen action in response to the measures we have taken: for example, we have blocked Chinese acquisitions of companies in this country through the National Security and Investment Act 2021, so we are biting directly.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): How many requests have the Government received from security services' chiefs in the past 12 months for additional resources to combat the Chinese security threat, and have all those requests been met in full?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to comment specifically on the agencies, but I can give him a general assurance that we have provided them with the necessary resources they need to combat all the threats that this nation faces.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): This unsavoury episode serves as a reminder for all of us in this place of the threats we face, not just from state interference but from a variety of malign actors. Can I please ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether we are doing enough to think about our physical security, surveillance and counter-surveillance, malware and IT on our phones and other Trojan viruses, and governance of MPs' security?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise all of those points. It is the case, not just in respect of China but also of Russia—particularly in light of the Russia-Ukraine war—and, indeed, Iran and other hostile states that the threat landscape is increasing, and the Government have to continually increase their actions. Through the creation of the National Cyber Security Centre and its work with GCHQ, we are able to constantly increase our action in respect of cyber-threats, malware and the other threats that my hon. Friend highlighted, and in respect of physical security, we have a mirror in the National Protective Security Authority working with MI5. In turn, the agencies also work with the Parliamentary Security Department, which deals directly with threats to Members of Parliament and is supported by those agencies and others.

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Chinese Communist party has shown once again that it will stop at nothing to get its way. The Deputy Prime Minister has said today that he realises

[Ms Marie Rimmer]

there are serious issues and that this is a systemic challenge, but he would not come out with a statement that it is a serious threat and being treated as such. The CCP is infiltrating our academia, and a lot of people right across these Benches feel very uneasy. Actions speak louder than words, and the Government need to back up words with actions—strong actions—and give us the impression that they are not being dragged by the heels all the time. We are constantly having to raise these things, and there is no confidence that we are treating the CCP as an absolutely serious threat, which is what it is. We are playing cricket while the CCP has the machetes out. Please, please take some urgent action.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** We have been totally clear-eyed about the threats represented by China, and have been robust in the action we have taken. The hon. Lady talks about higher education: we have passed legislation in respect of higher education, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. That Act requires greater transparency about higher education institutions' sources of funding, including from overseas states and hostile states. We are taking exactly the kind of action that she requests.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): At what was then the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I saw at first hand the now Deputy Prime Minister oversee an increasingly robust attitude to China in terms of economic security, and telecoms security in particular. To some extent, I wonder if that is why we see this growth in unwelcome attention from China. However, can the Deputy Prime Minister reassure the House that we will continue to take that increasingly robust approach, particularly when it comes to emergent technologies such as artificial intelligence and some of the other increasingly high-tech areas where Britain excels in the world, and where we will continue to attract even more interest from unfriendly states?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience from his time as a Minister, and we worked together on these issues. Telecoms security is precisely an example of the approach. First, we put national security before economic security. On a purely economic interest basis, we should not have removed Huawei's equipment from our networks. We put national security first, and I was transparent with the House about that. We also took the powers in the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021, which is the legislation required to provide that protection of our national security. That is yet more evidence of how the Government are taking a more robust approach and increasing the amount of activity with every passing month and year.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement. I am sensitive to the restrictions on both the questions and the answers, but we know—these facts are in the public domain—that two individuals have been arrested on suspicion of working for a hostile power and that they were parliamentary passholders. Their passes will have been sponsored by individuals who are probably in this Chamber, and they passed the security vetting for a

parliamentary pass. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that in due course—not today—an important question will have to be answered: were they recruited by the hostile power before or after they became passholders?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We must be careful what detail we go into, and I know the Deputy Prime Minister is aware of that.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman made a number of suppositions in his question that are subject to an ongoing police investigation. When that investigation has concluded and indeed if the Crown Prosecution Service decides to take any action under the Official Secrets Act, there will be a time for this House to debate the lessons from that, and the Government will of course—with you, Mr Speaker—help to facilitate the time for that to happen.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): In the statement, the Deputy Prime Minister very helpfully refers to the “erasure of dissenting voices” and the “stifling of opposition” under the new national security law in Hong Kong. In whatever dialogue now takes place with the Chinese, can I ask again that the cases of my two trade union colleagues, Lee Cheuk Yan and Carol Ng Man-ye, who were leaders of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, be raised again? They have been in detention since 2021, and are now facing lengthy prison sentences purely for standing up for democratic rights and trade union rights.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Ministers raised the general principle of China's national security law, its application to Hong Kong and the suppression of liberties in Hong Kong in very robust terms with their Chinese opposite numbers, and will raise individual cases. I am happy to pass that on to the Foreign Secretary, if the right hon. Member has not done so already, to make sure that those individual cases are raised.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): These allegations are concerning, but sadly they are not the first of their type. We have heard about the sanctions against MPs and the activity at the Manchester consulate. I have been ticked off more than once by the consulate in my own constituency because I said things it did not like, and I have been filmed by a drone speaking at a Chinese rally in the city. In July, the Intelligence and Security Committee said there was a lack of clear strategy from the Government. Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that that might be responsible for these repeated attempts, and is it not time that the Government had that clear strategy?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** First, the integrated review refresh was very clear about the approach we take in respect of China. We are clear that it represents the No. 1 state-based threat to our economic security. It also represents a range of other threats and a systemic challenge to our interests and our values. Ministers have raised Chinese interference with democratic processes, and any interference with the conduct of Members of Parliament is totally unacceptable and we will not hesitate in raising it.

## G20 Summit

4.33 pm

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** Mr Speaker, the whole House will join me in sending our sympathies to the people of Morocco following the devastating earthquake. Our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones, the injured and those bravely engaged in rescue efforts. We also remember the victims and loved ones of the terrorist attacks that took place in the United States 22 years ago today, including many British citizens.

I have just returned from the G20 summit in India. For the record, let me declare that, as is a matter of public record, I and my family are of Indian origin, and my wife and her family are Indian citizens with financial interests in India. At the summit I had three aims: first, to increase diplomatic pressure on Russia and call out its shameful disruption of global food supplies in the Black sea; secondly, to show the world that democracies such as the United Kingdom, not authoritarian regimes, are leading the fight on global challenges such as development and climate change; and thirdly, to strengthen ties and forge new partnerships to deliver jobs, growth and security for the British people.

The world faces a moment of danger, volatility and increasingly rapid change, but even as most G20 leaders came together in Delhi in a spirit of co-operation, one did not. For two years now, Putin has lacked the courage to face his G20 peers. Day after day, his actions cause horrendous suffering in Ukraine, violating the United Nations Charter, threatening European security, and disrupting global energy supplies. The spill-overs have driven up prices here at home, and they are hurting people all around the world. Russia's withdrawal from the Black sea grain initiative exposes its willingness to spread that suffering further. While Putin stalls, making unmeetable demands, he is destroying Ukraine's ports and grain silos. In just one month, Russia has destroyed over 270,000 tonnes of grain—enough to feed 1 million people for a year. I can tell the House today that, thanks to declassified intelligence, we know that on 24 August with multiple missiles the Russian military targeted a civilian cargo ship in the Black sea, demonstrating just how desperate Putin is.

At the G20, leaders united in calling out the “human suffering” caused by Putin's war. Ukraine has the right to export its goods through international waters, and it has the moral right to ship grain that is helping to feed the world. The UK is working with partners to get grain to those who need it most. We will provide £3 million for the World Food Programme, building on earlier contributions to President Zelensky's “Grain from Ukraine” initiative. We are using our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to monitor Russian activity in the Black sea, so that we can call it out if we see that Russia is preparing further attacks on civilian shipping or infrastructure, and so that we can attribute attacks should they happen. Later this year, we are hosting a UK global food security summit to put in place solutions for the long term.

I spoke to my friend President Zelensky just before the summit. Backed by our support, Ukraine's counter-offensive is making hard-won progress. We will continue to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, until we see

a “just and durable peace” that respects its sovereignty and territorial integrity. That is the only possible outcome to Putin's illegal war, and Ukraine, with our support, will prevail.

On my second aim, we showed at the G20 that it is the UK and our partners, not authoritarian actors, that offer the best solution to the global challenges we face. We are playing our part to stabilise the global economy, control inflation, and fuel future growth. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show the UK is leading the way, growing faster out of the pandemic than any other major European economy, and demolishing the false narratives we have heard from the other side of this House. We are also leading the way on development assistance. Instead of loading countries with debt, we are calling for fundamental reforms of the World Bank. When I met the World Bank president, I underlined the UK's desire to see the Bank become more efficient and responsible, sweating its balance sheet to deliver more support where it is needed.

We are also leading calls at the G20 to safely harness new technologies to support growth and development, and we are leading action to tackle climate change. While some in Westminster denigrate the UK's record on climate issues, out there in the world we are rightly seen as a global leader. We have cut emissions faster than any other G7 country, with low-carbon sources now providing over half our electricity. We are providing billions for the global energy transition, including through our pioneering Just Energy Transition Partnerships. And at the G20 I made a record commitment of over £1.6 billion for the Green Climate Fund—the single biggest international climate pledge that the UK has ever made.

Finally, my most important aim in Delhi was to deliver on the priorities of the British people. In a changing world, we are using our Brexit freedoms to build new relationships with economies around the world. Since I became Prime Minister, we have joined the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—the most dynamic trading bloc in the world. We have launched new partnerships with Canada, Australia, Japan and the US, covering trade and economic security. We have secured agreements with France, Albania, Turkey and others to stop illegal migration. At the G20, we went further. We signed a new strategic partnership with Singapore to boost jobs, growth and our security. I held warm and productive discussions with Prime Minister Modi on strengthening our relationship in defence and technology and on a free trade deal between our nations.

I also met Premier Li of China. The whole House is rightly appalled by reports of espionage in this building. The sanctity of this place must be protected, and the right of Members to speak their minds without fear or sanction must be maintained. We will defend our democracy and our security, so I was emphatic with Premier Li that actions that seek to undermine British democracy are completely unacceptable and will never be tolerated. I also emphasised the UK's unyielding commitment to human rights, and I was clear on the importance of maintaining stability and international law as the basis for stable relations. China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the world's second largest economy and the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide. It has growing influence on others, notably Russia.

[*The Prime Minister*]

One of my messages to Premier Li was that China should use its influence to call on Russia to end its aggression against Ukraine. The G20 showed a common purpose on food security, and we need to see that in other areas.

This Government have acted decisively to improve our security, including blocking China's involvement in critical areas such as civil nuclear power, semiconductors and 5G. I pay tribute to the tireless work of our security services. We will shortly set out our response to the Intelligence and Security Committee's report on China. In November last year, the Government set up a new defending democracy taskforce. Its mission is to reduce the risk to the UK's democratic processes, institutions and society, and to ensure they are secure and resilient to threats of foreign interference. The importance of that work is clear for all to see. Crucially, in taking that approach, we are aligned with each and every single one of our Five Eyes allies and our G7 partners. By speaking frankly and directly, we will ensure our messages are heard clearly and that our interests and values are protected and promoted.

In conclusion, at a time of rapid change, we are bringing British values and British leadership to bear on the biggest global challenges. As one of the fastest growing major economies, the second largest contributor to NATO and a global leader in everything from climate to tech to development, I am proud of the United Kingdom's leadership. It is through that leadership, working with our allies and partners, that we will increase our security, grow our economy and deliver on the priorities of the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

4.42 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of his statement? I join him in sending my condolences and those of the whole House to those affected by the devastating earthquake in Morocco. I know that UK search and rescue specialists are working to help Moroccan authorities find survivors, and it is important at this time that all those in Morocco know we are thinking of them and are prepared to give the resources and support that they need.

The G20 summit in India was a real opportunity to see progress on key global issues, by condemning Russia's illegal war in Ukraine in no uncertain terms and making solid commitments to boost growth and renewable energy capacity around the world. I am afraid therefore that the joint declaration from the weekend is disappointing. As Russian drones resumed attacks on Kyiv, it is disheartening to see language weaker than the G20's condemnation of Moscow at last year's summit in Bali. On this issue, the House speaks with one voice: there is no ambiguity; we all agree that this is an unjust, illegal war against Ukraine. I join the Prime Minister in saying that Britain and our NATO allies will remain committed in helping Ukraine defeat Putin.

On the matter raised in the preceding statement, the news of the arrest of a researcher here in Parliament on suspicion of spying for China is a serious breach of

security conducted by the Beijing security services. Given that the arrest happened in March, can I ask the Prime Minister whether the Foreign Secretary knew about this incident before he visited China last month? If he did, did he raise it on that trip? I listened to the answers given on the preceding statement by the Deputy Prime Minister, who said that these issues are regularly raised, but my question is specific, and I ask the Prime Minister to address it directly. If, as it seems, the Government are not considering designating China as a threat to national security, will he give further details on how they will tackle the infiltration of Chinese security services into key British institutions? Incidents like this show the constant threats that we face, and the G20 shows how far we have to go.

There was some important progress at the G20 this weekend: a new partnership for global infrastructure and investment was announced between the US, the EU, India and Gulf states. It is a partnership to counterbalance China's belt and road initiative, boost economic department, secure supply chains and connect the US, EU and trusted partners in Asia. A much welcome initiative, we might think. So when I looked at the signatories to this new partnership, I was surprised—something was missing. Where was Britain? Will the Prime Minister explain why the UK has not signed this agreement? This seems remarkable. A new agreement has been reached between major trade blocs to deliver economic security and Britain is not involved. The Prime Minister owes the House an explanation. Have we been left out or have we just decided not to sign? The race towards the future has begun. Major nations are investing in new technology, hoping to establish themselves as leaders and major global centres for green technology. The US has introduced the Inflation Reduction Act; the EU, in return, is relaxing rules to allow greater green subsidy. Where is Britain? Where is the plan?

I would also like to ask the Prime Minister about the trade deal between India and the UK. The Government promised it in their manifesto. Then they said it would be done by Diwali last year. Now, the Prime Minister says that the deal is not even guaranteed. What is going on? It really sums up their global economic approach: no strategy and no direction. We cannot be slow off the mark. The race has started. They once promised a new era of post-Brexit global trade, but instead of more investment and more trade they have erected unnecessary barriers and made Britain a more difficult country to do business in. We cannot be left on the sidelines. Britain needs a seat at the table. We have the expertise, the creativity and the ingenuity, but the Government are too distracted and too complacent, and have no plan to seize the opportunities of the future.

**The Prime Minister:** Let me rattle through the right hon. and learned Gentleman's questions. With regard to the matter covered in the preceding statement, I am sure he will appreciate that, as there is an ongoing investigation—as you also said, Mr Speaker—I am limited in what I can say specifically. But I have been emphatically clear in our engagement with China that we will not accept any interference in our democracy and parliamentary system. That includes the sanctioning of MPs and malign activity such as the type of activity alleged to have taken place. I can absolutely confirm that the Foreign Secretary raised those issues on his recent visit, and I reinforced that in my meeting at the G20.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman went on to raise the announcement about the partnership for global infrastructure and investment. What he failed to mention in his criticism was that that initiative—the PGII—was created by the UK under our G7 presidency. Far from being something that we are not part of, we were the ones who made sure that we were there at its inception. Again, he is, as ever, jumping on the latest bandwagon that he can find. The PGII initiative will contain a range of different projects. This particular one was also not signed by Canada, Japan or Italy, for example.<sup>1</sup> Each and every country will participate in a range of projects. What did we do to make our contribution? As I said, we made the single largest pledge this country has ever made to the green climate fund. Why? Because it is important that we play our part in helping countries make the transition to net zero—something that we have led on previously and, because of that commitment, we will continue to lead on.

What else did we do? We decided to work with other countries to improve global food security, something that African nations in particular have called on us to do. They have welcomed our leadership in hosting a summit later this year, which will tackle the cause at its root, improving crop yields and the resilience of food supplies globally. I could go on. As ever, the right hon. and learned Gentleman tries to find something to score a cheap political point, and completely and utterly misunderstands what this country is doing. As ever, he would prefer to talk this country down than recognise the contribution we are making.

I am happy to address the right hon. and learned Gentleman's comments on the trade deal. I thought they were telling—he asked, why do we not just sign it, why is it not done? I had a flashback to all those conversations when we were leaving the EU. His approach back then was just to sign any deal that was offered to us. We know where that would have led. The right thing to do for the British people is to fight hard for the things that we need. We only need a deal that works for the British people and delivers on our priorities. That is why it is right not to rush these things, as he would do, clearly. We do not put arbitrary deadlines on them. I take the time to make sure that they are right for the British people.

Our track record is there: we are the first European nation to accede to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—something else the right hon. and learned Gentleman failed to mention. That is the most exciting, dynamic trade bloc that exists in the world. The Asia-Pacific accounts for 50% of the world's population. Sixty per cent. of goods trade passes through that region, and it will account for over half of global growth in the coming decades. Now that we have left the EU, we are able to join that trade bloc, and it is excited to have us.

Lastly, on the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about Brexit, again he failed to point out that since we left the single market we have grown faster than France and Germany. I will end where I started: as ever, when it comes to these things, he is determined to talk Britain down. We are demonstrating that Britain is leading on the global stage and delivering for the British people.

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

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Let me start by putting on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, and the parliamentary security and intelligence services for your personal support over the last few months.

Here today, we know that across this House a real priority for Members is the safety of British nationals arbitrarily detained abroad. The Foreign Affairs Committee has recently released a report on that matter. It cannot be right that consular access is withheld on the basis of diplomatic silence being in place. I know that my right hon. Friend raised the case of Jagtar Singh Johal with the Indian Prime Minister at the weekend, but we are not clear on the outcome of those discussions. Will the Government finally officially call for his release? The UN has accepted that he is arbitrarily detained. Does the Prime Minister believe that he has been unfairly treated or even tortured while being held?

**The Prime Minister:** We are committed to seeing Mr Johal's case resolved as soon as possible. We continue to provide consular assistance to him and his family, and have raised concerns about issues including consular access to Mr Johal, the judicial process and reports of mistreatment, with the Indian Government on multiple occasions, including myself with Prime Minister Modi just this weekend.

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

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): We have heard a lot of PR and spin today, and I am sure we will hear a lot more. As ever in this game, what the Prime Minister is not saying is almost as important as what he is saying. The Leader of the official Opposition raised the case of President Biden's announcement. Can the Prime Minister tell us what part of those projects his Government are involved in? They are worth more than any FTA that we could sign, and will leave Brexit Britain on the global sidelines yet again if it is not fully involved. That is on top of the United States' inflation-busting and reduction Act tackling climate change.

On the bilateral meetings with the Prime Minister's counterparts, we heard of very strong concerns—relating to your statement earlier, Mr Speaker—raised with Chinese Premier Li. Can the Prime Minister advise the House when he was first notified of this issue?

On the case of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal, which was raised by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Prime Minister brought it up in conversations with Prime Minister Modi. Given the widespread concerns, in this place and outside, about the leaking of this Government's resolve to Jagtar Singh Johal, particularly in relation to getting a trade deal over the line, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and Jagtar Singh Johal's family, so he can tell them exactly what he intends to do on their behalf?

**The Prime Minister:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answer on Mr Johal. Most recently, the Foreign Office Minister met Mr Johal's family to discuss the case in detail.

Turning to the hon. Gentleman's other points, on our investment partnerships, the British investment partnership approach with India, for example, has invested over

1. [Official Report, 13 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 8MC.]

[*The Prime Minister*]

£2 billion to support 600 different enterprises, employing about half a million people. That is just to give him some sense of the scale of the alternative projects we are involved in.

Lastly, I turn to the hon. Gentleman's point, which the Leader of the Opposition also raised, about the US Inflation Reduction Act and the approach of other countries. Neither seem to recognise that the approach we have taken is working for the UK, not least with the recent announcement of a £4 billion investment in the UK by Tata, which represents the single largest investment in our auto industry, potentially ever, to build a gigafactory here. That was followed by investment by Stellantis and BMW to secure future electric vehicle manufacturing in the UK. Any which way we look at it, our auto manufacturing sector is receiving record amounts of investment to make the transition to electricity-oriented vehicles. That is because of the tax, regulatory and incentive regime we have put in place, which is delivering real jobs and real opportunity for the British people.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Did the Chinese representatives give any indication of when they might stop their big increases in carbon dioxide and start to reduce them? Does the Prime Minister agree with me that it makes no sense for the UK to rely on Chinese imports of electric vehicles, solar panels and other green products when they are so CO<sub>2</sub>-intensive in their production, and deny us the jobs and added value?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes a good point. He will see in the G20 declaration a commitment by all members recognising the need to peak emissions in the next couple of years. To his broader point, that is why the Government have consulted on measures to address carbon leakage. It is absolutely right that there is a level playing field, and that if we take action here it should not come at the cost of British workers if it ultimately makes no difference to global emissions. That is why we have consulted on proposals on carbon leakage, and I very much welcome his thoughts on that.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the House in sending our condolences to all those affected by the tragic events in Morocco.

I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. He was, rightly, strongly critical of President Putin in his statement, but I have to say that I do not agree with his assessment of the G20 statement on Ukraine. The joint declaration failed to condemn Russia for the invasion. Our Ukrainian allies labelled it

“nothing to be proud of”,  
while the Russians called it  
“a step in the right direction”.

Ukraine's soldiers continue to give their lives in defence of their country, while Ukrainian refugees continue to take shelter here in the UK and elsewhere. Why did the Prime Minister feel he was justified in signing up to such a weak communiqué?

**The Prime Minister:** I find it slightly strange that the right hon. Gentleman is using what Russia describes the situation to be as evidence of support. With everything

we have seen over the past year we should not believe a word coming out of Russia's mouth, so that is a very strange approach to take. What I would say to him on his criticism is that I am not entirely sure who he is critical of, because every single one of our Five Eyes partners and G7 allies who was present also signed the G20 statement. We fought hard to have a statement that we thought did in fact—as the US itself has said, including the President and the Treasury Secretary—contain substantially very strong language regarding Russia.

I went out to the summit specifically to raise the impact of Russia's illegal war on food security and food prices. The language in the summit goes further than what we have had before, highlighting that and calling for an end to attacks on food and civilian infrastructure, and for the restoration of the Black sea grain initiative. We also agreed on the significance of securing a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the principles of the UN charter, including territorial integrity. That is why all our allies—I could go through the list of them—worked hard for that statement and supported it. The right hon. Gentleman's criticism may well be of me, but he is also criticising every single one of our closest allies.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome the robustness of the Prime Minister's stance on Russia, but does he agree that there are aspects of other topics discussed at the G20, such as China, which he might not be able to discuss in full on the Floor of the House, but which he could discuss securely with the Intelligence and Security Committee? I should add, however, that whereas for the first 20 years of the Committee's existence it had a meeting with the Prime Minister every single year, there has been no such meeting since December 2014, although, during her short term in office, this Prime Minister's immediate predecessor did volunteer to reinstate such meetings. May I ask him whether he will do the same—reinstate the meetings and return to proper, comprehensive scrutiny?

**The Prime Minister:** I shall be happy to consider my right hon. Friend's request, but let me say in the meantime that I welcome the Committee's report on China, and am grateful for all its efforts. The Government are considering its recommendations and conclusions carefully, and we will publish our response in due course and in the usual manner.

**Sir Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Surely one of the things that should keep the Prime Minister awake at night—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Unfortunately, a Member behind the hon. Member for Rhondda feels that he should be taken first. Let me just say that the hon. Gentleman is second on the list of members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and is also one of its longest-serving members.

**Sir Chris Bryant:** As I was saying, Mr Speaker—seconds out, round 2—the one thing that should keep the Prime Minister, or any Minister, awake at night is the arbitrary detention of a British national in a foreign country. One would hope that Ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, would summon up every ounce of energy to try to get people released. I am sorry, but I think that quite a lot of us are very depressed by the Prime Minister's



answer to the question from the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), about Jagtar Singh Johal, who has been arbitrarily detained for six years. Everyone knows that he is being tortured and mistreated. I took the Prime Minister to say that he had not called for his release. Is that really the truth?

**The Prime Minister:** No. As I said earlier, we consistently raise our concerns about Mr Johal's case with the Government of India, including concerns about allegations of mistreatment and the right to a fair trial. That is why the Foreign Office and Ministers are giving direct support to Mr Johal's family, and it is why I raised this specific case with Mr Modi.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): I welcome both the statement and the Prime Minister's leadership on Ukraine. Our national security and our economic security are interdependent, and there is no better illustration of that than the grain ships that are trying to get out of Odesa. The Prime Minister mentioned the global food security summit. Could he expand on that? As he knows, I have been campaigning for some time for an international maritime protection force to help to escort those ships out, which would assist not only the Ukrainian economy but our own economy, because food inflation here is also being affected. Will the Prime Minister advance that idea to ensure that it is raised at the food security summit?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend has focused on the issue of maritime security in the Black sea for some time, and he has been correct to do so. We are talking and working with partners, allies and, indeed, Ukraine in considering all the different ways in which we could ensure the safe exit of and access to grain from Ukraine, and will continue to do so.

As for the global food summit that we will host in London, it will focus on four themes: creating new approaches to ending the preventable deaths of children, building a climate-resilient food system, anticipating and preventing famine and food security crises, and using science and technology to boost food security and nutrition. We are also working to deliver the food summit in combination with partners including the United States and Somalia.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): May I first associate myself with the sympathies extended to the people of Morocco?

I welcome the language in paragraph 50 of the G20 communiqué about building a bigger World Bank. The truth is that we need to triple the lending of multilateral development banks if we are to mobilise the climate finance that the world now needs, and we cannot do that simply by building a better World Bank; we need to build a bigger World Bank. In the United States, President Biden is asking Congress to support a capital call and boost the balance sheet of the World Bank. Why is the UK, one of the founders of the World Bank, not leading the same argument? We could even use the money we are getting back from the European Investment Bank, and the Prime Minister, if he so chose, could call it a Brexit dividend. The world leads a bigger World Bank now, and the UK should be leading the case.

**The Prime Minister:** We are in fact leading the case on the World Bank's balance sheet, and through my right hon. Friend the Development Minister we have had extensive conversations with the president of the World Bank on precisely that matter. It is something I discussed with colleagues at the G20, including the World Bank president himself. We are also broadly leading the way on how else we can reform the international financial system, including pioneering the use of climate-resilient debt clauses, which has been welcomed by countries around the world; channelling our IMF special drawing rights back for use for developing countries; and finding ways to stretch balance sheets to unlock more funding. The UK is looked to as a leader in all these areas, not least as we are announcing a conditional capital increase for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. All these things together position us as a thought leader in changing the international financial system. It was a subject of my interventions at the G20 and, as I have said, the Development Minister is taking forward this work at pace with our allies.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly the inclusion in the communiqué of the G20 AI principles. I would like to press him on what further work he and the United Kingdom will be doing ahead of the AI summit in November to ensure that work on the safety of AI more than outpaces work on capability, and that we can move towards a meaningful principles-based approach to the safe use of this vital new technology.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right about the need for global co-operation when it comes to AI safety. It is obviously a technology that does not respect national borders. Again, this is an area where the UK is demonstrating leadership, building on our expertise and our leading position in AI research. We are having the conversation with partners about what that principles-based approach to regulation would look like, to ensure consistency across jurisdictions. We are also seeing what we can do to make sure that the UK is the leading place for that AI safety research, and that is the work of our AI taskforce, which is currently under way and proceeding well.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the African Union as a permanent member of the G20. Africa is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and it is important that her voice is at the table discussing major global issues such as climate change, security and economic stability. My own country of origin, Nigeria, is one of the largest in Africa; it has over 223 million people, which is rising daily. Can the Prime Minister outline what steps his Government are taking towards a strategy for the continent?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent question and join her in saying that we were delighted to agree the African Union's membership of the G20. She is right to highlight the increasing importance of Africa in global affairs. Over the next decade or so, Africa's population will double to 2.5 billion people, with 60% of them under the age of 25. Also, Africa contributes just 4% of global emissions but is home to 35 of the 50 countries most at risk from climate change, so it is important that we are engaged and supportive. I can tell her what we are doing. Now that we have left the

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European Union and are in charge of our trade policy, we have changed our tariff structure so that 98% of goods imported into the UK from Africa will enter tariff-free. We are making sure that our just energy transition partnerships help countries such as South Africa with their transition, mobilising billions of dollars of support. Next year, we will be hosting the Africa investment summit with over 20 different countries, because the UK, as measured by foreign direct investment, is the largest investor in the continent.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): In an ever more dangerous world, having allies and partners is really important, and trust is so important in keeping those allies. I thank my right hon. Friend for the commitment he made on climate change. It was a commitment we gave in Glasgow at COP, and this shows that Britain is a country that keeps its promises. Would he like to share examples of how that money will be spent, how it will make our allies and partners stronger and how that will help to strengthen our own security here in the UK?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for all her work in this area. She is right: it is important that we meet our commitment to £11.6 billion of international climate finance, and this particular investment will ensure that we do that. It was warmly welcomed by partner countries at the G20. She will know that the importance of giving money through this multilateral fund rather than bilaterally is that it can be leveraged multiple times, so every pound that we contribute will be able to be used multiple times more and attract more capital. In that way, we are helping to fund hundreds, if not thousands, of projects across the world and I know that the countries that benefit from them are extremely grateful for our support.

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): In his private meeting with Mr Modi, did the Prime Minister raise the issue that, while we are supporting Ukraine, India is buying huge amounts of oil from Russia and trading in engineering, manufacturing and technology stocks? On the UK-India trade agreement, did he raise the human rights of the Dalit community, the Sikh community—particularly Jagtar Johal—and the Christian community and the abuses that have taken place, including the long-standing abuse of the Kashmiri community? For us to have a trade agreement, it must be fair and based on human rights and international law.

**The Prime Minister:** Supporting democracy and human rights is a core part of our engagement not just with India but with all countries with which we engage. When it comes to the situation in Kashmir, my view is that it is not for the United Kingdom to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator.

**Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Paragraph 30 of the G20 leaders' declaration speaks of delivering quality education. Mahatma Gandhi said, and I paraphrase, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a family." The UK is certainly doing as much as it can to ensure that people across the globe who need education receive it, especially girls and women. Will the Prime

Minister give an assurance that the UK will do all it possibly can to ensure that the other members of the G20, including the newest member, the African Union, do their bit to ensure that girls and women in their countries, and across the world, are educated?

**The Prime Minister:** It was a privilege to visit Raj Ghat to pay tribute to Gandhi's work. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of equality and women's access to education. I am very pleased that Prime Minister Modi made this a central theme of the G20 summit, and it is something we discussed. All of us in this House should be proud of the UK's contribution over the past several years. We have helped to educate more than 8 million girls as part of our development priority to provide all girls with 12 years of high-quality education.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I do not think anyone in this Chamber takes seriously what the Russians may have to say about the G20, but we are listening to what the Ukrainians have said, and in particular their statement that there is nothing to be proud of in the joint statement. The Prime Minister spoke about speaking to President Zelensky before the summit. When he next rings him, how will he explain the fact that the statement does not even mention the word "Russia"?

**The Prime Minister:** I know President Zelensky was incredibly supportive of our effort to highlight Russia's aggression, the impact it is having on food prices and food security, and the damage it has done to civilian infrastructure. He will be grateful for the fact we have declassified intelligence that shows the world those attacks on civilian ships. And I know he will be grateful for the work we are doing with Ukraine to find alternative means to export Ukrainian grain to the world, which is good not only for the Ukrainian economy and its sustainability but for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. He has said that ending the war in Ukraine and holding Russia to account is a top priority. I dealt with sanctions as a Foreign Office Minister, and they are a key tool for the United Kingdom to address Putin's war machine. Forty-four non-aligned states are not supporting us with sanctions against Russia, which is delaying the war in Ukraine, and India is one of those countries. India takes Russian oil, and some now say that it refines that oil and sells the products into Europe, circumventing those sanctions. Did the Prime Minister have those conversations with Prime Minister Modi? If so, will India now change its behaviour?

**The Prime Minister:** Our position is of long standing and consistent: we urge all countries to follow our lead, and the lead of others, in sanctioning Russia. Obviously each country will approach that in its own way. Our job is to continue raising the impact of Russia's illegal war, and to work with our allies to bring that war to an end, including by enforcing our own sanctions. That is why I announced the economic deterrence initiative in March, with £50 million of funding being made available to improve our enforcement of the UK sanctions regime. We are developing that closely with our partners, and I think it will help to tighten the vice on Russia's economy.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): In answer to my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister wanted praise for the inception of the partnership for global infrastructure and investment. The agreement that was signed by the US, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union is described as a landmark agreement, creating an economic corridor across Europe, the middle east and India. If the inception of the global partnership is worth claiming praise for, will he explain—he did not answer this question earlier—why Britain was not a signatory to that memorandum of understanding?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said previously, each country will contribute to the effort in its own way. We are participating in many different projects, together with our partner countries, that help countries lessen their dependence on China. One thing we have led on is the development of the common framework to ensure that countries can get appropriate debt relief. Again, they are very grateful for our leadership on that, with China having put many countries in hock to it. We have created a framework and made sure that China has engaged with it. It is already providing relief to two countries and we are making sure that there are more in the pipeline. That has been very welcome, but, again, it is just an example of our leadership making a difference on these complicated matters.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): In 2015, I went to Delhi to implement the coalition Government's decision to end grant development aid to India. That policy has not changed, has it?

**The Prime Minister:** The policy did change and we stopped providing traditional development aid to India in 2015. Most UK funding is now in the form of business investments which not only help India reduce carbon emissions and address climate change, but deliver jobs and opportunity for British companies here at home.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): With so much at stake—the war in Ukraine, increasingly high numbers of people suffering from famine and drought, and human rights issues in places such as Iran or the Xinjiang part of China—is now really the time for the Prime Minister to empty chair the United Nations General Assembly?

**The Prime Minister:** I have just been over how our leadership on these matters is unquestioned. We are an active and engaged member at the G20. In just a couple of weeks, I will be at the European Political Community summit as well. Let me gently point out something to the hon. Lady about the UN General Assembly: as far as I can tell from looking back at the records, on the vast majority of occasions under the Labour Government it was not the Labour Prime Minister who attended either.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The leaders' declaration expresses the optimism about AI that I know the Prime Minister and I share. It talks about the importance of "international governance" and "international co-operation". How optimistic is he that all the countries at the G20 can sign up to those sorts of principles, just as they signed up to the joint declaration?

**The Prime Minister:** There was a good conversation about AI at the G20 summit. I am optimistic that most countries are approaching this in a similar way, recognising the tremendous opportunities for growth, opportunity and transforming developments in healthcare and education in particular, but cognisant of the challenges and risks that AI poses, and keen to work together to find ways to resolve those. Obviously, it is very early days in terms of countries having this conversation and everyone learning themselves about the potential of the technology. However, as I said, I think that on this topic the UK can play a leadership role, and that is what we will do.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Many of us were very impressed by the close relationship that the Prime Minister obviously has with Prime Minister Modi. When he had private time with Prime Minister Modi, did he ask him, first, why he has not condemned Russia for the invasion of Ukraine? Secondly, did he ask what Modi is doing to stop all the persecution of Muslims and Christians, with their mosques and churches being burnt, and with people being killed and persecuted?

**The Prime Minister:** The Prime Minister and I discussed a range of issues. As I have said, we talk about human rights and defending democracy in all our international engagement, because those are values that we believe in very dearly.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Of course, migration is best dealt with by international co-operation, but it also depends on decisive action at home. One thousand five hundred Indians enter this country legally every week. Last year 600 came across illegally in boats, and this year there have been 600 in just the first three months. The Prime Minister told me personally that he would lead by example by having illegal migrants based at Catterick in his constituency. This afternoon, the Ministry of Defence was unable to give me any date on when they are going to come. Meanwhile, my council has issued a stop notice against the slash-and-burn tactics of the Home Office at RAF Scampton. The Prime Minister is the head of the Government. Will he instruct Home Office Ministers to work proactively with West Lindsey District Council to ensure that we get a compromise, do our bit and take illegal migrants to a secure location, and that we do not rely on decaying bases but take action that will work in the future?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his constructive engagement. I know that he will continue to represent his community strongly and has engaged with Home Office Ministers on the particular issues in his constituency. More broadly, we continue to strengthen our co-operation with international partners to combat illegal migration—something I discussed with many of my counterparts at the G20, as I will continue to do through further engagement this autumn—and look to find ways to formalise that co-operation and improve returns agreements. As he mentioned, it is important that we have the ability to return illegal migrants who have come here from countries that are clearly safe places for them. We have done that with Albania and are strengthening the returns agreements with other countries, too.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is disappointing that the this year's statement from the G20 does not name the perpetrator of aggression in Ukraine.

[Richard Foord]

What kind of statement is it where G20 leaders feel the need to spin the interpretation of it after the event? Does the Prime Minister agree with Canada's Liberal Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, who said yesterday that if it were up to him, the language on the war would have been stronger?

**The Prime Minister:** It goes without saying that, because this is not the G7 or, indeed, the G1, it is not for us just to take the language that we ourselves would like. Our position on Ukraine is crystal clear for all to see, but the G20 is a collection of a large group of countries that do not all share the same perspective on global affairs or, indeed, the same values. To assume that it can reflect the unanimity that we have in the G7 is simply to misunderstand how foreign affairs actually works.

The hon. Member asked about what the statement said. It agreed on the significance of securing a comprehensive, just and lasting peace. The statement specifically called for an end to attacks on food and civilian infrastructure and for Russia to rejoin the Black sea grain initiative. Indeed, it highlighted the suffering that it is causing. It was also a statement that the United States described as containing "substantively very strong" language on the situation. This why to have agreement among G20 members, even if it is not exactly the language we would have chosen, is still a positive outcome from this summit.

**Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I, too, associate myself with the Prime Minister's words about Morocco and the people of Morocco, and I pay tribute to Truro-based ShelterBox, which as ever has a team standing ready for deployment at the point that the Moroccan Government need it. Will the Prime Minister tell the House what conversations he has had with his G20 partners about critical mineral extraction, not only to boost local production from Cornwall—lithium, obviously—but to ensure that we have supply chains that cut out rogue partners?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the need to improve our economic resilience and security, which is why that is an increasing feature of the partnerships and agreements that we strike around the world. Indeed, it was a feature of the partnership agreement that I struck with Japan when I was there and with the US when I visited recently. I spoke to President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida about those agreements and the work that we are doing. In both cases, there are milestones for us to meet with regard to strengthening our co-operation on critical minerals in particular.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. He rightly highlighted the importance of international trade and the progress that he has made, including new partnerships joined. Will he perhaps give a bit more detail on the progress made on securing a UK-India deal?

**The Prime Minister:** We do make, and have made, substantial progress, but as I said, there is hard work left to do and that is why we will we keep at it. But it is

right that we do not put arbitrary deadlines on these trade deals and that we keep going until they work for the British people, British companies and the British Government. That is what we will endeavour to do. As I say, we have made lots of progress, but we will not sign a deal unless it is right for the United Kingdom.

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his leadership in securing the outcomes of the summit. Further to his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), in view of the scale of the population and the speed of growth in India, the areas of joint expertise and the co-operation that has taken place to date, as well as the deep-rooted ties the UK has with India, which spread across the whole of the United Kingdom, can my right hon. Friend assure me that as he progresses the negotiations on the trade deal, he will ensure that it contains a chapter or elements that allow for small businesses and medium-sized enterprises across the UK and beyond to trade effectively with India?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Unquestionably, India is if not the most, then one of the most significant and consequential countries for global affairs over the coming years and decades. It is absolutely right and important that the United Kingdom has a close relationship with India that spans not just economic co-operation but areas including defence and security, and science and technology research collaboration. We are aiming to enhance our partnership in all those areas, for the reasons he mentioned. This will be to the long-term benefit of the UK if we get it right.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Members will know that the next G20 summit will be held in Rio in November 2024. I note with interest that Brazil has already placed on the agenda something called "reform of the global governance institutions".

Does the Prime Minister agree that reform of the UN Security Council should be considered with the best interests of the UK at heart, so that the UN Security Council remains a viable framework for global security, and that Britain must never put Britain's seat at the table on the table?

**The Prime Minister:** We have spoken in the past about support for additional members of the UN Security Council, including in India, and it is something we continue to do. As my hon. Friend has seen, at this G20 summit we warmly supported and welcomed the inclusion of the African Union in the G20, because he makes a good point that international institutions need to adapt and change continually, to reflect the reality of the current state of global affairs.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): I was very proud earlier this month to celebrate Ukraine Independence Day with Huddersfield's vibrant Ukrainian community. I heard at first hand how proud they are of the UK's steadfast support for Ukraine. With Brazil taking over the presidency of the G20, will the Prime Minister continue to work with our international allies and partners to increase and build on our wonderful support for Ukraine, and to build unity in condemning Putin's barbaric and illegal invasion of Ukraine?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to him and his constituents for all they are doing to support Ukraine and Ukrainian families. UK support for Ukraine now amounts to over £9 billion, and 29 different states have now signed up to the declaration we helped to initiate to provide long-term security support to Ukraine, so he can be confident in our steadfast support for Ukraine. It is not going away; we are here to stay, which is why we will tell Russia that now is the time to lay down arms and come to a sensible, peaceful resolution.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Prime Minister for his statement today, and for responding to questions for 55 minutes.

## Points of Order

5.28 pm

**Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the recent debate on the safety of school buildings, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) referred to a school in my constituency, wrongly including it in a list of schools with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete waiting to hear from the Government about remediation. The original school was indeed built using RAAC, many decades ago. However, earlier this year pupils moved into their brand-new £23-million state-of-the-art school on the site, while utilising other college buildings as the next stage of the £50-million transformation progresses. Furthermore, the Royal College Manchester, Seashell Trust, is not reliant on Government funding; it is non-maintained, as it is an independent charity. Will you direct me on how I can set the record straight and ensure that the positive message regarding this excellent school is heard?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and her forward notice of it. Let us be fair: she has just done it, in an amazing way.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 20 July this year, I and more than 70 right hon. and hon. Members from all parties wrote to the Prime Minister regarding the case of my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal. Questions were addressed directly to the Prime Minister on whether he would raise the case of my constituent when he met his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, at last weekend's G20 summit, and on whether he would ask for his release, given the plethora of organisations, including the United Nations, that have deemed his detention to be arbitrary.

I do not come to the House today to complain about the tardy ministerial response; instead, my grievance lies in the fact that it was not the Prime Minister who replied to me but a junior Minister from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office who sits in the other House. Only the Prime Minister would be in a position to answer, because only he was in the room with Prime Minister Modi and in a position to ask the questions about Jagtar. What recourse do we have as Members, Mr Deputy Speaker, when correspondence with His Majesty's Government, including the *primus inter pares*, who is also a Member of the House, is treated with such disrespect?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for his point of order and his forward notice of it. It is not for the Chair but for the Government to decide which Ministers reply to a particular piece of correspondence, but I know how assiduously the hon. Member pursues this matter and I am sure that he will continue to find ways to ensure that it is on the Prime Minister's agenda.

## Ukraine

5.31 pm

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Since the most recent statement on Ukraine, which was given in June by the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), the armed forces of Ukraine have launched their land offensives to retake their country. I therefore thought it useful to start with an update on the status of the conflict before I outline the strategic consequences and considerations for where we are today.

The impact of Ukraine's summer offensive has been widely reported in the media. Although it is true that the conflict remains hard going for both sides, Ukraine's determination remains steadfast. The Ukrainian armed forces have shown extraordinary resourcefulness and their determination to win is stronger than ever. They have adapted, necessarily, their approach to overcome the Russian use of mines, artillery and drones, resulting in steady progress, with notable success in recent weeks. We have witnessed the clever prioritisation of their operations and they are husbanding the battle-winning equipment provided by their allies and partners to have maximum effect.

The Ukrainian armed forces continue to prioritise offensive action in the Robotyne area and are currently fighting through the first Russian main defensive line, which is heavily fortified. Ukraine is carrying out operations around Bakhmut, pushing the Russians back to the edge of the town and ensuring no significant territorial changes within the past month. Despite the large numbers of Russian forces committed, they are not succeeding. Ukraine has made notable successes in destroying several Russian command and control centres and ammunition storage sites.

It is difficult, from the comfort of our position here in the House of Commons or watching on television as observers, to imagine the ferocity of the fighting and the sacrifices of the Ukrainians. It has been bloody, brutal and painstakingly slow as they have penetrated a defensive minefield that is 30 km in depth, but they are succeeding.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Minister very much for his introduction and for our clear commitment in the United Kingdom, and through the Minister's office, to helping Ukraine. One thing that is currently prevalent—the Minister referred to it—is the clearance of mines. I understand that in the past perhaps 10 or 12 months Russia has had time to set different levels and lines of mines. What help are we in the United Kingdom and, indeed, all of the free world able to give to the Ukrainians to clear the mines?

**James Heapey:** There are two parts to mine clearance in-country. First, there is the tactical mine clearance of lanes through which to launch the Ukrainian offensive. The tactic to which the Ukrainians have resorted to preserve combat power has been to clear the minefields very slowly, deliberately and methodically with dismounted infantry, in a way that those of us who served in Afghanistan or Iraq will remember as a tactic for improvised explosive devices there. It is quite something that that

has been the tactic for clearing a minefield, but it has preserved combat power and therefore has been necessary. The other part is that there will obviously need to be a demining effort for the country at large after the war, and that is a concern for all of Ukraine's donors and friends—*[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker, it seems odd to talk about the progress of the war and the atrocities when others are so busy in their conversation, but I am sure they mean nothing by it.

Despite the large numbers of Russian forces committed, they are not succeeding. Ukraine has had notable successes, destroying several Russian command and control centres and ammunition storage sites. It is difficult from the comfort of our position as observers to imagine the ferocity of the fighting and the sacrifice of the Ukrainians. Russia is suffering heavily on the battlefield and has taken some 200,000 casualties, of whom we believe 60,000 have been killed. In addition, more than 10,000 armoured vehicles have been destroyed.

However, the value of today's debate is not simply to reflect on the tactical situation on the ground in south-east Ukraine, but to zoom out and assess the strategic scorecard.

**Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con):** My right hon. Friend makes a valuable point about demining, but demining could be put in place now, and it is important now, because even areas that are retaken still have significant numbers of seeded mines. There is not only traditional mine clearance, of the kind that he will be familiar with from Afghanistan, but the use of artificial intelligence and software to predict how mines move and spread. That work can be done now—we do not have to wait till the end of the war.

**James Heapey:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend's observation. The reality is that, as the frontline moves, it is in Ukraine's interest to bring the agricultural land back into productive use as quickly as possible, and we have seen some extraordinarily innovative efforts to do that, from the most low-tech to the most high-tech. The challenge is that neither the UK nor any other supporter of Ukraine would want to put a combat engineering capability into the country, for fear of any miscalculation that that would cause. That effort necessarily sits with the non-governmental organisations, but there are a number working with the Ukrainian Government, some of which are based here in the UK.

I suggested that the House zoom out a bit to look at the strategic scorecard. As a result of Putin's war, the Russian people are needlessly suffering, the Russian economy is faltering and we are seeing Ukrainian strikes deep into the interior of Russia. An aborted coup and its aftermath laid bare the nature of Putin's regime and the strength of feeling of so many Russians against his so-called special military operation. It has become a standard line in these updates, but on day 564 of Putin's three-day operation he still has not achieved any of his strategic objectives. Russia's economy is failing, the rouble continues to fall and sanctions are biting.

As we have seen before, Russia will resort to terrorising Ukraine's population whenever its battlefield objectives cannot be met. Just last Wednesday, a Russian strike hit a crowded market in the Ukrainian city of Kostiantynivka, killing at least 17 people and wounding a further 32. Over the weekend we have seen sham elections run in

Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Crimea, but, as the Foreign Secretary tweeted, the problem for Putin is that

“You can’t hold elections in someone else’s country.”

Putin continues to use food as a weapon to hold the world to ransom. Russia is using its Black sea fleet to attack Ukrainian ports with impunity in order to prevent the export of grain and exacerbate global food insecurity. I have travelled extensively across Africa and the rest of what is sometimes lazily referred to as the global south. Whatever Putin might think he achieves through the security conference he hosts in Moscow and St Petersburg, I am yet to meet anyone who is not clear that it is his attacks on Ukrainian port infrastructure that threaten food security across the developing world. He is using food as a weapon. We encourage a return to the Black sea grain initiative, but we are clear-eyed about Putin’s actions and his likely intent.

It is self-evident that Russia’s behaviour on sovereign Ukrainian territory means that he is interested neither in finding a path to peace nor in stability in the world beyond. Make no mistake, the fastest route to peace in Ukraine and to security and stability for the rest of us is through Putin withdrawing his forces and ending this illegal and unjustified war.

The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to support Ukraine’s offensive. As the House will know well, we provided £2.3 billion in military support to Ukraine last year, and by being the first to send tanks and Storm Shadow missiles, we galvanised a coalition of like-minded nations to follow suit and come to the defence of the broader international rules-based system. At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July, the Prime Minister announced a new tranche of support for Ukraine, including thousands of additional rounds for Challenger 2 tanks, more than 70 combat and logistic vehicles, and a £50 million support package for equipment repair, as well as the establishment of a new military rehabilitation centre. We are also seeing increased contributions to the international fund for Ukraine. So far, £782 million has been pledged, and 10 contracts worth £182 million have been placed, to assist Ukraine in critical areas such as intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, electronic warfare and air defence. The first deliveries arrived in Ukraine this summer.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Two organisations in Putney have raised a lot of money and contributions of medical aid for Ukraine. They have, with volunteers, taken ambulances out to Ukraine. That is a big need that has been communicated back to us. Can the Minister say anything more about the medical aid being supplied to those on the frontline in Ukraine?

**James Heapey:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that. There is, of course, the aid that the MOD gives the Ukrainian armed forces in combat medical equipment and, indeed, in medical support, but the most amazing thing in the medical aid space is what has been done by small groups around the country, such as those in her constituency. People have banded together and pooled whatever supplies they can lay their hands on. Very often, they then deliver those supplies in person—exactly as she says her constituents have done—which takes some bravery, as well as real commitment to gathering them in the first place. In reality, those endeavours will always be of enormous value to communities across Ukraine, just as the medical aid that we give more

directly to the Ukrainian military is to them. Her constituents and others are to be commended. The Government will continue to support the military with the medical aid it needs, and to consider what more we as a nation can do to complement the work done by voluntary groups.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): A charity similar to those the Minister describes is Medics4Ukraine, which is based in my constituency. I visited those at the charity and asked them what they would request of the Government. They said that expired medical equipment from the NHS—specifically dressings approaching their expiry date—would be enormously useful to their charitable endeavour.

**James Heapey:** I note the hon. Gentleman’s comment and pay tribute to the work of the group in his constituency. On a Government-to-Government basis, it is important that we are led by the Government of Ukraine and what they ask us for. They are clear in their communication with us about their priorities, and those are what we resource. However, I will of course ensure that his point is noted. In the meantime, I encourage the groups in his constituency to continue doing what they can in support.

We have now trained more than 23,000 Ukrainian personnel under Operation Interflex, with contributions and knowledge from international partners, as demonstrated by the growing coalition of countries now joining us in training Ukrainians here on UK soil. Nearly 1,000 Ukrainian marines are returning home after being trained by the Royal Marine and Army commandos during a six-month UK programme. That training saw the commandos training Ukraine forces in small boat amphibious operations and in conducting beach raids. We have also commenced basic flying training for up to 20 Ukrainian pilots to support the recent decision by Denmark and the Netherlands to donate F-16 jets. That, in addition to the ongoing work from the Royal Navy to train the Ukrainian minesweeping crews, makes the UK the only country on earth that is training soldiers, sailors, aviators and marines—something about which we should be very proud.

**Bob Seely:** My right hon. Friend is making a great speech, and I apologise for interrupting again and thank him for taking the intervention. Apologies if I have missed it, but when it comes to training people, is any thought being given to a Sandhurst package or starting to get junior officers through? One thing that the Royal United Services Institute has identified—it is not necessary to go through a year-long course to do it, but it may help—is the lack of junior officers, and of people with J3 ops experience and of putting together basic plans. That is one point that has been identified, and I was wondering whether my right hon. Friend could answer it.

**James Heapey:** My hon. Friend thinks deeply about the problem, and his observations are absolutely correct. It would be inelegant to reflect on the private conversations that we have with Ukrainian Ministers and defence chiefs, but I think Ukraine is going through exactly the same as any other country that has been fighting a war: it is very hard to strike the balance between keeping its most combat-experienced and battle-hardened on the frontline, in command of tactical situations, and bringing those people rearwards and making them part of the planning or training effort. That can have an exponential impact, but it is a very big opportunity cost to accept.

[James Heapey]

The UK remains one of the largest bilateral humanitarian donors to Ukraine. At the Ukraine recovery conference in London in June, co-chaired by the UK and Ukraine, we added a further £127 million of humanitarian support to the £220 million we have already provided. This week, we have proscribed the Wagner Group as a terrorism organisation, a further measure of the UK's commitment to compete with Russian influence wherever in the world it manifests itself. Through our sanctions, we are frustrating Russia's attempts to prosecute its war and hindering its efforts to resupply. The UK alone has sanctioned over 1,600 individuals and entities since the start of the invasion, including 29 banks with global assets worth £1 trillion, 129 oligarchs with a combined net worth of over £145 billion, and over £20 billion-worth of UK-Russia trade. In June, we introduced legislation to reinforce our approach by enabling sanctions to remain in place until Russia pays for the damage it has caused in Ukraine.

Russia's failures on the battlefield demonstrate that its much-vaunted and much-feared capabilities are anything but. Russia has been proven to be an unreliable partner, unable or unwilling to satisfy export orders due to outdated and inferior-quality materials, alongside inadequate logistics and equipment care. Moscow is having to prioritise its own forces over its international order book. Potential Russian export customers see clearly the opportunity to diversify their defence supply and seek out the reliable and effective equipment that Britain and others in the west manufacture.

What is true for defence exports is increasingly true for all other exports, too. That matters, because Putin's illegal war in Ukraine is increasingly costly to him, not just in blood and treasure on the battlefield, but in influence in the international arena. More and more countries in Russia's near abroad are looking for other friends because they see that Russia cannot be trusted, while countries that have been in the Russian sphere for decades, and depended on it for their defence and security, now realise the need to diversify. That is not just in NATO, where Finland and Sweden have gone through huge strategic shifts: others around the world are doing likewise. The cost to Russia of Putin's folly will last for decades.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): I commend the Minister for the full range of strategic initiatives being conducted by the British Government, but it strikes me that the best way of supporting Ukraine in toto is for all 32 member nations of NATO to be contributing the agreed 2% per nation. As of today, seven of those 32 are doing so. May I please ask the Minister—with the FCDO Minister, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), in his place as well—what we are doing to compel, or at least coerce or encourage, other NATO nations to do so?

**James Heapey:** At the Vilnius summit earlier in the summer, the Prime Minister and others who are spending 2% of GDP were very clear in their expectation that others quickly move to do likewise. Moreover, they were clear that that cannot be just a short-term capital commitment, but a long-term, enduring commitment to spend 2% for good, as a minimum—a floor—because Euro-Atlantic security has not been so threatened for well over a generation.

One day, the war in Ukraine will cease, so we must make sure that Ukraine is in the best possible shape to help its economy recover, and quickly. To bring prosperity back to Ukraine, the Ukraine recovery conference committed a further £3 billion of guarantees to unlock World Bank lending; £240 million of bilateral assistance; and up to £250 million of new capital for the UK's development finance institution, British International Investment, to advance Ukraine's economic recovery. Critically, we are also spending some £62 million on a programme to help Ukraine rebuild a sustainable and resilient energy system and to keep the lights on.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure those in the Kremlin pay particular attention to the Commons when you are in the Chair, so I have no doubt that they are watching this afternoon, and they need to be clear that we recognise the need—

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**James Heapey:** I will give way one last time.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I am most grateful, because I think he is reaching the end of his remarks—

**James Heapey:** I am.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** But I was waiting for him to get on to the bigger strategic picture. It is quite clear that Mr Putin is playing this long in the hope that the patience of our allies—we can think of who they are—will wear thin, our attention will wane and by a process of attrition he will gain something out of this conflict. I congratulate the Government on refusing to accept that that should be the outcome, but what confidence does the Minister have that we will carry all our allies to ensure that we sustain the Ukrainians' effort so that that they achieve total victory, not some sell-out of half their territory already occupied by the Russians?

**James Heapey:** Well, *Hansard* already has the final few paragraphs of my speech, so I will simply agree with my hon. Friend. He is absolutely correct. The tactical support that we provide to the Ukrainians to win, tonight and tomorrow, will continue for as long as is needed. Putin cannot wait this out, and to prove that, increasingly over the last few months the UK Government's focus has been not just on that tactical support for tomorrow, but on giving Putin the certainty that the Ukrainian armed forces will be helped to continue to modernise and grow over the next decade so that they finish this war superior to the Russian armed forces. We will help Ukraine to recover more quickly and to grow faster than Russia, so that the economic cost and difference are clear for all to see. The UK has the strategic patience to make sure that this illegal war finishes in Ukraine's favour, and that Putin or his successors are shown that Russia will never succeed by throwing its might around in its near abroad.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I call the shadow Minister.

5.52 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It has been 564 days since Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. War in Europe is a harsh reminder that



to be secure at home we must be strong abroad, and that our allies are our greatest strategic strength in doing so.

Our commitment to Ukraine must be long lasting. Fine words do not defeat the tanks of an invader; only weapons, training, courage and determination stand up to them. The Ukrainian war effort in recent weeks and months has been slow going, but effective. Despite deeply dug in and heavily mined Russian defences, the Ukrainians are steadily getting the upper hand on the battlefield in the south of the country by targeting supply lines and outlying areas in the western Zaporizhzhia oblast and Robotyne. In its defence, the Ukraine operation is also diversifying the ways it is hitting its enemy—airfields at depth in Russia, targets in Crimea and Russian ships in the Black sea. Some have criticised the slow pace of Ukraine's counter-offensive, yet Ukrainian forces are making a similar rate of progress as British troops did in the days after D-day and the Normandy landings. Now, as then, it is brutal conventional trench warfare, and I want to pay tribute on behalf of all on the Opposition side of the House to the extraordinary heroism and resilience of the Ukrainian military in the face of Russian aggression.

In contrast, Vladimir Putin is fighting a war on a number of fronts with a military battlefield and a political one, too. He is fighting to fix his failing war strategy as Russia's armed forces continue to fight on the back foot in Ukraine, without the supplies they need, the leadership they need and the rotation of troops they need. Putin is fighting increasing hostility on Russian soil, with a growing number of drone attacks and economic headwinds facing the country because of the grip of sanctions. He is fighting increasing scrutiny of his leadership, as we saw in the aborted coup over the summer, as concerns about the war continue to grow in Russia. However, more than 18 months on, there is no sign that his strategic aims have changed, nor are there any signs that he is any closer to achieving a single one of them.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Going back to the hon. Member's comments about D-day and Normandy, the Americans and Brits were bogged down in hedgerow country there, and the way they broke out and started to make real progress was with overwhelming aerial superiority and bombardment. That is exactly what the Ukrainians need.

**Luke Pollard:** It is telling that neither Ukraine nor Russia enjoys air superiority over the contested parts of Ukraine at the moment; nor does either enjoy superiority in the electronic warfare spectrum or in uncrewed aerial vehicles. That contest in EW and the airspace makes the contest on land even more brutal, so the hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of ensuring that we continue to support our friends in Ukraine not just with artillery systems but with the shells and spare parts required to ensure the artillery can keep firing. We must also ensure a continual supply of aerial combat systems—not only F-16s, but the uncrewed drones, which Ukraine is using with such effect—and training. This is a long-term commitment, and while there is no air superiority we need to make sure that every single available advantage that Ukraine can have from the provision of western support is available to it. I agree with what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Putin believes that the west will not stay the course, as the Minister suggested, but Putin is wrong. Those who call for the Ukrainians to sue for peace and negotiate are doing Putin's dirty work for him. In over 20 years, Putin has never given up territory he has taken by force. A ceasefire now would cede territory to Russia, allowing Putin's forces to regroup, deepen the occupation and pretend there is legitimisation for the regime of torture, rape and execution, including the theft of Ukrainian children and their removal to parts of Russia.

The threats we face from Putin are long term, and our resolve must equally stand the test of time across Parliaments, across changes of Ministers and across changes of Governments. There may well be a change to Labour next year, but let me say clearly that there will be no change in Britain's resolve to stand with Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes.

The defence of the United Kingdom starts in Ukraine. The support that has been offered to Ukraine by the UK should make us all proud, and I agreed with the Minister when he set out clearly the contribution that has been made by UK forces through Operation Interflex, with the training of our Ukrainian friends and the provision of military systems. Now it is time for Ukraine's allies to double down on that support, because this is a long-term fight. The UK does deserve credit for its support for Ukraine and the leadership shown among allies to get them to do more, but it is vital that we are able to say the same thing in six months' time, because stockpiles are being depleted, energy levels are lowering and there is a risk of fatigue. We cannot afford that fatigue, and that is why we must be in this for the long term.

Once Ukraine has prevailed, the rightful place for Ukraine is in NATO, alongside the allies that share common views on democracy, freedom and territorial integrity. That is the rightful place for Ukraine once it has prevailed. However, let me also reiterate that the UK Government will continue to have Labour's fullest support on military aid to Ukraine and on reinforcing our NATO allies. Labour's support for NATO is unshakeable, and our backing for Ukraine is solid and firm.

Ukrainians are now urgently asking for more, to help with their current counter-offensive and ensure that it succeeds. Since January, the Prime Minister has repeatedly pledged to accelerate UK support for Ukraine, but one concern on the Opposition side of the House is that momentum behind our military help is faltering. The 14 Challenger 2 tanks that the UK sent to Ukraine may be seen as top of the range, but our effort has now been dwarfed by other European allies. Poland has committed 324 tanks, the Czechs 90, and our friends in the Netherlands 89. There is an urgent need to help Ukraine ramp up its domestic industrial production of key weapons and equipment such as ammunition and shells. BAE Systems' move to set up a local entity in Ukraine is a start, but the Government could be doing far more to help facilitate deals from a variety of partners, so that Ukraine can produce both modern and Soviet-era systems closer to the frontline, so that they can be used quicker.

Ministers are also yet to provide accelerated support on new drone technologies, including counter-drone measures such as electronic warfare systems and armoured

[*Luke Pollard*]

vehicles, despite there being a clear need to do so. Finally, our friends in Ukraine need further support with their de-mining capability—that was raised earlier by a number of Members across the House. It is important that such de-mining support continues, not only on the frontline to ensure a breakthrough, but in the liberated areas to ensure that proper economic activity can return.

Now is the time when the UK should be stepping up support for the Ukrainian offensive. Will the Minister clarify how the new Defence Secretary will be accelerating UK assistance to Ukraine, and will he set out the scope of assistance that Ukraine can expect from us as part of that acceleration? How is he removing some of the bureaucratic hurdles that prevent partnerships between UK industry and our friends in Ukraine from taking place? The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) raised a similar point during Defence questions, and this is about breaking down the barriers between businesses and allies, rather than a simple intergovernmental transfer of support being required. Boxing clever here could produce good results. To be the lead nation in providing support for Ukraine, we must be faster in delivering the support that is required.

On help with rebuilding Ukraine, the European Union has already set out a plan to shift frozen assets into a fund to help rebuild Ukraine, Canada has passed laws allowing it to do the same, and now the US has also drafted a Bill to do so. The Government said in July that they support using frozen assets to rebuild Ukraine, so what is causing the delay? When can we expect frozen assets to be used for that purpose? If Ministers come forward with a workable plan, it will enjoy cross-party support. This Parliament will be agreed on it, so when will that happen and what will it look like?

The Government finally decided last week to proscribe the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation, but on 20 February this year I stood at the Dispatch Box and called for Wagner to be designated as a terrorist organisation. Labour colleagues have been doing that for some time, and the European Parliament voted for it late last year. Complacency could be the enemy of success in Ukraine, so why has it taken six months since Labour called for it to happen for Ministers slowly to grind into action? Why now, only after Prigozhin has been killed, has Wagner been proscribed in that way by the United Kingdom? That is a lengthy delay, and it would be useful to understand why we were so out of step with our allies when it came to Wagner. Will the Minister provide an assessment of the risk that Wagner troops pose to Ukraine, including the thousands still based in Belarus?

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, I and Labour colleagues have responded eight times to debates, statements or urgent questions concerning Ukraine. Time and again in such debates we have reiterated the urgent need for a stockpiles strategy to sustain support for Ukraine and rearm Britain. Time and again, the Government have failed to provide a coherent long-term stockpiles strategy. That is not good enough. Our generosity to Ukraine, correct as it is, is depleting our current military stockpiles, and despite the Government having known about this problem for over a year, they continue to act too slowly to replenish them. The capability gaps that are being created are concerning, because if we want to be in this

for the long term—and I believe that on a cross-party basis we do—we cannot afford capability gaps. Nor can we afford to empty our cupboard to ensure that the front line is well supplied, while having nothing for our own defence, that of our allies or the continuing support we need.

Next generation light anti-tank weapons have been vital to Ukraine, and it was 287 days after the invasion before the MOD got its act together and signed a new contract, with the first newly made NLAWs not due until 2024. What active steps are the Government taking to improve the British magazine depth, as the Americans would describe it, and our stockpiles? Does the Minister accept that the UK needs a stockpiles strategy so that we can finally shift parts of our defence industry and MOD procurement on to urgent operational footing, to ensure that that we have the supplies of both the armaments and the military systems that we need to ensure long-term support? At the moment the Government are continuing to fall short on that front.

**Jim Shannon:** I have been listening to what the hon. Gentleman is saying about NLAWs, and there was a very quick response—some credit should be given to Thales for its response when the Government put the order in. Almost straight away Thales was able to respond, manufacture those NLAWs and get them out to Ukraine. Some credit must be given to the Thales factory and the workers back in Belfast, for what they were able to do.

**Luke Pollard:** I am grateful for that intervention, because it gives me a chance to thank not only those in Britain's military industries who have been supporting the effort in Ukraine, but those in Plymouth who are supplying the parts that go into some of the missile systems that are made in the factory mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. This is a long-term effort, and that is why we need a stockpiles strategy to ensure that investment is going in across the United Kingdom, especially in missiles and missile systems that are proving their worth on the battlefield in Ukraine, but that were developed, designed and built many decades ago, and that we have been using as part of our stockpiles ever since.

The Government need to show us that they are learning the lessons from the war in Ukraine, and part of that is about our homeland defence and how we better protect these shores. There was a brief mention of that in the defence Command Paper refresh published recently, but in light of developments in missile technology and the weaponisation of drones that has been on display in both Ukraine and Russia, I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify what the Government are doing to protect the UK and our own homeland defence from such threats. Our cities are as vulnerable as Russian cities to those kinds of attacks, and as we begin the autumn and winter months we must learn from the experience of the attacks in Ukraine last year, especially Russian targeting of supply chains and, importantly, civilian energy installations. What are we doing in advance to ensure that those energy installations are better defended, and that there is an ongoing supply of power? I realise that there will be things the Minister cannot say, but I am sure there are things he can say to ensure certainty in this House. Russia will try to force Ukrainians into darkness once again. What additional support can the UK provide for increased Ukraine air defence, which is critical to ensure that Ukraine's critical national infrastructure survives over the winter?

Ukraine must win this war, and Russia must lose. The former Defence Secretary understood that well, and his successor must now give that his full focus when he can. The new Defence Secretary has taken this job at a time when political leadership is just as vital as military leadership. Earlier this year, his predecessor conceded in the Commons that successive Conservative Governments had “hollowed out and underfunded” our forces. Since 2010, the Government have cut 25,000 full-time soldiers from the British Army, removed one in five ships from the Royal Navy, and taken more than 200 aircraft out of RAF service in the last five years alone. As the new Defence Secretary takes his place, he should pursue an accelerated UK plan to help support Ukraine and defeat Putin. First, he must accelerate military support, secondly he must redouble UK defence diplomacy to help maintain western unity, and thirdly he must spell out the long-term security guarantees announced with G7 partners at the recent NATO summit.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** The hon. Gentleman is giving full solidarity, and the pledge on behalf of the Labour party to continue the Government’s policy in Ukraine is extremely welcome and will be heard around the world. Does that extend to guarantees on funding for defence? I appreciate that this is a loaded question, but will the hon. Gentleman match whatever the Government promise to spend on defence?

**Luke Pollard:** The hon. Gentleman invites me to write Labour’s manifesto from the Dispatch Box, and I am sure that the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), would not be too keen on me doing that. Let me say clearly that Labour in power has always spent what is required on defence. When we left power we were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, a figure never matched by Conservative Governments in 13 years. It is important that when it comes to defence, we not only have a reasonable budget for security, but that the money is well spent.

What we have seen recently, as the hon. Gentleman will know, is a huge amount of waste in MOD procurement. That is not only on wasted systems, but through money going to foreign contractors that in the Opposition’s mind should have gone to UK contractors, because we believe in building in Britain first and foremost. As we have seen from the recent Royal Fleet Auxiliary solid support ship contract, which was sent abroad rather than to a UK supplier in its first instance, we are seeping money out of our system when we allow such contracts to go abroad. We need to make sure that as we build new platforms, there is an adequate work share for all partners involved. There is a balance to be struck, but I take the challenge that the hon. Gentleman makes. I am afraid he will have to wait for our manifesto for those commitments.

The final thing I will do is to thank all the communities up and down the country that have been supporting our Ukrainian friends throughout the 564 days since Putin’s illegal invasion. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know you have been supporting people in your constituency in Doncaster and met some of them to thank them for their support. Members from both sides of the House have been supporting their communities over the summer recess, including in making sure that Ukrainians who

have come to the United Kingdom can remain here. In particular, I pay tribute to some of the Ukrainian young people in Plymouth who have succeeded in achieving GCSEs and A-levels, despite the enormous pressure upon them and their families. In many cases, they were studying subjects in a new language and a new country while their friends and families are facing bombing and attack in Ukraine. It is an incredible achievement, and I put on record our thanks and, I am sure, those of the entire House to all those British families who have been making Ukrainians welcome here in Britain.

We still have a lot more work to do, and our commitment needs to be long term, not only in our military support for Ukraine, but in our support for Ukrainians for whom it is unsafe to go home. For as long as it is unsafe, we need to make sure there is a safe home for them here. Should there be a change of Government at the next general election, there will be no change in Britain’s support for Ukraine. We must rise to the same heights as our Ukrainian friends to ensure that Putin loses and Ukraine wins.

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

6.12 pm

**Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con):** The paralysis of the G20 statement reflects the difficulties of the geopolitics we face. The absence of a communiqué to confirm that it is Russia at fault here shows what leadership is still required in leaning in to what is happening in Ukraine. This remains the biggest war since world war two. Although it is dragging on—as the Minister for Armed Forces said, we are on day 564—we should not be desensitised to what is happening; we should be concerned that there continues to be economic and security disruption right across the continent. This is a test of our staying power and our ability to continue our support. To dry up our support for Ukraine is exactly what Putin wants us to do.

Since the last time we had a debate on this matter, dramatic events have taken place over the summer. They affect what is happening on the ground in Ukraine and in Russia, and they could be game-changing. It is worth remembering that Putin thought he could win this war because he saw a divided Ukraine. President Zelensky did not enjoy the command and support that he has today. If we go back to the Maidan in 2014, Viktor Yanukovich was pressed by Putin to lean his country to the east when it was clear that the nation—or at least half of it—wanted to face the west. Putin saw the west being risk-averse in wanting to support Ukraine in its hour of need. He then pressed further by taking on Crimea and the Donbas. Again, the west did little. He then invaded in 2021, as we know, hoping to repeat what happened in 1968, when the Soviets marched into Czechoslovakia with 50,000 troops and, I think, around 5,000 tanks. It was the courage of Ukraine that meant it stood up to the mark and stood up to the third largest army in the world.

This is where we can pay tribute to what the British Government have done, because there has been commendable engagement, even prior to the invasion itself. They have provided those important anti-tank weapon systems, training on Salisbury plain, those main battle tanks—the Challengers—as well as Storm Shadows

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

and Brimstones. They have been leading in the Ramstein group, co-ordinating efforts with other allies to make sure that Ukraine has the necessary military assistance. We have learned and become less risk-averse as time has moved forward, conscious of the escalatory ladder and knowing we are dealing with a nuclear power that has invaded another state. The west has rekindled its cold war statecraft skills, but the fundamental issue is: if we want Ukraine to win and Russia to lose, we should not be half-hearted in giving what Ukraine requires. We need to be fully committed to giving Ukraine the tools to succeed for victory.

It has been clear and mentioned already in the Chamber today that the war has not gone well for President Putin. He expected a quick win and is now frustrated on the frontline. There is little to show for his efforts. He is using conscripts and prisoners and having to replace successive generals, because command and control is not what it was. He has spent the past 23 years coup d'état-proofing, as it were, the Kremlin, Moscow and Russia to make sure that he will not be removed, because that is the Russian way. Russian leaders remain in power because they exhibit strength and are infallible. As soon as they show any signs of weakness, that is when the oligarchs, the elites and so forth realise they can no longer have their back watched by the leader in charge, and they move to replace them. That is what we are seeing today because of the game-changing events involving the Wagner rebellion and Yevgeny Prigozhin. His removal by Putin was inevitable, for the very reason I have just raised: when a Russian leader is attacked in any way, it is the Russian way to crush one's enemies—to remove them and to eliminate them in one form or another.

Prigozhin did something exceptional: not only did he challenge Putin and bury the myth that this war was going well, but he used his own forces to charge up through Rostov-on-Don towards Moscow. That illustrated that no Russian forces were able to take on the Wagner Group—the private army—to prevent a coup d'état and a mutiny. That weakness is now recognised across Russia; Putin's time will eventually be up.

The other dynamic is that, of all the fighting forces in Ukraine, the most powerful, capable, potent and best equipped was the Wagner Group. It had the best equipment and was the most motivated. It has now been removed from the battlefield and that provides an opportunity for Ukraine.

Lots of western pressure has been placed on Ukraine, saying, "We have given you all this expensive, exceptional, ever-complex equipment. Why has the counter-offensive not advanced further?" Again, it is because—this happened in the second world war—various phases of operations need to be conducted. We have seen Ukraine probe the frontline across 1,000 km, and we are now seeing advances taking place as it penetrates through complex minefields and anti-tank defences, particularly in the Zaporizhzhia region. That is the progress we need to see, but we need to exhibit patience. This is not going to happen overnight—there will not be a quick phase of war, with this all being over by Christmas.

What Putin is now realising is that this could be the beginning of the end of his war in Ukraine, and it could be the beginning of the end of his existence as leader,

too. I do not believe he will be replaced overnight, but I do believe that the weakness exhibited is enough to unrest and unnerve many of the leaders in Russia who will be looking for a replacement in the longer term. We therefore need to be cautious and perhaps stand up to those voices in the west who are saying, "Let's draw a line. Let's start negotiating. Let's get round a table and draw a close to what is happening in Ukraine."

We need to recognise the bigger picture and what Putin—indeed, even his successor—might be trying to do, and that is to expand Russian influence in the Slavic area of eastern Europe. Again, that is the Russian way. Let us go back hundreds of years; the view has been, "If we are not being attacked, the best way is to attack, otherwise, our defences will not be enough to hold the motherland together, so let's take advantage of the west's weakness or risk-averseness." I am pleased to see that we are now starting to change that.

What is next for the west? Absolutely, we must keep up that military support—that is the tactical that has been talked about today—but I would advance two further areas where we could do more to support Ukrainians. First, we must recognise that more than \$300 billion-worth of frozen assets belong to Russia. We need to develop a legal mechanism that would allow each month about \$20 billion of that to be slid across the table to Ukraine to help in its reconstruction and development. That might focus minds in Russia—in Moscow, in the Kremlin and Putin himself—that the longer the war continues, the more Russian money it is costing.

Secondly, I would stress the grain shipments—I brought them up with the Prime Minister—which are critical for Ukraine as well as fundamental for our own economy, where food inflation remains in double figures. I would stress the symbiotic relationship between our economic security and our national security. I am pleased that the Government are organising and participating in a global food security summit. I hope that we will look towards creating some form of expeditionary force that can provide the necessary defence and support for a maritime taskforce to protect those ships and ensure they can depart from Odesa to feed the rest of the world.

I end simply by stressing what I think many colleagues will express: because our world is getting more dangerous, not less, our peacetime defence budget of just over 2% of GDP is simply not adequate. We had the 2021 integrated review, which introduced so many cuts across all three services. Because of Ukraine, we had another IR—IR '23. Unfortunately, none of those cuts was reversed. I hope that the new Defence Secretary, who has the Prime Minister's ear, will be able to persuade him on that and recognise that we have done so much in advancing our hard-power capabilities, but we need to go further because of where this very dangerous world is now headed.

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

6.23 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench for, I think, the third time today. On this subject, however, I think there will be much more unanimity and agreement across the House.

As someone who has been speaking about the plight of Ukraine essentially since I was elected in 2015, I have always been happy to state my support and that of my party for the Ukrainians' ongoing struggle to establish control of their homeland across the full extent of their 1991 borders—and as someone who it is fair to say has never been shy in criticising the Government when they deserve it, I think the political will they have shown to remain ahead of the curve when it comes to the international response is to be commended. Given that my opinions and those of my party are well understood and an matter of extensive record in the House, I intend to keep my remarks relatively short, but needless to say it is important to reflect on where we are at this stage in the war.

It is fair to say that a little too much pressure was put on the Ukrainian armed forces before their summer offensive. Not only is it an eternal adage that no plan survives contact with the enemy, but Russia had a significant amount of time to dig in as well as to learn from the mistakes it made at the beginning of the conflict and adapt. These Russian forces are riddled with corruption, clientelism, cronyism, racism and poor morale, as witnessed by the attempted coup, as was mentioned earlier. However, that does not mean that they are entirely incapable of learning on the battlefield and, as satisfying as the initial successes of capabilities such as Javelin or HIMARS were, there is no doubt that they adapted and changed their approach, becoming a harder opponent to break down in the process. That said, recent advances are to be welcomed, and the sacrifices made by the armed forces of Ukraine in advancing past those initial lines in certain areas should be recognised. While it may be all too soon to talk about whether this is a breach, a breakthrough or anything more, it is welcome news at the end of the summer.

I have always been one of those who have felt it important to allow Ukraine to lead this strategy. I hope that we will not be hearing anything more of the veiled criticisms of that that emerged from some allied quarters. It is a similarly solid adage that things always take a little longer in war than is initially anticipated, and we know that it will be perseverance and adaptation in response to the battlefield in front of them that will win the war for Ukraine. Our patience and resolve are therefore needed at this time along with an ongoing appraisal of what we can do to continue supplying matériel to Ukraine that could prove decisive. In that context, the recent conversations about the army tactical missile system are most welcome and it will hopefully provide the opportunity to strike deep behind Russian lines and further disrupt the morale of those Russians preventing a Ukrainian advance.

Our patience and resolve must extend further. I will never tire of saying here that winning the peace in Ukraine, and providing the funding for the civilian authorities there to rebuild after the conflict is over, will be as important as winning the war. That work will probably take decades and I believe it is already beginning. Again, I commend the Government for the work they have started on that with this year's donor conference held here in London, but we cannot take any of this for granted.

Let us not be naive. The Kremlin's strategy is, as we have heard, to try to wait Ukraine and its allies out. It is placing a lot of hope in an amenable result in next year's

US presidential election. While we cannot thank our American friends enough for the breadth and depth of their bilateral military and economic aid to Ukraine, we know that that that has become something of a live question in that country's political debate. We should prepare ourselves for the possibility that that bilateral support may not continue in its current form. It is therefore most disheartening to read reports in the press of former UK Prime Ministers stating publicly their preference for candidates in that election who have pledged to roll back support for Ukraine. It would be most disheartening should broader culture war tropes that have infected the American debate on Ukraine also cross the Atlantic. I therefore hope that we can continue the agreement on the broad strategy of aiding Ukraine, while of course reserving the right occasionally to disagree on how best to do that, and show patience and resolve as they go about liberating their homeland.

I am happy to say that I have the unwavering support of my party for those sentiments. It passed a motion on Ukraine at last year's party conference, which stated unequivocally:

"As a party which has as its founding principle the ability of people to self-determine, Conference...states unequivocally that Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia are all Ukraine."

6.28 pm

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The people of Ukraine are suffering in a manner that we in Britain are unaccustomed to in recent times and we are horrified by. Russian forces are committing war crime after war crime with no regard for civilians, including women and children. While visiting the Ukrainian town of Irpin, just north-west of Kyiv, in February, I saw what the local Ukrainians referred to as the cemetery of burnt cars. That was what was left on a day when families had packed what they could to escape the Russian advancing forces, but they did not make it out because the Russians fired upon them, killing those attempting to escape. It could not even be said that they were killed by stray small arms rounds. Looking at the number and size of the holes in the backs and sides of the cars, it was clear to anyone that those poor people were deliberately targeted by heavy weapons.

All that is taking place on the continent of Europe, in a sovereign state with a parliamentary democracy. The people of Ukraine are fighting for their lives and their freedom and democracy—our shared values. In August, I was able to visit the frontline, south of the city of Zaporizhzhia. I spoke with some of the troops, and it was great to see the very high morale among them. Many of those brave men were trained in the UK, especially the gunners trained at the Royal School of Artillery in Larkhill. I was proud to see British kit and equipment used in the fight to eject Russians from Ukraine. I saw an AS-90 gun, which had come from my son's regiment, 1 Royal Horse Artillery.

The Ukrainian gunners spoke to me about how they preferred British ammunition because the charge bags did not fall apart and the gun barrels needed less cleaning. We saw the guns in action, with rounds landing on Russian targets. They asked me to convey their thanks to the Prime Minister, the Government and the House of Commons for our unwavering ongoing support. If Ukraine is to win the war, the Government must

[Jack Lopresti]

continue to provide such equipment, weapons, training and aid. I welcome my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's announcement of plans for an additional UK-led training programme, to include Ukrainian fighter jets and marines.

Over the weekend I made my third visit so far to Ukraine, when I attended the Yalta European Strategy conference with other Members from across the House. We discussed the power, importance and profundity of Ukraine's ideals; how helping Ukraine is best for global peace, security and the global economy; and how we may bring this illegal, bloody, terrible war to an end. Since the war started in 2014 with the invasion of Crimea, and the subsequent expansion of Russian aggression in February 2022, Ukrainians have proven themselves to be a strong, determined and fiercely patriotic people, who are passionate about defending their home of beautiful and diverse landscapes, as well as preserving their culture and traditions. With many refugees from Ukraine now living in our constituencies in the United Kingdom, I hope Members across the House have sought to experience that culture, along with many of our constituents.

The United Kingdom coming to the aid of Ukraine is imperative in defending the freedom of our friends overseas, but those working on that noble effort are also contributing much here at home. MOD Defence Equipment and Support—DE&S—at Abbey Wood in my constituency employs several thousand MOD personnel, who are not only running the entire procurement for our armed forces, but are largely ensuring that the Ukrainians get all the equipment they need. At Prime Minister's questions back in June, the Prime Minister joined me in paying tribute to all their work. In addition, there are several defence companies in my constituency with hard-working teams working around the clock, developing the technology and equipment that will continue to help Ukrainians liberate their country.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for sovereign defence manufacturing capability, I follow these issues closely. At an event hosted here in the House of Commons by Leonardo and BAE Systems, we discussed the incredible support that the British defence manufacturing sector is providing the Ukrainian military. While in Ukraine in August, I met the then Ukrainian Defence Minister, Oleksii Reznikov, to discuss defence procurement and how our countries are working and will continue to work together in this area. To that end, the APPG is currently running an inquiry on the impact of the Ukrainian war on the resilience of our defence industrial capacity and capability, not only to continue to supply and support Ukrainians but to look at our own stocks and how we can replenish them.

I have been in discussions with British companies who want to co-operate with their Ukrainian counterparts. The need for closer co-operation between our two countries is urgent; unfortunately, some elements of the bureaucratic machinery here seem not to have woken up quite yet to the urgency of the situation. The Ukrainian defence industry has high levels of skill, innovation, synergy and capacity for manufacturing advanced technology, as well as basic mechanical components. The Ukrainians need the materiel, they need it now and, what is more, they want us to produce some of it jointly.

Ukraine is a significant trading partner of the UK, the EU and our NATO partner Turkey. Ukraine's exports of iron ore, semi-finished iron, seed oils, wheat and corn are vital to the rest of the world, as has been demonstrated by Ukraine's recent difficulties in exporting those goods. For foreign direct investment to return to Ukraine, Russian forces must be out of the country entirely, and programmes must be in place to ensure peace, stability and protection from attack. That will provide better security of commercial assets, factories, offices, technological systems and so forth. Therefore, securing a victory for freedom in Ukraine, as well as the stability of the region, is of the utmost importance in helping to maintain global trade, peace and security.

Only once Russian forces are expelled from the whole of Ukraine will Russia learn that it cannot prey again upon Ukraine, or allies such as Poland and Estonia, without terrible and catastrophic consequences. Guaranteeing security and stability in the region is paramount for the resumption of trade in and out of Ukraine, as well as for foreign direct investment in the country. However, for that to be achieved, we must be willing to do whatever it takes to help defend our friends and defeat the Russians.

On the future for Ukraine, the United Kingdom should be at the centre of promoting security guarantees for the country, and assisting and supporting its application for NATO membership. The rebuilding of towns, cities and infrastructure must be a priority for the international community. Such proposals being part of future foreign aid expenditure, incentivising FDI by the British private sector, and having multilateral asset transfers and other reparations are all worthwhile suggestions for funding the reconstruction.

To sum up, the United Kingdom's defence sector, much of which is based in my constituency, has been at the forefront of defending freedom in Ukraine, as I have seen at first hand on the frontline. His Majesty's Government must continue to lead and to ramp up support for Ukraine to ensure victory and lasting peace, and to promote the rebuilding of the country and its economy and prosperity. Together with the Ukrainians and with the help of our allies, we will finish the job.

6.36 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who I seem to have been following recently. Just this weekend we were at the Yalta European Strategy conference, and before leaving for Ukraine we were in Leeds, which I will come back to. At Yalta European Strategy we were joined by the Minister; the shadow Europe Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely); and the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), who is not here. We had a strong UK contingent. However, my journey into Ukraine this time starts a bit earlier, with the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke and the Leeds Ukrainian community centre, for Ukraine's national day.

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking groups—which I am such he is about to mention—such those in Newport West, who

have joined together to fund medicines, equipment, money and all sorts of vital things to go to Ukraine to support the war effort and the people of Ukraine?

**Alex Sobel:** Absolutely. It is incredible to see groups up and down the country doing that. At the event that I attended in Leeds at the Ukrainian centre, I was shown a picture of a support vehicle that they had bought and were taking to Ukraine. It had been purchased thanks to an auction in Morley and Outwood, which I attended with the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns), where I bought a vyshyvanka, which I wore in Ukraine. The auction raised enough money to buy that vehicle. We have seen such activities right across the country.

Exactly two weeks ago today, I set out to Ukraine from Dover with the Ukraine Freedom Company, Emergency Ukraine and Macclesfield Ukrainian Aid, taking five vehicles of aid. That is the second time the APPG has done that this year. We not only talk about the support we will give, but deliver in a practical way to the people of Ukraine. We left to go through the Eurotunnel and had to cross four different sets of customs borders. At each stage there were minor delays, and there was quite a long delay at one, which I will come back to. The UK Government need to do more to ensure that small, local voluntary organisations can get through those customs borders quickly, because they are volunteers and they will not wait three, four or five hours at each border. The UK Government need to speak to their partners to ensure that that does not happen.

We left and drove through France, Belgium, Germany, Hungary and Romania, and arrived at the Danube where we crossed into Ukraine. The next day, Shahed drones attacked the very same port where we had crossed the Danube. That reflects—others have mentioned this—the importance of the fertile Black sea plains, which produce most of the world's sunflowers, much of its grain and, in Kherson, the world's best watermelons. The ports are being attacked because the Black sea grain corridor is now closed.

We drove through the night from the Danube to Odesa. I have never seen so many heavy goods vehicles in all my life. It made the route down to Dover look like a small car park. They were there because the grain cannot be taken from Ukraine by sea. It has to be driven to Romania or other Black sea ports and then transported on. It is a purposeful attack by the Russians to try to close the port, so that not just us in Europe but those in the Gulf, the horn of Africa and right across the global south do not receive this vital food. It is an act of ecocide.

We arrived in Odesa and met the mayor, Gennadiy Trukhanov, who highlighted the strikes on vital infrastructure. We visited the headquarters of a local mobile telephone company and were shown how the Russians had stripped out telecommunications. The UK must do more to support Ukraine's telecommunications infrastructure, because without it, it cannot progress the war or support the nation.

From there, we travelled to Mykolaiv and met the deputy mayor for infrastructure. We saw the devastation and the need for reconstruction. We then went to a town—this was one of the most horrifying things I have ever seen in my life—called Posad-Pokrovske in the Kherson region where not a single building was undamaged.

Nearly every single building had been destroyed. What had been supplied for the people by the international effort were, effectively, plastic boxes. We went into one and it must have been 50° in there. They were horribly hot in the summer and they will be freezing cold in winter. We must do more to support civilian infrastructure, in particular housing, in areas that were occupied and destroyed by Russia but are now liberated. Brave Ukrainians are living in their hometowns without decent housing, so much more needs to be done. Some of the aid partners we went with are now committed to trying to bring housing solutions to them. I hope the UK Government can work with them.

Afterwards, we visited a renewable energy project—a wind farm. There is an irony here in that half the wind farm was completed after the Russian invasion. Just last week we had a wind farm auction in the UK where nobody put in a bid. In Ukraine, however, they can somehow build them in the middle of a war. It is a part of Ukraine's security strategy, and is not just about climate and transition. It is easy to take out a single power station, but much harder to take out a distributed network of wind or solar installations. Again, the UK and other partners need to support and invest, because this is not just about peace and rebuilding; it is about the war effort now.

We then went on to Kharkiv. Leeds is in the process of twinning with Kharkiv. I am really proud of our efforts and we will put our full support behind raising money and delivering for the people of Kharkiv. I met the mayor, Ihor Terekhov. The north of the city had been assaulted. We visited a school that was the same distance from the centre of Kharkiv as my children's school is from the centre of Leeds. It had been completely destroyed and gutted, and the children do not have adequate school facilities. We went to multiple blocks of flats which had been destroyed. In all locations—this was the case in Posad-Pokrovske, too—we were told, "You cannot walk over there or over there," because they were heavily mined. People are living and children are playing in places next to areas that are mined. At the rate the area is being de-mined, and at the rate of de-mining in previous conflicts, it will take 40 years or more to de-mine Ukraine. That is just not acceptable. In liberated areas, we need to step up and support the de-mining effort, because without de-mining there will be no reconstruction.

We met some troops from the frontline—Kharkiv is not that far from the frontline. There is a lot of talk about Russian troops not being as good. The Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) mentioned Wagner and said that Russian elite troops are now no longer on the frontline. We asked the troops what they thought of the Russian troops they were fighting. They described them as worthy adversaries. They are taking nothing for granted. They are on the battlefield risking their lives. We should not think that there is an easy victory here. Every inch of ground is hard-fought and hard-won.

After Kharkiv, we went to Kyiv and, as the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said, to the Yalta European Strategy conference. I will not go into great detail about all the speeches and meetings that took place, but there were a number of takeaways. We have been hearing, more or less from the start of the conflict, about the need to close the skies. It is still being discussed.

[Alex Sobel]

We are only now in the early days of training pilots. Why were we not training pilots much earlier? Why are we not much further on? I know the UK does not have F-16s, but the point stands. The Ukrainians were very grateful for the Storm Shadow missiles from the UK, but the missiles they have are the export variants. I will not go into detail, but to be able to prosecute within the territory of Ukraine, they need the Storm Shadows that we use because their range is greater.

The Minister needs to redouble his efforts and look again at our stockpile of weapons and what will help Ukraine to progress the war quickly. I warn Ministers that in Kyiv the view is beginning to set in—the UK is not at the front of this; other countries are—that whatever is asked for arrives but takes too long, is too slow and too bureaucratic, and that the supply is to keep the war going and to ensure Ukraine does not lose, but not to ensure the speediest victory. That is a deep concern of the people in Kyiv and the rest of Ukraine who are progressing the war.

We need to do everything we can to ensure a rapid victory, because the Ukrainians are not just fighting for themselves. They are fighting for democracy, our way of life and our civilisation. One of the most interesting speeches at the conference was by Timothy Snyder, a Yale professor, who said that in the 4th century BC, Athens was able to have a democratic republic because it was supplied with grain by the Scythians in the Black sea region—now southern Ukraine and Crimea. That is the history of the region. Without Ukraine, we all fail. That is why we need to step up our efforts on every front to ensure the war is completed and there is not a single Russian soldier on Ukrainian territory.

6.48 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a real honour to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I thank him and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for the work they continue to do to lead the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine.

This evening is possibly the last warm and balmy evening of the British summer. We are on a one-line Whip and I suspect there will be wine glasses clinking on the Terrace. It would be very easy to forget about Ukraine. I am therefore very grateful for this opportunity to bring us together and ensure that we do not forget the people of Ukraine. Freedom and democracy matter, and it is in Ukraine that the war between freedom and oppression is being fought out. I thank the Minister for Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey) for giving us such a detailed update on the current military situation.

Sometimes it is difficult to think about the human cost of the war. I was looking for some numbers because I am a mathematician. Although Kyiv does not release estimates of the numbers of military killed, there is a recent estimate that Ukraine has lost 70,000 military personnel. The number of those wounded is estimated to be between 100,000 and 120,000—and more on the Russian side as well. Human Rights Watch suggests that 9,500 civilians have been killed, of whom 550-odd were children, that 17,000 civilians have been injured, of whom 11,000 are children, that 16,000 children have

been stolen from their parents and abducted, many never to be seen again, and that women and girls as young as four and as old as their 80s have been raped and sexually assaulted.

When the invasion first started we said that Russia must not be allowed to win, because we knew that if that happened, Ukraine would not be the last: that brutality, that barbaric behaviour would continue. Time and again since the invasion, Russia has blatantly disrupted global supply lines of food and fuel, driving up inflation, hiking up food and fuel prices, and hitting the customers and consumers in our own constituencies—but hitting the world's poorest and most vulnerable hardest. There is no end to the Russian evil, so the UK has led from the front, through military support, through sanctions, through humanitarian and military aid, and in so many other ways.

I was very pleased when we led the Ukraine recovery conference. I went to a reception at Lancaster House afterwards, and it was uplifting to see many of the Ukrainian friends whom I have made over the past year and a half. Their faces are normally so harrowed, but there were genuine smiles because of what had been achieved during the days at the conference, and the hope for the future. It is great news that the UK will host a conference on food security as well. We must stand shoulder to shoulder for as long as it takes.

The human cost, as well as the infrastructure costs, will take a long, long time to mend. My constituency is home to Blesma, formerly the British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association, which has been supporting male and female veterans who have lost limbs since the aftermath of the first world war, when 40,000 servicemen lost their limbs. In the 90 years of its existence it has supported 60,000 people who have lost limbs in war, and today it is supporting 2,800 members who have lost their limbs in British conflicts in Afghanistan and Northern Ireland and, in a handful of cases, back in the second world war. Blesma told me that in the period between the start of the war in Ukraine and the beginning of the present offensive, more than 5,000 Ukrainians had already become limbless: 5,000 in that year and a bit, in contrast to the 2,800 who lost limbs in our wars dating back to 1945.

The president of the commission for the rehabilitation of veterans in Ukraine—it is a long title—has estimated that many, many more multiples will be affected. Many multiples more will be injured, and between 10% and 15% of veterans will have serious injuries, including limb loss, loss of part of limbs, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. The human cost of support will go on for decades. It is a sad part of our own history that the UK has particular expertise in caring for these veterans, and I was moved to learn that charities such as Blesma, Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion have already been “leaning in” with support and advice for our friends in Ukraine.

As others have said, it is crucial that Russia pays for the damage that it has done—not just the physical damage, but the damage to humanity. I was very pleased when the Prime Minister announced earlier this year that the frozen assets that we have in the UK would not be defrosted, or taken out of that freeze, until Russia had paid. We need to make sure that every pound and every dollar that can be raised for Ukraine is being well used. I therefore gently ask the Minister whether, in his



closing remarks, he can give us an update on what has happened to the Chelsea football club money, the £2.3 million of Abramovich funds, which I believe has still not left the bank account to help with humanitarian aid. I think I was possibly the first Member to call for Wagner to be proscribed, so I was pleased by last week's news; it has been a very long time coming.

Over the summer, I have been more and more concerned about what has been happening in Africa and across the Sahel. The civil war rages on in Sudan, where ethnic cleansing is continuing in Darfur and elsewhere. That is important, because we know that Russia controls the gold, and we do not know where the gold from Sudan is going. We have seen a worrying military coup in Niger. Was it a coincidence that Prigozhin was at the Africa conference just before he died, stirring up malign activity again across that part of the world? I believe that Russia likes to cause further instability in parts of the world that are already unstable. The Russians know that instability will lead to further humanitarian disasters and further migration, and they know that that migration will put more pressure on western Europe and western European allies. The fact that the head of Wagner may have died in a plane crash does not necessarily mean that Russian malign influence through evil proxies—or the risk of that—has gone away. I therefore say to the Minister, “Please keep a very close eye on that Russian malign influence, and the malign influence of others in that part of the world.”

Every day in Ukraine, military personnel and civilians face brutality and horror that are unimaginable, and they react with bravery and fortitude that are incredible. We must leave no stone unturned, and we must continue to support them for as long as it takes.

6.58 pm

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is a privilege to follow the speech of the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who gave us a heartrending reminder of what life must be like in Ukraine right now. I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and other Members who spent the weekend in Kyiv at the Yalta European Strategy conference. I found it, in fact, offensive that the Republican candidate Ramaswamy described as offensive the fact that we have professional politicians making a pilgrimage to Kyiv. I say hats off to those people, and I think that that candidate for the US presidency would do well to make the journey himself.

On 20 September last year, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), committed the UK to spending £2.3 billion on military assistance for Ukraine. The expenditure in that year, 2023-24, was the same as that in the previous year. Liberal Democrats welcomed the announcement at the time, and we continue to welcome the fact that, per head of population, the United Kingdom has been as generous in the gifting of materiel to Ukraine as the United States has been. I will return to the subject of British military assistance at the end of my speech.

I would like to talk about two specific things today that are probably a little bit operational in nature: drone attacks on Russian soil and the supply of cluster munitions. Then, finally, I would like to comment on when might be the right time to move the conflict to the negotiating

table. This is Russia's war. It is Ukraine's defence, and it is not for Ukraine's allies and partners—and not for the UK in particular—to tell Ukraine how to fight it, but we have seen a couple of developments since the House last held a general debate on Ukraine, in February, that I would like to comment on.

It is entirely possible that the drone attacks in Russia are the work of Russian dissidents in Ukraine. The level of dissent is difficult to judge from afar. If those drone attacks on Russia were the work of the Ukrainian Government, they would be legal as an act of self-defence in accordance with the UN charter, but we have seen how galvanising the attacks on Ukrainian cities have been. We need only think of the devastating effects of the various railway station attacks in 2022 to imagine that if Ukraine were to attack Russian cities, it could have the opposite effect to the one that was intended.

What of the supply of cluster munitions? The United States announced in July that it would be supplying cluster munitions to Ukraine. We know from the use of cluster bombs in Kosovo, where I served, that unexploded ordnance including cluster bombs killed many innocents in the years after the war, including tens of children. As the United States' closest ally, it is our responsibility to speak out when we think our friend has made the wrong decision. Given that some in the US want to supplement the existing provision of cluster rounds for artillery with cluster munitions for rocket systems, it remains, to my mind, the responsibility of the British Government to speak privately but frankly. We need to pledge support for Ukraine for the long haul, rather than simply offering munitions that it is easy or convenient for us to give from our existing inventories.

On the sum of money that the UK should give next year, it is an interesting coincidence that we saw £2.3 billion of frozen assets from the sale of Abramovich's Chelsea and that the UK Government are currently giving £2.3 billion to Ukraine in military assistance. In September last year the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), made an announcement about £2.3 billion being made available this year. That expires in April, so now that we are in September once again, it would be good to hear from the Minister what sum the MOD is seeking from the Prime Minister and whether the Ukrainians can depend on the same amount of money again.

May I also ask the Minister whether NATO members are contingency planning for the withdrawal of generous funding from any one of our members, so that Russia cannot wait this out? I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) that Russia could potentially be seeking to do that. We need to give Russia absolute certainty that it cannot simply wait this out, and that the partners and allies of Ukraine are in this for the long haul.

Finally, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) dismissed the voices calling for an armistice and a negotiated settlement based on the current lines and the current occupation of territory. I would go further and suggest that the reason for not accepting such a settlement is that the vast majority of Ukrainians do not want it. As someone who believes in liberal democracy—as I believe we all do—I believe that it is only for Ukrainians to determine when the conflict is fit to be taken to the negotiating table.

7.3 pm

**Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): Apologies for my absence earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, and thank you for your understanding.

Like others here, I spent roughly a week in Ukraine last week, with two and a half days in Kharkiv, Kramatorsk and Konstantynivka—which was also sadly bombed—followed by two days in Kyiv, along with the co-chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), to understand the changes on the battlefield, to see what was happening in Ukrainian society and also to understand the Ukrainian way of fighting and how it is evolving, some of the Russian changes and whether there needs to be some tweaking to the support we provide—the training and other things that we can do.

I want to look first at the Ukrainian style of fighting. It is always a pleasure to listen to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Armed Forces and he will probably be interested in this because, as a former serviceman, he was used to the intense tactical battles in Helmand and Sangin, and we are seeing something similar in Ukraine. If a Ukrainian way of war is evolving, it is being formed around creative problem solving and around strongly empowering junior officers because they need to make decisions. There is a real mission command culture, which is radically different from Russia with its intense hierarchy that effectively slows operations down massively.

There is a volunteer culture and an openness about using external support—perhaps unlike the British Army at times, dare I say it—which makes up for the Ukrainian army's size. The most obvious example of that external support and the volunteer experience is in the use of drones, which is well documented, with commercial drones now being engineered for military work as well. Other examples include patriotic businessmen raising regiments—I have had the pleasure of meeting a few—and the original use of commercial comms kit. When I was in an ops room near Kramatorsk, they were using gaming software to communicate with the frontline, their mortar positions and their drone positions. They had basically taken the commercial gaming software used by the shared gaming sites around the world and were using it in battle. There is very much an emphasis on what works.

There is also a focus, as I am sure the Armed Forces Minister will appreciate, on the tactical battle rather than on large-scale manoeuvres, which cannot be carried out because Ukraine does not have air superiority and its forces are faced with kilometres of mines in front of them. Perhaps most importantly, commanders are having to fight in a very economical style because there is not much kit. Long-range missiles are used sparingly. Even standard 155 shells are fired back at the rate of maybe one for every five or sometimes one for every eight. Russia is still using between 10,000 and 40,000 shells a day, and we really underestimate the scale of resource needed.

This is also about having to conduct assaults while minimising casualties, and it was remarkable how many of the military vehicles we drove past were medical vehicles. It was quite upsetting at times. Having to assault while minimising casualties means that the Ukrainian forces are not assaulting with a traditional 3:1 ratio. They are having to assault effectively while being mindful that the Russians can lose four people for every one the Ukrainians lose. If Putin were given the option of

sacrificing another 500,000 Russian lives for 150,000 Ukrainian lives, he would take that, because that would effectively shatter Ukraine's volunteer army. So there has to be an economical use of force.

The Russians are changing and learning. They are doing it slowly, but we should not delude ourselves that they are not doing it. I would that anyone who wants to know what is going on on a daily basis and to understand the tactics of the war reads the report by Jack Watling from RUSI and the one from the Institute for the Study of War. Jack has said:

“It is also important to recognise that Russian forces are fighting more competently and with reasonable tenacity in the defence”.

That is the critical point. The hon. Member for Leeds North West and I had a conversation with soldiers who they were saying that the Russians were fighting well enough. They were not dismissive of their enemy, because the Russians are dying in place. If they are retreating, it is a controlled retreat. They have a depth of defence that they did not have last September. This is a big argument against tactical or strategic pauses, or indeed negotiations, because every time the Ukrainians stop, the Russians will dig more lines. I see no evidence that a collapse like the one that happened last September in Kharkiv is going to happen again. I wish it would, but there is no evidence.

I spent about 24 hours with a unit called Tsunami, a volunteer unit out of Odesa with additional soldiers from the Luhansk area, which is right over in the east of the country. They are a lovely bunch of people and I am incredibly grateful to them for hosting us. I was in their ops room, 20 km or so from the front. It was a very professional ops room with lots of screens and drone screens, and we were watching a tactical battle as it was taking place in Bakhmut. They were using gaming software, as I said, to connect drone operators with small teams on the ground. In some places in these villages and streets where people are dying in large numbers, as has been happening over the last few months, the soldiers are 50 metres apart. Normally at a British shooting range, we start at 100 metres and go up to maybe 400 metres. On the Ukrainian training grounds, a mile or so out from the frontline, they are practising trench clearance and doing range shooting at 50 metres, because 50 metres is probably what they are going to be up against in and around Bakhmut and other areas of the frontline because those frontlines are so close together.

The command guys in the Tsunami unit had a lot of communication with the teams on the ground to walk their mortars into position. Their drones and the base were communicating using gaming software—there were lots of screens—to strike the Russian position with 120 mm mortars, reducing it to rubble. They were watching for the splash every couple of minutes, adjusting their aim until, unfortunately—well, fortunately, but sadly—they killed the Russian invaders. I take no pleasure in saying it, but huge numbers of Russians are dying, which is a tragedy for them on so many levels. The Russians fought until they were killed. The Ukrainians also took three prisoners that day, one of whom was carrying propaganda cards explaining why they were fighting. An argument is being put for why they are there.

During the 24 hours I was there with that one unit, there was one Ukrainian dead and seven injured. We sat down with the commanders and asked, “How much

land have you taken, and what are your casualty rates?" We worked out that a man is dying every 80 metres or so. They are fighting and taking back their country, but every 80 metres, and certainly every 100 metres, on this section of the front a man is giving up his life for that small piece of ground, and that is not including the injured.

One of the improvements in Russian arms is the Lancet drone, which is now made in Russia. Some of us went to see the head of the National Security Council on Saturday afternoon, and it was explained to us that there are 490 bits of kit in that drone, 60 of which are still coming from the United States and the west. Sanctions leakage is still doing damage to the Ukrainian war effort, and it is killing people.

These guys are rotating out every 24 hours, and we went to see them in the house they had rotated out to. When the people we met the day before went back to the frontline, their soft-top vehicle was struck by a Lancet. One of them was killed, one lost his testicles and two others were injured. A price is being paid. There is no war weariness in Ukraine, but nor is there the early rush of adrenalin they had when the initial positions collapsed last September. There is a grim realism that this will potentially be a long war, and that tens of thousands more people will die. Even if we accept a quarter of a million Russian casualties, we have to accept that if Ukrainian casualties go above 50,000 it will have a phenomenal effect on that society.

On the military convoy train that we took back from Kramatorsk, I sat opposite a lovely guy called Volodymyr, who was going back to comfort his wife because his brother-in-law had been killed on the southern front the week before. We know that drones are critical, and the Russians are improving their drones.

I will finish with a few points about how we can maximise our positive influence. The Government are doing a phenomenal amount, on which I congratulate them. I have some mates who are involved in the training, and I was chatting with them the other day. They love training these Ukrainian soldiers, so this is not a complaint but a suggestion for how we can train them a little better. Ministers will know from their experience in Afghanistan that the OPTAGs—the operational training and advisory groups—went out into the theatre and continually tweaked our training. Every time there was a change in the Taliban's tactics, it would come back very quickly to the training programmes that people attended. I wonder whether we can speed up our learning from the battlefield in the drills we are putting these guys through. I worry that five weeks is not enough, and I know the Armed Forces Minister would say that is what the Ukrainians want and that that is how much time they are giving us, but I wonder whether a week or two extra, with a few more significant exercises built into the programme, could help to keep more of these fantastic guys and girls alive.

Looking at that OPTAG experience, is there more we could do to get drones involved in the training exercises? This is effectively a tactical war of 120 mm mortars and drones, and sometimes big, fat, horrible artillery shells. The problem is that we do not have enough drones in the British Army, and we do not have the commercial drones that could help. If the Armed Forces Minister is minded to do so, I wonder whether we could see how we can speed up our learning from the Ukrainian frontline, in the same way that we did with OPTAG. There is also

a question about whether we can further vary some of the special purpose courses we are doing for the special purpose units—I will not say where it is—at one of the bases that is hosting the Ukrainians.

There are a few little tweaks, but the head of the National Security Council also made a wider point to me about the desire for a strategic relationship with the UK. Having listened to the Armed Forces Minister, it is very difficult to argue that we do not have a fantastic strategic relationship, and I am mindful of the fantastic work this Government have done. Indeed, I pay tribute to Boris Johnson. I know he is not popular with some Members, including on the Opposition Front Bench, but he is phenomenally popular in Ukraine, where people still see him as the man who helped to make the difference. Whether the Opposition like it or not, the Ukrainians love us partly because they are very grateful for what Boris did. They want that depth of strategic relationship, and I wonder whether there is more we can do across the board. We have done huge amounts—lots of short-term stuff and some medium-term stuff—but they complain that not enough Ministers come out. They say that Tel Aviv gets bombed more often than Lviv. People can easily get insurance to go to Tel Aviv, but they cannot get insurance to go to Lviv. Is there more we can do on the insurance market? I know we are doing good stuff on the grain convoys, but we are not quite there yet.

The Ukrainians are talking about wanting a greater strategic relationship. They love this country, and they see us as their closest political and military ally, although they know they are getting more kit from the US. I just wonder whether we can formalise that depth of relationship for the benefit of both our nations, not only in the short term but in the medium and long term too.

7.16 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank hon. and right hon. Members for their pertinent and appropriate contributions touching on all the important subjects. The key point coming out of the debate is our strength of purpose, as the Minister illustrated, in standing by Ukraine. Each and every Member has mentioned that.

I thank the Armed Forces Minister not only for his gallant service but for his clear commitment and for setting the scene so well today. Many of us thought that he would be called to higher office, which may still happen, but we are very pleased to see him in his place and to hear his contribution.

The UK Government have stood fast by Ukraine, and they have committed themselves to the military help that is needed. They have done so much, and they have never been found wanting. Over the last few weeks and months, I have been somewhat concerned about the apparent weakness of the Biden Administration, bearing in mind that their overarching interest may be not only in helping Ukraine but in reminding Russia that it cannot simply do as it pleases. Through our conversations and speeches today, we are encouraging our Government and the whole of the west to stand firm. There must be a clear message.

Like other Members, I care about the personal suffering of those men, women and children who are victims of Putin. They have lost loved ones, lost their homes, lost years of education, lost confidence and lost themselves.

[Jim Shannon]

I care for those people who refused to cower before Putin's demagoguery, and for all the Ukrainians who are defending their homeland, their way of life and, ultimately, their freedom. Their battle for freedom is our battle for freedom, too. The job we have to do is clear.

I have been reading a lot of commentary on the current situation in Ukraine, and I was struck by a comment in the *Telegraph* outlining the scenario if Ukraine cannot stay strong and bring Putin to the negotiating table:

"If anything like this scenario plays out, a humiliated West will need a robust damage-limitation strategy. This would involve building up Nato forces, which still has not yet been seriously approached on either side of the Atlantic. There is no indication, for example, that Germany is budgeting to reach the minimum Nato defence spend of 2 per cent of GDP, despite promises. The UK continues to make further cuts to its undersized army.

A second prong would be continued economic warfare against a weakened Russian economy, to emphasise the price for waging aggressive war and undermine Moscow's ability to rearm."

That is the view of the commentator in *The Telegraph*. I cannot disagree with the fact that more does need to be done and that the countries that are not stepping up need to do so to bring Putin to the negotiating table. Not enough is being done to step it all up.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) referred to an incident where one Ukrainian was killed and seven were injured. The one good thing—if anything good comes out of war—is that, because the healthcare and response times have been so significant and helpful, many people who are injured do not die now, as they would have perhaps in the past. The medical treatment is so significant that they live. The medical progress has empowered the emotional and post-traumatic stress disorder support that is given.

I am proud of our Government's Homes for Ukraine scheme and the fact that Ukrainians have been able to come over and be safe here, in my constituency and in others. But I also know that many of those I have spoken to want to have a safe place back home. Some who are here will probably stay; many others want to return home. They want their children to return and they want to work in Ukraine. They want to go home and rebuild, and they want us in this place to help them to do that. So the Government and the west have to be thanked for their clear commitment to rehousing and to rebuilding. I want to put on record my thanks to Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct in my constituency, which have offered jobs and even accommodation to Ukrainians, and were among the first to make that available. The Ukrainians have integrated greatly into society in my constituency, and I am very pleased that the Government have made that happen.

We need to encourage fellow NATO countries to change what they do, to contribute more and to give the full commitment. Words have never impacted Putin, but action does. As a nation, and as a full member of NATO, we need to increase the military equipment. We need to act on behalf of not only the Ukrainian people, but the ideal of democracy and a free world. Russia is not the only superpower that watches us. The statement earlier today referred to China. The Chinese are very aware of the steps that have been in the news over the weekend. It is clear that the message that has been sent is not a deterrent—it could, should and must be.

As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I wish to comment on the evidential base coming out of Ukraine that shows that the Russians have persecuted Christians and those of the Ukrainian Church. I am a member of the Baptist Church, and my church and the Baptist religious groups also support many missionaries out in Ukraine. We were aware early on in the battle for Ukraine that some pastors had disappeared from the eastern part of Ukraine. They have never been found, but no action has been taken to try to find out what happened to them. We suspect that they have been murdered simply because of their religious belief. I know that this is not the Minister's remit, but I must put on record my concerns about those persecuted Christians and other ethnic groups in the east of Ukraine, where Russia has taken over and systematically, brutally and violently killed and displaced many, many people. We have seen attacks upon the faith, religion and churches in Ukraine, and the theft of historical and church artefacts. Again, I have great concern over where we are. Like others, I hope that the day will come when we can see the retribution and the accountability—something in the process that makes Russia accountable, financially, physically and emotionally, in every way possible.

So I ask the Minister to firmly outline how we are going to take even more decisive action, that words are not enough and that the actions that we take are the strong ways of doing things. The long-term security of the free world will rest on decisions taken not just by our Government, but by NATO as a whole and our allies. These decisions must be taken soon, before Putin and China decide to press on against what appears, in some eyes, to be a weakened west. We must stand strong for Ukraine and for the freedom, liberty and democracy it has, because the threat to it today is a threat to us tomorrow.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** I call the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman.

7.25 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank colleagues across the House for their considered contributions to today's debate. It is important that the House has the opportunity, soon after the summer recess, to debate Ukraine, and the egregious and illegal war against its people. For me, as for a number of Members here today, this debate is particularly timely. Like the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), I have just returned from Kyiv; I came back yesterday. I had meetings there with senior Ministers, officials, parliamentarians, members of civil society and aid workers, and I heard from many in the Ukrainian military. It was clear to me that, despite a profoundly challenging summer of Russian bombardment and the ongoing counter-offensive, the spirit of Ukraine continues to burn bright. The resilience and courage that we have seen endure throughout Russia's years of aggression, which we must remember started in 2014 or even before, have never been more evident, from the individual citizen to the soldiers on the frontline.

During our visit, we had the privilege to meet many who had returned from the frontline. It is a pleasure to be opposite the Minister, who, as I said, was also in

Kyiv—that is illustrative of the unity in this House and in this country and our resolute support for Ukraine against Russia’s aggression.

Of course, I draw attention to my current and future declarations in relation to the visit to the Yalta European strategy conference and other events. The title of that conference was “The Future is Being Decided in Ukraine” and it is clear that it is. This is not just about the future of Ukraine or of European security; it is fundamentally about the future of the world and whether we want to stand up for democracy, the rule of law, the international system and the principles that have guided us since 1945, or whether we succumb to autocracy and barbarism.

We have heard some excellent contributions today. It was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) at the start, who clearly set out the military needs of Ukraine, which we must continue to deliver on with our allies.

We also heard important speeches from the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who was there with me as well and who talked about the importance of the UK training and the industrial support we must continue to provide; from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who spoke about the importance of medical aid; from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who talked about the support from UK citizens, which of course has been there from my constituents; from the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who spoke about the impact of veterans—we met many veterans in Kyiv—and the work of Blesma, which actually supported my grandfather, who served at Arnhem; from the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who always gives hugely informed contributions and was a pleasure to travel with; and from the hon. Members for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). However, I want to single out my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), not only for the comments he made about the importance of dealing with the delays facing small organisations providing aid, the issues relating to grain exports, the importance of getting those Black sea routes open, and the issues affecting children and schools, but for his bravery and resilience in travelling with a number of others, including people from across the UK, who are providing critical aid to communities that have been devastated by the Russian aggression. I thank him for all the work he did on that visit.

I took away three major reflections. The first is that Russia’s barbarism knows no bounds. I heard horrific stories about what happened in Mariupol—stories of torture and abuse. I heard of the horrors of what has happened to children, not just in the east of Ukraine, but in Crimea—I heard about the false narratives about Crimea and we met a special representative of the president for Crimea. I heard about the attacks on civilians, which occurred in the market while we were there, and about the daily impact on the lives of Ukrainians.

I was able to travel over to the left bank of Kyiv with an MP, Lesia Zaburanna, who has also visited my constituency to thank UK volunteers supporting Ukraine and meet Ukrainian refugees. We were able to go into some of the bomb shelters that Ukrainians have to spend so much time in under those aerial attacks and to see how children were able to carry on their education.

Tragically, they were doing it in bunkers underneath their schools and they are having to do that multiple times in a week.

I also took away the continued strength and resilience of Ukrainians. The fighting is grinding, but there have been significant successes in the south and the east. Work is being done to support internally displaced persons within Ukraine in places such as Bakhmut and elsewhere, and Ukrainians who are already struggling are giving support to others who have been displaced in Ukraine. It is a whole-country effort.

Lastly, I took away the fact that our support is making a critical difference, whether we are talking about individual aid convoys, Government-to-Government support, which we in the official Opposition fully back, or the crucial diplomatic support that we are providing on so many levels to maintain the coalition. I underline Labour’s enduring support for the people of Ukraine and our unshakeable commitment to them and the wider NATO alliance, and to all those facing the consequences of the war. If a Labour Government were elected, there would be no change in providing the necessary economic, diplomatic and military support to Ukraine and in supporting Ukraine’s reconstruction.

I add Labour’s voice to the condemnation of the sham elections that took place on Friday in Russian-occupied Ukraine. We are in absolute agreement with the Council of Europe, which described the bogus votes as a

“flagrant violation of international law”.

We also condemn the perverse attempts at continued Russification in the occupied territories. That must be dealt with, as must—this has been spoken about a number of times—the illegal and utterly barbarous deportation of Ukrainian children and young people into Russia and the separation from their families.

I want to cover a few other issues in the remaining moments. In the diplomatic sphere, the NATO Vilnius summit rightly underscored the strength of our alliance’s support for Ukraine, but there is still much work to be done. As the Secretary-General said last month, Ukraine’s “rightful place” is in NATO. Does the Minister agree that once, with our support, Ukraine has prevailed in its war against Russia’s invasion, there can be no Minsk III and that Britain should play a leading role in securing Ukraine’s path to joining NATO?

We heard the concerns that the Leader of the Opposition raised with the Prime Minister about the G20 declaration. Will the Minister say more about that and why there was no specific mention of Russian aggression, which is plain for the world to see? Will he say what we are doing to support President Zelensky’s peace formula and how we are working diplomatically to support those aims, securing Ukraine’s future sovereignty and territorial integrity? As has been said, we do not want false negotiations when, frankly, this could quite easily be solved by Russian troops getting off Ukraine’s soil.

The crucial United Nations General Assembly meeting is coming up in New York. What plans do we have there to further support Ukraine in our diplomatic efforts across the world and through the United Nations?

On sanctions and Russian state-owned assets, the Minister will know that 75 days ago, we passed a motion in the House relating to the Government bringing forward a Bill to seize and repurpose Russian state-owned assets.

[Stephen Doughty]

It was supported across the House, and there are 15 days to go. Will he give us an update on when the Government will introduce legislation to seize, not just freeze, Russian state-owned assets and use them for Ukraine's reconstruction? We have seen the progress being made in the US Congress and by other international partners, so when will we get on with it?

Significant concerns are being raised about the circumvention and enforcement of our sanctions regime. A lot of hard work has gone into our regime, but unless it actually delivers, a lot of papers and orders passed by the House will be meaningless. I raised specific concerns with the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is responsible for the Asia-Pacific region, about growing evidence of the transport of Russian-origin crude oil being refined in third countries and exported onwards—skirting existing sanctions regulations—into countries that have sanctioned its direct import. I am sure that all Members would find the possibility of the importation of Russian-origin oil, irrespective of its constitution, deeply troubling and recognise that that runs counter to our efforts to undermine Putin's war machine. Will the Minister tell the House whether oil originating from Russia and being refined elsewhere is reaching the UK or our allies? If so, in what quantities, and what will we do to close any such loophole? Similarly, we also need to close any loopholes that exist for steel and iron, which have been raised regularly with me, and dual-use items, which were rightly raised in relation to the components used for drones.

When are we going to get on and prosecute people for sanctions avoidance? I find it hard to believe, given that the Office of Foreign Assets Control in the US has managed to clamp down with a number of sanctions-busting measures for individual companies, that we do not seem to have done any of that in this country.

We continue to support a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. Will the Minister say more on that? We are a member of the core working group but our support appears to be tentative. When are we going to get on and move that forward?

The Ukraine reconstruction conference was an excellent event. I was pleased to be there—many of us attended—and I was delighted to be invited. There was a real sense of spirit in the room about what was going to be done. Will the Minister update us on what has been delivered since the conference?

Will the Minister say a bit about de-mining? That has been raised a number of times in this debate and it is crucial to the military operations and to economic reconstruction in Ukraine. It took us 38 years to get mines out of the Falklands; we have to be up to dealing with the scale, time and cost of the task.

Will the Minister also join me in welcoming the very clear messages that we heard from President Zelensky and others about reform and dealing with corruption, and so on, and making sure that there is zero tolerance of that in Ukraine? It was very pleasing to hear some of the comments that the President and others made. I am sure that the Minister will join me in welcoming them.

There is a huge amount more to be done in support of Ukraine. We must continue to stand with Ukraine in everything, in every aspect that it needs, until it is victorious over Russia in the defence of its territory. We must remember that this is not just about what happens to Ukrainians and to their country—as well as our aim being morally just, it is absolutely right for our national security—but about what happens in the world more generally. Russia must be defeated, Ukraine must win, and we must stand the course with it.

7.36 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):** I am very grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful and useful contributions. Like many in the Chamber, I have just returned from Ukraine and the Yalta European strategy conference. While I was there, I saw at first hand the tragic impact of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion, and the ever-inspiring bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people. At the conference and in my meetings with the Deputy Foreign and Defence Ministers, I underlined the UK's unwavering commitment and determination to help Ukraine win the war for as long as it takes.

As I said, I am grateful for the many contributions today. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) spoke of the brutal warfare that has been inflicted on Ukraine, the Ukrainian counter-offensive and the heroism of Ukrainian forces. He spoke about the headwinds that exist for Putin and the fact that he has not achieved his strategic aims. The hon. Member also praised the UK's Operation Interflex effort, to which we are entirely committed, and it was very welcome that he reiterated Labour's continued support for the Government's policy.

The hon. Member asked some good questions, including on frozen assets and when we might move from freezing to seizing. A considerable amount of institutional effort is going into looking at that and we will keep the House updated as we progress through that issue. He endorsed the Government's approach to the Wagner Group. I assure him that we are acutely focused on its continued malign activities, whether in Belarus or beyond.

The hon. Member asked some good questions about UK stockpiles. MOD colleagues are working very hard across industry to ensure that we grow the capacity. A lot of that work is wrapped up in the Defence Command Paper. He made some good comments about drones and drone attacks. I confirm that we are working on that kind of technology as well, and we are helping Ukrainians to improve and expand their critical air defence. The hon. Member was not very clear on Labour's endorsement of our plans for defence spending, but the House will make its mind up on the future importance of that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) gave a very useful speech outlining the geopolitical context and made an important reference to the experience from Prague in 1968, which informs how we see Russian malign activity. He spoke of the need for statecraft on behalf of the west and the fact that commitment is needed. I assure him—this was my message to our friends in Ukraine on Friday—that that commitment is unflagging.

My right hon. Friend spoke about Putin's brutality and the crushing of the Wagner Group, and the fact that that is a sign of weakness. He asked some good questions, again, about when we might move to seizing frozen assets. We will keep the House updated as and when we develop our plans on that. He spoke usefully about the importance of Ukrainian grain exports. We are very much focused on that, given Russia's totally unacceptable undermining of the Black sea grain initiative.

My right hon. Friend also made a plea for more money to go into defence expenditure, which is good because this Government have delivered a unique £24 billion increase in our defence budget. Colleagues across the House will be very grateful for that.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) delivered a commendably and characteristically knowledgeable and wide-ranging speech. He spoke about the importance of lethal aid, but also about the reconstruction efforts that should happen concurrently. He posed the question whether the west can stay united and stay the course. Having heard the collective view of the House and having been to Ukraine last week, I think the answer to that question is yes. No matter the machinations of European politics, overwhelmingly the collective interests and the security of the west—including, of course, the US—are furthered by continuing to support our friends in Ukraine.

I am grateful for the reflections of my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) on his three visits to Ukraine, covering the ground in Irpin and giving us the striking image of a cemetery of burnt-out cars. I am also grateful for his reflections on his visit to see artillery—British-supplied artillery—in action, taking out important targets, and on the importance of the Yalta European Strategy summit and the need for continued UK resolve. The House will agree with his analysis.

We are all very grateful for the reflections of the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on his remarkable and very long journey with the aid vehicle delivery, undertaken over the last two weeks. The way he spoke about the terrible destruction in civilian areas was very moving, as was his description of the grain industry destruction as ecocide. We agree with his analysis. He also spoke of the destruction in the Kherson region, the importance of air power and of our continued support for our Ukrainian allies and the urgency of the situation. I am sure we are all grateful for his remarks.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) gave an important and moving speech about the human costs of this tragic war. She reflected on the important work done by Blesma, which we entirely endorse. She asked a good question specifically about the assets from the sale of Chelsea football club. We continue to work on that. It is important to get the vehicle right to distribute those funds, and we will keep colleagues and the House updated as those plans develop. My right hon. Friend spoke from a background of considerable knowledge about Wagner's malign activity across Africa and elsewhere. I assure her that we are institutionally watching this very closely and will take steps to counter such activity.

We are grateful for the reflections of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), who made a very useful contribution, particularly bringing into

view the necessity of continued NATO unity. We should never take that for granted, and we will always be at the front of the pack in making those arguments.

The House will have appreciated the detailed reflections of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on his recent long visit. They were most welcome. He spoke knowledgeably about the Ukrainian style of fighting and their economical approach, but also about the formidable depth of the Russian defence, which is a particularly important shaping context. He gave some unique insights into his time with the tsunami unit and spoke of their astonishing casualty rates, which showed us the heavy costs of this war. He made some useful comments about our efforts in Operation Interflex. I saw our right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces nodding during that part of my hon. Friend's speech, and I am sure that his comments will be taken on board.

My hon. Friend also made a good point about our long-term strategic relationship with Ukraine. That is exactly what I was discussing with Ukrainian Ministers on Friday in Kyiv. We are already in the middle of a deep and wide strategic relationship with Ukraine, but I am sure that we will formalise that as we move through the more dynamic stages of this conflict.

The House is, I am sure, grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for his characteristically useful and powerful speech. He spoke about the utility of lethal aid, but also about the importance of Russia's accountability for its outrageous actions. I assure him that we are focused on that. In Kyiv last week, we continued our discussions on the right sort of vehicle to hold Russia to account, and we will keep the House updated as and when that process develops.

I am very grateful for the comments made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). It was fantastic to see him in Kyiv last week. He spoke correctly about the Ukrainian spirit burning brightly. That is exactly the impression I got, and I share his analysis. We continue to be grateful for the Opposition's support for our policy. He spoke of Putin's barbarism and asked a very good question about NATO accession. Following this conflict, the path toward NATO for Ukraine is of course clear, and we will be at the front of the pack in ensuring that that path is a smooth one.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about Zelensky's peace formula. We will help Ukraine to win; that is the best step toward peace. We will keep the House updated on seizing frozen assets. He made some good observations about circumvention, and we are focused on countermeasures to that. He also spoke about a special tribunal. We have to get the legal vehicle right and make sure it is legally watertight. We are very focused on that with our Ukrainian friends, and we discussed that again in Kyiv on Friday.

The hon. Gentleman asked questions about the Ukraine recovery conference and de-mining. We are putting cash and institutional effort into de-mining efforts through the HALO Trust. We are also encouraging our Ukrainian friends to reform their state, to ensure that all the innovation and progress made during the conflict is sustained and benefits Ukraine in the long term. I discussed that with Ministers on Friday.

[*Leo Docherty*]

As the Prime Minister said from this Dispatch Box earlier today, having spoken to President Zelensky before the G20 summit:

“Backed by our support, Ukraine’s counter-offensive is making hard-won progress. We will continue to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, until we see a ‘just and durable peace’ that respects its sovereignty and territorial integrity. That is the only possible outcome to Putin’s illegal war, and Ukraine, with our support, will prevail.”

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

### ELECTORAL COMMISSION

*Resolved,*

That an humble address be presented to His Majesty, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint Dame Susan Bruce as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2024 for the period ending 31 December 2026; appoint Sheila Ritchie as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 February 2024 for the period ending 31 January 2027; and appoint Carole Mills as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2024 for the period ending 31 December 2027.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

### PETITION

#### Railway Station Ticket Offices

7.46 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of just over 3,000 of my constituents in Westmorland and Lonsdale in which they urge rail firms to cancel their plans to close the majority of the remaining 1,007 ticket offices across England, saying that these offices and their staff provide vital services to ensure the accessibility of train services for all passengers, and that these staff are crucial for disabled and elderly customers and visitors to the area. The petitioners request the House to urge the Government to take into account their concerns and take immediate action to drop plans to shut railway station ticket offices, especially those in Oxenholme, Penrith, Windermere, Appleby and Grange.

The petition states:

“The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that rail firms should cancel their current plans to close the majority of the remaining 1,007 ticket offices across England; further that these offices and their staff provide vital services to ensure the accessibility of train services for all passengers; and further notes that these staff are crucial for disabled and elderly customers and visitors to the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to drop plans to shut railway station ticket offices.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

[P002851]

### Scottish Football Association: 150th Anniversary

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

7.47 pm

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): I begin my remarks by reminding the House of my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a match official operating for the Scottish Football Association.

I am delighted to lead this Adjournment debate celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Scottish FA. Throughout my speech, I will look at the past and to the future, but it is also right and fitting that we look at the present and the current qualification status of the Scottish men’s national team. Friday’s 3-0 victory over Cyprus made it five wins out of five in the qualification for Germany 2024. Scotland sits proudly at the top of group A. Another table that Scotland is at the top of is goal scorers, where we see Denmark’s Højlund, Belgium’s Lukaku and Scotland’s McTominay, each of whom scored six goals in this qualification round. Not only is Scotland leading its group, but it is leading in goal scorers as well.

When preparing for this debate, I went on the UEFA website for the Euro 2024 qualification. There, the picture was of two Scottish players—John McGinn and Scott McTominay—celebrating another victory. Scotland is featured in the picture and caption because as soon as tomorrow night, Scotland might have sewn up its qualification for Euro 2024. If my maths is correct, Scotland would then be the first team to have qualified, along with the hosts, Germany. They are the only team able to qualify on matchday six, which shows how impressive the current team is under the expert management of Steve Clarke.

Hampden will be rocking tomorrow anyway when the heritage match against England takes place as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations. It will be an outstanding match—on which I will say more in a moment—but at the same time results up in Oslo could go our way and see Scotland qualify for Euro 2024 tomorrow night. What an atmosphere there will be at Hampden if that score comes true and we qualify directly for the tournament.

The Scotland-England heritage game is part of a series of events held over the past year to celebrate the 150th anniversary. Earlier today the two team captains, Andy Robertson and Harry Kane, met at the West of Scotland cricket club to promote tomorrow’s match. That was the site of the first ever international match between Scotland and England. The game will be the 116th meeting of the two nations. So far, England have won 48 and Scotland have won 41. I note that few English colleagues are present in the Chamber; I think that reflects their concern about the match tomorrow. It is called a friendly, but there is never a friendly between these two nations and it will be competitive to the very end. Given the way Scotland are currently playing, I do not think many people would bet against them.

As I said, I want to look back at the history of the game. Given that the Scottish FA is celebrating its 150th anniversary, it was of course formed in 1873, but football has been played in Scotland as far back as the



15th century, when the public played royalty. At that time, and for many decades, football was prohibited under the Football Act 1424. It was felt that the game interrupted the men's marital duties, so football was not allowed. I am pleased that that idea has now been dispelled. Indeed, the law fell into disuse, but it was not actually repealed until 1906, after the Scottish FA was formed.

It was at a meeting in Dewar's hotel in Glasgow on 13 March 1873 that the Scottish Football Association was formed. Clubs including Queen's Park, Clydesdale, Vale of Leven, Dumbreck, Third Lanark, Eastern and Granville met there, and Kilmarnock FC sent a letter of support. On that day, the Scottish FA was formed, making it one of the oldest associations anywhere in the world. Archibald Campbell from Clydesdale was the first president and Archibald Rae of Queen's Park was the First Secretary.

Of course, the formation of the Scottish FA followed others. In 1886, the Scottish FA, along with the FA, the Football Association of Wales and the Irish Football Association, set up IFAB, the International Football Association Board, which to this day still acts as the guardian of the laws of the game. IFAB's most recent annual general meeting was held here in the Palace of Westminster, when representatives from across world football came into Parliament.

Scotland is home to the Scottish cup, which is the oldest knockout trophy in the game. The Scottish women's cup—I will come to this when I speak about women's football—was revamped this year, and the new trophy that was presented is the newest knockout trophy in world football, so we have both the oldest and the newest.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. He is absolutely right that we all celebrate football, whether it be Scottish football or football all around the world, and as a Northern Ireland supporter I do as well. As an avid Rangers fan, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I can only take my hat off to the teams that make up a tremendous sporting section. Knowing that the Scottish FA has been in place for 150 years, I, along with other Rangers fans and, indeed, Celtic fans back home in the Province will have one thing to say in one voice: long may the Scottish FA continue.

**Douglas Ross:** I am very grateful for that intervention. Football needs a ball, two teams and a referee; an Adjournment debate needs an intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), so I am glad we got that. I know that the hon. Gentleman's sentiments will be well received by everyone connected to the Scottish FA.

Scotland has a great tradition of managerial successes, whether for home nations or clubs or, indeed, around the world. The names Stein, Shankly and Ferguson echo through history, and Scotland has been a hotbed of managerial excellence for generations. It is a country that has created leaders and innovators in the game, with some of the world's most celebrated coaches and managers.

I want to take a short time tonight to remember the Scotland manager who most recently took the team to qualification in a World cup. France '98 was the last World cup tournament for which we qualified. I remember

being at school and watching the first match against the holders Brazil, and Craig Brown, an outstanding manager, leading out the team with great pride. Craig Brown sadly died earlier this year at the age of 82. He was Scotland's longest-serving manager, being in charge of 71 games from 1993 to 2001, and qualifying not just for that World cup in 1998 but for the Euros in 1996.

Anyone who was fortunate enough to have played under Craig Brown or to have met him at a football match or after-dinner event at which he spoke so well about his career and how he helped others remembers him extremely fondly. I looked up a couple of quotes from people who spoke immediately after Craig Brown's death. Aberdeen chairman Dave Cormack said:

"He was one of those rare individuals who was not only effective at what he did but universally loved by all who got to know him. A gentleman who loved his family, friends, and football."

One of Brown's great friends and colleagues, Sir Alex Ferguson, described him as a "thoroughly wonderful man". He continued:

"When I was given the honour of managing Scotland at the World Cup finals in Mexico there was one man I had to take, for all his attributes and knowledge, and that was Craig. He had a great career as a manager of several clubs but his service for his country stands out. In an industry that questions a man's capabilities, Craig never wavered in that situation, he always kept his head and his composure."

He really was a giant of our game and is sadly missed by many people across Scottish football.

I want to touch on another area, because although, understandably as a Scottish fan, I want to highlight and praise the current achievements of the men's team, as in many other parts of the country the women's game in football has developed greatly in recent years. In 1974, the Scottish FA officially recognised women's football, then in 1998 affiliated with the Scottish Women's Football Association. Since 1998, the Scottish FA has been responsible for the Scotland women's national team. Indeed, in 1998 they had their biggest ever win: a 17-nil victory over Lithuania. The side has had significant success in recent years, qualifying for the World cup in 2019 and the women's Euros in 2017. We have legends of the female game such as Rose Reilly, a truly inspirational footballer both on and off the pitch who has rightly been recognised at home and abroad for her outstanding contribution to the game.

Closer to home, away from the national team, I have mentioned previously in the Chamber the success of Buckie Ladies, who won their inaugural trophy, the Highlands and Islands league cup, in 2022, only five years after having been established. What is so special about that club is that not only does the team perform at that level in the women's game but the club has a pathway right down to under-10s. What was so special about that win last year—I think it was at Nairn County's ground—was that all the under-10 players and those in the age groups right up to the full women's team joined in and went along to see that cup final success on penalties. It is great to see the team go from strength to strength.

I also want to look at disability football or para football. In 2017, the Scottish FA rebranded its work in disability football with the new brand of para-football. The brand was created to allow greater emphasis on the diverse work carried out by the Scottish FA in this area of the game, as well as to create a stronger voice for

[Douglas Ross]

people living with varying conditions. In 2017, the Scottish FA launched its new strategy called “PlayAbility...Our Game is the Same”, which aims to create greater opportunities in para football that will allow participants to reach their full potential.

I also want to focus briefly on Street Soccer Scotland, which was announced earlier this year as the official charity partner of the Scottish FA. I was fortunate enough to be at a reception in the Scottish Parliament where we had a presentation, as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations, looking at Street Soccer Scotland and the incredible work it does. At the moment it is running more than 60 projects across the country and has 2,500 registered players, on top of the 25,000 players who have been helped by Street Soccer Scotland throughout its existence.

It is great to see males and females getting involved in football both at home and abroad in the homeless world cup, at which Scotland had success back in 2007 and 2011. In the 50 countries that have been represented at both the male and female tournaments, it is great to see that 94% of people said that the homeless world cup positively impacted their lives, 83% said it improved social relations with family and friends, 77% said their involvement in football changed their life significantly and 71% continue to play sport today because of their involvement.

There are many areas I would like to focus on tonight. I am grateful that we have a little more time because the Adjournment debate has come earlier. I want to look at the leagues across Scotland. We have the different areas within the national game—male and female, disability and other areas—but the leagues are important as well. The Scottish league was established in 1890. A league closer to home is the Scottish highland football league; many Moray clubs have had success in that league in the past and I am sure will do in the future, including Forres Mechanics, Lossiemouth, Rothes, Keith and Buckie Thistle. The league was established on 4 August 1983 in Inverness Workman’s Club, so, as part of the Scottish FA’s 150th anniversary, the Scottish highland football league is celebrating its 130th.

The Scottish highland football league continues to go from strength to strength. It draws big crowds for some of the big matches throughout the season and it is renowned for its hospitality and for the welcoming approach that the clubs take to each other and to spectators of both clubs. That is why it is so highly regarded across Scottish football and, indeed, renowned in many parts of the world as well.

If I may remind the House of my declaration of interests, I wanted to mention the referee, who is sometimes forgotten about in the history of the Scottish FA and other FAs—but not tonight, when the debate is led by a referee. Sadly at one point there was a joke, “What do you call a Scotsman at a major footballing finals?” The answer then was, “a referee”, because when our national team was not qualifying, our referees were. Some of the giants of the game—literally—were the match officials. Tom “Tiny” Wharton was an imposing figure on football pitches around Scotland and around the world, highly regarded as a FIFA match official, a FIFA observer and the chairman of the referee supervisors committee in Scotland for many years.

Other names are also well known: Bob Valentine, Jim McCluskey, George Smith and many others have made a huge contribution to the game in Scotland and abroad. Most recently, when we were not qualifying for those tournaments, that lone Scotsman at the international tournaments was likely to be Hugh Dallas. He was at France ’98; four years later, at the next World cup in 2002, there was no Scottish men’s team, but Hugh Dallas was there, not just officiating at the highest level in the world, but for the duration of the tournament. He was the fourth official for the final match, Germany versus Brazil—a Scotsman on the pitch at a World cup final. It was an incredible achievement, not only for Hugh Dallas and his family, but for Scottish football.

In 2004, Stuart Dougal was a fourth official at the Euros. William Collum led a team of officials, including Frank Connor as one of his assistant referees, Bobby Madden and John Beaton, at France 2016—again, Scottish referees at the top of the game. At home we are extremely well served in the referee department by referee observers, my own association manager Bill Machray and many people outwith the limelight of the professional game on the TV every week, who put so much into association training, the development of new referees and mentoring new referees.

Referees are an integral part of the Scottish FA, and so too are our fans. It is right that in this debate we recognise the incredible fans of Scottish football, both at home and abroad. They say if there is no Scotland, there is no party, so we certainly hope there will be a good party in Germany when Scotland qualify. The fans are the lifeblood of our game, domestically and internationally.

I must say that I joined the fans in being insulted and disgusted by the ludicrous proposals last week from the senior traffic commissioner for the United Kingdom, who suggested introducing a series of draconian rules that would have impacted fans going to and from football matches. The proposals were rightly condemned by those at the very top of Scottish football, by people from across the political spectrum and, most loudly and passionately, by the fans themselves, who could see they would be an absolute mess and completely not required in our game. Those proposals were rightly shelved very quickly, which we all welcome; they should never have seen the light of day in the first place, but it is right that they will now not be taken forward.

Another area where many fans unite is the screening of Scottish national team matches on terrestrial television. Tomorrow night people will be able to watch on Channel 4 the match between Scotland and England at Hampden Park, but too many can only watch the qualifiers on pay-per-view. Many Scottish fans reluctantly pay their subscription to ViaPlay, which won the rights to the UEFA bidding contract, only for ViaPlay to say it will not continue with the coverage in the medium to long term.

It is vital that there is work done between the Scottish FA and UEFA on that, and that the Parliaments at Westminster and at Holyrood do whatever they can. When I mentioned this issue at the Scottish Affairs Committee earlier on today, the Chair was very keen that I highlight that the Scottish Affairs Committee is looking at it and seeking to work with everyone to try to get a resolution that will allow Scottish qualifying matches to be seen on terrestrial television at all times.

I also want to mention how important football is to families. Football is a sport that brings families together, and sometimes we forget about that. We look at the big prices paid by players and the controversial decisions taken on the pitch, but we forget that this is a sport that brings people together. People take their sons and daughters and go with their husbands and wives to watch that 30-yard screamer hitting the back of the net, to complain at decisions that go against them or to be frustrated about losing a game they never should have lost. We saw during the covid-19 pandemic just how important the football community was to many individuals and families. It was often the thing that made people pick up the phone to their parents, to discuss what had happened on the livestreams that they were watching because they could not get into the stadium together.

We should never forget that the wonderful successes we have had in football across Scotland are down to fans and down to families. Anyone involved in the game at any level is doing that for the spectacle it has become and continues to be. It is so important that we recognise that involvement.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman referred to families, and I know that when my three boys were small, one of the great things we enjoyed doing was going over to the Rangers matches. We went on the bus with Ballywalter Loyal Rangers Supporters Club before Christmas and after Christmas. The boys were small and it was one of those great family occasions that I look back at with much joy and fun. The boys had an education on Rangers football club in the Broomloan stand, where the Rangers supporters all united and sang those songs. My boys enjoyed it and those are memories for our family that I will never forget.

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful again to the hon. Gentleman. Those memories last a lifetime. My own oldest boy watched me officiating at his first match—thankfully, he did not understand all the abuse directed at me—and he has just started off his own interest in football at the Mini Dribblers at Elgin City football club, a great community resource that I will speak about in a bit. It is about being able to share that interest at an early age. Some families grow apart, and people leave their home area, but often the one thing that brings them back is the love of a team, of a sport, or certainly of successes for the Scottish team more generally, as is the case at the moment.

Another area that deserves recognition is that the family experience can sometimes be over an entire day—not just from the kick-off at 3 o'clock, or a lot earlier or later depending on television—and in many cases involves travelling the length and breadth of Scotland to go to the match. That goes back to what the independent traffic commissioner was trying to do. It is sometimes a whole day; sometimes a whole weekend. I travel a lot to get from my home in Moray to matches across the country.

The people who are with me for most of those journeys are Stuart Cosgrove and Tam Cowan of “Off the Ball”, which is described as:

“The most petty and ill-informed sports programme on radio!”

It is anything but; it is entertainment. Tam is a big Motherwell supporter and Stuart is a St Johnstone fan, and they are both extremely well informed about the

Scottish game. They get incredible guests on every week, including Kirsty Wark, Lorraine Kelly, football stars and many others—they are part of the package. Next year, “Off the Ball” will celebrate its 30th anniversary. There are no guarantees, Mr Deputy Speaker, but we might be back here in a year's time having a debate about “Off the Ball”. I mention it because sometimes we think about what happens on the pitch and between clubs, but people are involved in a whole process. Stuart and Tam are motivated by trying to ensure that the football experience is enjoyed by all. For me, certainly, and for tens of thousands of football fans across Scotland, “Off the Ball” plays an important part in that.

The last couple of things I will mention relate to grassroots football—the lifeblood of the game in Scotland—and our facilities. It is fair to say that Scotland is facing a crisis in football facilities and for people playing grassroots football. Now more than ever, many communities face the stark reality either that there are not enough facilities to ensure that all levels and areas of the game are fully serviced, or that, in too many cases, young people are priced out of facilities. Many new facilities get built by local authorities and others, but then simply become unaffordable; often, only the clubs that have money coming in can afford them. Even if we do nothing else after this debate, I would like us to look more seriously at the lack of facilities and availability in Scotland and ensure that they are there for the next generation.

I welcome the announcement by Department for Culture, Media and Sport of £20 million for facilities and infrastructure development, but we need to think smarter about that. Grassroots football in Scotland generated £1.3 billion in social return on investment, according to a landmark UEFA study. I hope that the people who make decisions about sporting facilities across the country, particularly football facilities, think ahead and spend to invest going forward. That money will be extremely well spent if we have facilities for our game available for all ages in all communities across the whole of Scotland.

Finally, as I was preparing for the debate, I contacted the president of the Scottish FA, Mike Mulraney, who took on the position recently. I asked him what he would say if he had the opportunity to speak in this Chamber. These are his words:

“We are grateful for the opportunity to celebrate the impact and legacy Scottish football has had on the game globally, across the UK and in communities across Scotland. My role as President is to harness that power of Scottish football and to ensure it can inspire our nation. Football should be a vital tool in the national agenda to improve the health and wellbeing of our society. In that regard, we are at your disposal: ready, able and willing to help the fight against poverty, ill health—both physical and mental—and inequality in society. I ask that we pool our resources to ensure that this game is accessible to all with no barriers. For that we need urgent investment, innovative thinking and a collective will. Football transforms lives. Football saves lives. Use our national game as a valuable team-mate in the challenges I have outlined, not a political football.”

I could not have said it better myself, and I think it right that the president's words are heard in this Chamber and recorded in *Hansard* for the future.

For those who support a club, football can, at times, be challenging and frustrating, but it is always, always inspiring. It does not matter whether someone is a male player or a female player, old or young, playing at home

[Douglas Ross]

in the United Kingdom or watching their team abroad, or whether their game is on the local pitch or at an iconic stadium around the globe. Football inspires at every level for every generation. Scotland's place in that historical and inspirational game has already been secured. Steve Clarke and his men are writing the next chapter in the history of Scottish football. Let us ensure not just that we recognise the 150th anniversary by celebrating the past and praising present successes, but that we prepare for the future to give young people in Scotland the ambitious, outward-looking prospect of playing at whatever level they wish, at whatever ground they wish and for whichever team they wish, understanding that, over the last 150 years and the next 150 years, the Scottish FA has been and will be there to help and develop them.

8.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont):** On St Andrew's Day in 1872, players from Queen's Park football club represented Scotland against England in the world's first international football match at the West of Scotland cricket club in Glasgow's west end. That 0-0 draw sparked international football into life, and 115 official men's matches have since been played between Scotland and England. Tomorrow evening they will meet at Hampden Park in a special 150th anniversary heritage match to mark the historic first meeting between the two sides. The match will also celebrate the establishment of the Scottish Football Association, which formed in March 1873 to provide a formal structure to the game of football across the country, where it had experienced a rapid growth in the previous decade.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for securing this debate so that the House can also celebrate those significant anniversaries. As a registered match official in Scottish football, he is possibly the only person who has ever endured the—what can I say—"accolades" that come from being both a politician and a linesman. I can think of no better colleague to have secured the debate.

When Scotland played that first fixture against England, Queen's Park provided not only the players but the dark blue kits, which it then donated to the team for future use. Queen's Park is Scotland's oldest club. It was established in 1867 as an amateur outfit and remained so for 152 years. The club introduced new concepts to the game such as crossbars, half-time and free-kicks, all of which were later incorporated into the modern game.

Queen's Park was at the forefront of developing the game, so it was no surprise when Andrew Watson, one of the most exciting talents of the 1880s, joined the club. Born in Guyana, Watson moved to England to attend school, and then completed his education at the University of Glasgow. Having represented various teams across Glasgow, Watson attracted the attention of Queen's and signed in 1880. After domestic success at Queen's, Watson was selected to captain Scotland against England at the Oval in 1881. Watson's achievements and influence as the first black international footballer are celebrated at the Scottish Football Museum and on a mural near Hampden Park. When Watson was captain, the Scotland team won by the margin of six goals to one—one of the biggest ever victories between the two sides and England's heaviest defeat on home soil.

In the early days of the fixture, Scotland were very successful: until 1890, we dominated, and it was rare that England won. These days, of course, things are a bit different. A Scotland win against the auld enemy—our vaguely affectionate term for the English team—has become much more seldom. Indeed, we have not managed to pull off a win in this century, although we have come close in recent years. We have not forgotten that Harry Kane had to score an injury-time equaliser to rescue England at Hampden six years ago, when the game ended in a 2-2 draw. More recently, I was delighted to attend the European championship game between the two sides, which ended in a very nervy 0-0 draw at Wembley. That was the first European championship for the men's team since 1996, and the first major international competition since France '98. The atmosphere that night was electric as a tough Scotland side fought hard against an English team filled with household names, who would of course go on to reach the final of that tournament.

The Scotland-England matches in recent years have been very close, as a resurgent national team under Steve Clarke have grown to become one of the most promising Scotland teams in decades. We currently stand top of our European championship group, having racked up huge wins over Spain and Norway this year. We are starting to dream that this golden generation of Scottish players can go further than any other in history and make it out of the first round of the Euros, or even the World cup—although I have probably just jinxed any chance of that happening.

Tomorrow night at Hampden, in the 150th anniversary game, we are hoping that this Scotland team can replicate the success of the side captained by Andrew Watson long ago. Naturally, we would not dream of a 6-1 victory: these days, given the quality in the England team, a 1-0 win would be celebrated just as loudly and proudly. However the game goes, we are surely in for a great night of football.

Over the years, these clashes have produced moments of magic on both sides. We cannot forget the 1996 European championship, when Gazza knocked the ball over Scotland's defence and scored one of the most memorable goals—and did one of the most memorable celebrations—of the tournament, or the famous 1967 game at Wembley, where an England team filled with World cup winners such as Bobby Charlton, Geoff Hurst and Bobby Moore lost 3-2. Scottish legends including John Greig, Jim Baxter, Billy Bremner, Denis Law and Bobby Lennox were crowned the unofficial world champions that day.

Of course, we should also celebrate the great successes of our women's team. They missed out on qualifying for this year's World cup, but they did make it to the world stage in 2019 and qualified for their first major tournament in 2017. The women's team provided a new group of heroes for the modern era; some also featured for Team GB at the Olympic games, including Kim Little and Caroline Weir. Scottish players are at the peak of the game across Europe. Weir currently plays for European giants Real Madrid, and other players in the current Scotland set-up include Bayern Munich's Samantha Kerr, West Ham's Lisa Evans, Sophie Howard of Leicester City, Chelsea's Erin Cuthbert, Martha Thomas of Manchester United, and numerous players for Rangers, Glasgow City and Celtic.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Moray, the women's team are flourishing, and we look forward to seeing the prominence of women's football continue to grow in the years to come, as future generations are inspired by the examples they see of women competing at the highest levels of football. On the 22nd of this month, the women's team will also take on the auld enemy, and we will be cheering them on just as enthusiastically. There is a rich history of Scotland-England fixtures in women's football too, of course: the first official international women's game in the UK took place 51 years ago, when England narrowly defeated Scotland 3-2. The women's game did not receive the support it deserved in those early days, but thankfully, that has changed in recent decades.

At club level, Scotland's teams have also punched well above their weight. Celtic's achievement in 1967, becoming the first British side to win the European cup, is made all the more historic by the fact that all members of the "Lisbon Lions" were born within 30 miles of Celtic Park. Rangers lifted the European cup winners' cup in 1972, and have made two remarkable runs to the Europa League finals, the most recent being just two years ago. To this day, Dundee United are the only side to enjoy a 100% win record against Barcelona in competitive European ties, winning four games out of four, and 40 years ago, the Aberdeen side led by Sir Alex Ferguson beat the mighty Real Madrid to clinch the European cup winners' cup.

Such successes are definitely harder to come by in the new age of football, where money matters more than the passion of the fans, but this United Kingdom

Government are committed to providing support to the grassroots game in Scotland as we look to inspire the next generation of footballers who will create their own legacy. In his speech, my hon. Friend emphasised the importance of investment in grassroots sports—a point well made. From 2021 to 2025, the UK Government will provide the Scottish Football Association with over £20 million to build and improve grassroots football facilities across the length and breadth of Scotland, from Stornoway to Annan and from Kilwinning to Moray, and of course we are very excited about our UK and Ireland joint bid to host Euro 2028. It would be the biggest sporting event our islands have jointly hosted, and Hampden Park would play a starring role. It is also a really positive example of how Government partners can work together to deliver for communities across every part of the UK, and Ireland too.

A passion for football is ingrained in Scottish society, and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate so that we can all join together in wishing Scottish football well for its next 150 years. I am confident that we will all wish both Scotland and England well when both the men's and women's teams face each other over the next two weeks.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.26 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Monday 11 September 2023

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation Taskforce

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer):**

This is a joint statement with the Lord Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)

We are pleased to inform the House that HM Government are today formally announcing the launch of a taskforce dedicated to tackling Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, known as SLAPPs, which target journalists.

SLAPPs seek to silence investigative journalists, writers and campaigners, often on unfounded defamation and privacy grounds which prevent the publication of information in the public interest. This abuse of the legal system is used by the wealthy to intimidate and financially exhaust opponents, threatening them with extreme costs for defending a claim and therefore undermining the reporting of important public interest issues. The Government recognise the need to protect defendants from abusive litigation while ensuring access to justice for properly conducted claims.

The new taskforce, which will have its inaugural meeting today, 11 September, will sit within the framework of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which was set up to ensure that journalists operating in the UK can do so free from violence or threats. It will bring together key stakeholders from across Government, civil society groups, representative bodies for journalists, and legal services regulators and stakeholders to develop a non-legislative response to SLAPPs targeting journalists. Its work will complement incoming legislation tackling economic-crime linked SLAPPs which cover up to 70% of such cases brought to UK courts. The changes, introduced in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, will allow SLAPPs to be thrown out by judges more quickly and place a cap on the costs for those targeted, making them less effective at strong-arming reporters into abandoning their stories. The Government have also committed to legislating to tackle SLAPPs beyond economic crime as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The establishment of the taskforce will be key in driving forward the Government's agenda to make sure that appropriate protections exist for journalists who are tirelessly working to investigate and publish stories in the public interest, holding power to account and supporting our strong democratic tradition. Its first priority will be to establish an ambitious plan of activity to deliver its objectives over a fixed, 12-month period after which its future will be reassessed. It will be led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport along with the Ministry of Justice and its inauguration is a key milestone in our roadmap for bolstering the safety of journalists in the UK.

This is an important development in ensuring that journalists in the UK can continue to serve the vital democratic function of holding the powerful to account.

[HCWS1011]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Suicide Prevention Update

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield):** Every suicide is a tragedy with devastating impacts on individuals, loved ones and communities. Today we are publishing a new National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England, which refreshes the national strategy for England that was published in 2012.

The strategy considers the latest evidence collected through our mental health call for evidence and discussions with experts, including those who have experienced the suicide of a loved one, academics, those who work within suicide prevention and the Government's National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group.

I am incredibly grateful to everybody who took the time to provide feedback to ensure that the new strategy reflects the most pressing challenges and opportunities.

The result is a new cross-Government and cross-sector strategy for the next five years, with a core message that suicide prevention is everybody's business. Over the next five years, we intend to reduce the suicide rate—with initial reductions in half this time. The strategy also sets out measures to improve support for people who have self-harmed and those bereaved by suicide.

Together, this strategy lays out over 100 concrete actions across national Government Departments, the NHS, local government, employers, the voluntary sector and many others. It includes new priority areas of action, such as improving online safety, addressing the links between suicide and factors such as gambling and domestic abuse, and combating different methods of suicide.

We have already provided funding to improve access to crisis support and support the voluntary sector to deliver suicide prevention activity including:

The £10 million from 2023 to 2025 to support non-profit organisations to meet the increased demand seen in recent years and support a range of diverse and innovative activity that can prevent suicides, including targeting groups of concern identified in this strategy.

Over £2.3 billion more a year for mental health services by March 2024 compared to 2018-19, with £57 million specifically for suicide prevention and suicide bereavement services.

The £150 million capital investment made available to urgent and emergency care mental health pathways, including mental health ambulances, crisis cafes, children and young people's places of safety and new mental health assessment spaces.

We will continue to review progress and update actions to prevent as many suicides as possible. I look forward to continuing to work with members of this House, the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory group and colleagues across the NHS, local government and the voluntary sector to deliver on our ambition to reduce suicides.

I will deposit a copy of the strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1012]





# Petitions

Monday 11 September 2023

## OBSERVATIONS

### TREASURY

#### Bank branches

*The petition of residents of the constituency of North East Fife,*

Declares that bank branches, particularly those in Cupar, Falkland and St Andrews are the heart of their communities, and are relied upon by local communities, those who need access to cash and those without internet banking.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the bank closures in North East Fife are reversed and all local bank branches are protected.—[Presented by Wendy Chamberlain, *Official Report*, 18 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 879.]

[P002846]

*Observations from The Economic Secretary to the Treasury:*

The Government thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding the closure of the Bank of Scotland's Cupar and Falkland branches and the closure of the Barclays UK branch in St Andrews.

The Government are sorry to hear of her constituents' disappointment at the planned closure of these branches. However, the way consumers interact with their banking is changing. In 2022, almost 9 in 10 (88%) UK adults used a form of digital banking, such as an app or online banking platform, up from 77% in 2017. Indeed, according to Bank of Scotland, 75% of the customers of the Falkland branch and 82% of the customers of the Cupar branch also used other Bank of Scotland branches, internet banking or telephone banking.

Meanwhile 97% of people who use the St Andrews Barclays have also banked using the app, online and by phone; less than 10 customers use this branch regularly as the only way to do their banking.

As with other banking service providers, Bank of Scotland and Barclays will need to balance customer interests, market competition and other commercial factors when considering their strategy. Although the Government can understand constituents' dissatisfaction, decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis.

The Government hope that the hon. Member can appreciate that it would therefore be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in these decisions. The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can they determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. Having the flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world, and the Government want to protect that. Having

a dynamic and competitive financial services sector drives innovation and incentivises banks and building societies to keep developing their banking products and services, creating better outcomes for customers.

None the less, the Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered, and mitigated where possible so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have appropriate access to banking services.

As the hon. Member may know, guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) sets out its expectation of firms when they are deciding to reduce their physical branches or the number of free-to-use ATMs. Firms are expected to carefully consider the impact of a planned closure on their customers' everyday banking and cash access needs and to consider possible alternative access arrangements. This is to ensure that the implementation of closure decisions is done in a way that treats customers fairly. The new consumer duty also requires firms to act to deliver good outcomes for customers. The FCA is closely monitoring banks and building societies in this regard and if a firm falls short in its provision of reasonable alternatives, the FCA can and will ask for closures to be paused or for other options to be put in place.

In the customer information pack that Bank of Scotland has published for the Cupar branch closure, customers are pointed to the nearby free-to-use ATMs at the nearby Supersaver (0.03 miles away), Nationwide building society (0.05 miles away) and Keystore Cupar (0.07 miles away), as well as alternative Bank of Scotland branches in St Andrews Queens (8.77 miles away) and Leven (9.89 miles away). Meanwhile the information pack for the Falkland branch directs customers to the Bank of Scotland branch in Glenrothes (6.1 miles away) and also signposts the free-to-use ATM at Freuchie Stores (1.86 miles away) amongst other alternatives. Barclays also points to free ATMs at the Tesco Express, a minute's walk away from the current St Andrews branch location. These branches are all accessible from the closing bank branch via public transport. On its website, Barclays also indicates that it will be providing alternative in-person services in the St Andrews community and will share further information once the arrangements are finalised. Where Barclays closes a branch, it often provides a community service within walking distance under its "Barclays Local" banner, to support customers with non-transactional banking such as opening and closing accounts, checking balances, digital skills support and money management advice.

Alternative options to access everyday banking services can be via telephone banking, through digital means such as mobile or online banking and via the Post Office. The Post Office banking framework allows 99% of personal banking and 95% of business customers to deposit cheques, check their balance and withdraw and deposit cash at 11,500 Post Office branches across the UK. The nearest Post Office branch to the Cupar Bank of Scotland branch is 0.1 mile away at 69 Crossgate, Cupar; for the Falkland Bank of Scotland closure, the closest Post Office can be found close by, just up the High Street two shops (246 feet) away. Meanwhile, the St Andrews Post Office on South Street is also less than 500 feet away, a short walk up Logies Lane from the current position of the St Andrews Barclays bank branch. The Government hope this will prove convenient for the hon. Member's constituents who prefer to use an in-person service for their everyday banking.

In recognition that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, the Government legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to establish a new legislative framework to protect access to cash. The Act establishes the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) as the lead regulator for access to cash and provides it with responsibility and powers to seek to ensure reasonable provision of cash withdrawal and deposit facilities. As part of this responsibility, the FCA must also seek to ensure that there is reasonable provision of free withdrawal and deposit facilities in relation to personal current accounts.

Following the passage of this legislation, the Government recently published a cash access policy statement, which sets out the Government's policies on access to cash. The FCA is required by law to have regard to these policies when determining its regulatory approach in this area. The FCA will publicly consult on its regulatory approach in due course. The Government's policy statement is available online:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cash-access-policy-statement/cash-access-policy-statement>

In the context of the Government's legislation, the financial services sector is working together to develop and provide shared services. This includes a process for Link, which operates the UK's largest ATM network, to assess a community's access to cash needs. These assessments take place in the event of the closure of a core cash service or a request to Link directly from a local community. In circumstances where Link considers that a community requires additional cash services, participating firms within the financial services sector will provide a suitable shared solution, such as an ATM, deposit service or shared banking hub for cash users in that community. The Government understand that Link has recommended an alternative cash deposit service as a result of Bank of Scotland's plans to close its Cupar branch. We also note that as a result of the Falkland Bank of Scotland closure, a replacement Link ATM is required. Petitioners may wish to contact Link for further information. Contact details can be found on Link's website: [www.link.co.uk/consumers/request-access-to-cash/](http://www.link.co.uk/consumers/request-access-to-cash/)

### **Barclays Kidsgrove**

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North,*

Declares that following the planned closure by Barclays of their bank branch in Kidsgrove, this would leave the constituency with just one physical bank.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government work with Barclays in order to keep their branch open in Kidsgrove.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jonathan Gullis, *Official Report*, 19 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 982.]

[P002848]

*Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury:*

The Government thanks the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, Jonathan Gullis MP, for submitting the petition on behalf of his constituents regarding the closure of the Barclays UK Kidsgrove branch.

The Government are sorry to hear of his constituents' disappointment at the planned closure of the branch. In 2022, almost 9 in 10 (88%) UK adults used a form of

digital banking, such as an app or online banking platform, up from 77% in 2017. Indeed, according to Barclays, 86% of the customers of the Kidsgrove branch also banked via other means such as mobile banking, internet banking or telephone banking.

As with other banking service providers, Barclays will need to balance customer interests, market competition and other commercial factors when considering its strategy. Although the Government can understand constituents' dissatisfaction, decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis.

The Government hope that the hon. Member can appreciate that it would therefore be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in these decisions. The Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can they determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. Having the flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world, and the Government want to protect that. Having a dynamic financial services sector drives innovation and incentivises banks and building societies to keep developing their banking products and services, creating better outcomes for customers.

None the less, the Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered and mitigated where possible so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have appropriate access to banking services.

As the hon. Member may know, guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) sets out its expectation of firms when they are deciding to reduce their physical branches or the number of free-to-use ATMs. Firms are expected to carefully consider the impact of a planned closure on their customers' everyday banking and cash access needs and consider possible alternative access arrangements. This is to ensure that the implementation of closure decisions is done in a way that treats customers fairly. The new consumer duty also requires firms to act to deliver good outcomes for customers. The FCA is closely monitoring banks and building societies in this regard and if a firm falls short in its provision of reasonable alternatives, the FCA can and will ask for closures to be paused or for other options to be put in place.

In the customer information pack that Barclays has published for the Kidsgrove branch closure, customers are pointed to the nearby free-to-use ATMs at the nearby Tesco superstore (0.3 miles away) and Co-op store (1.0 mile away), as well as alternative Barclays UK branches in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent (5.4 miles away) and Crewe (9.7 miles away). I understand that Barclays has also implemented a Barclays Local service at the Kidsgrove sports centre, where customers can access day-to-day banking services—excluding cash—three days a week.

Alternative options to access everyday banking services can be via telephone banking, through digital means such as mobile or online banking and via the Post Office. The Post Office banking framework allows 99% of personal banking and 95% of business customers to deposit cheques, check their balance and withdraw and deposit cash at 11,500 Post Office branches across the UK. The nearest Post Office branch to the Kidsgrove

Barclays branch is on the Avenue in Kidsgrove—140 yards away. Industry are also working with Cash Access UK and the Post Office to provide banking hubs, where one is recommended by Link. These provide cash withdrawal and deposit services, as well as a dedicated space where community bankers from major banks can meet customers of that bank. So far, over 70 have been announced. Further details about the locations of bank hub sites can be found on Link's website:  
<https://www.link.co.uk/initiatives/bank-branch-closures/>

In recognition that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, the Government legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to establish a new legislative framework to protect access to cash. Following the passage of this legislation, the Government recently published a cash access policy statement, which sets out the Government's policies on access to cash. This is available online:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cash-access-policy-statement/cash-access-policy-statement>



# Ministerial Correction

*Monday 11 September 2023*

## JUSTICE HMPPS Update

*The following is an extract from the HMPPS Update oral statement on Thursday 7 September 2023.*

**Dr Allin-Khan:** People in Tooting are alarmed that someone could escape from what is supposed to be an extremely secure prison. A few months ago, I raised the issue of low staffing levels with the Justice Secretary because I had concerns after speaking to Battersea and Wandsworth trades union council. My parliamentary question revealed that, shockingly, only seven prison officers turned up for a night shift last December to cover 1,500 inmates. That is unworkable and unsafe. Staff are having to do double shifts, with officers facing violence and abuse and struggling with their mental health. That makes staff retention impossible. In those circumstances, mistakes will happen.

**Alex Chalk:** The hon. Lady began by expressing concern on behalf of her constituents. She was right to raise that. I invite her and her constituents to consider

the remarks of the Metropolitan police that the prisoner is believed to be a low risk to the community. It is important to stress that in the House.

It is an overriding and overwhelming priority for me to increase staff numbers, and I am pleased that they are increasing. Of course, I want them to go up further, but it is positive to note that, since 30 June, there has been an increase of more than 700 full-time equivalent band 3 to band 5 staff—wing officers up to custody managers.

*[Official Report, 7 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 562.]*

*Letter of correction from the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. and learned Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk):*

Errors have been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan).

The correct information should have been:

**Alex Chalk:** It is an overriding and overwhelming priority for me to increase staff numbers, and I am pleased that they are increasing. Of course, I want them to go up further, but it is positive to note that, since **30 June 2022**, there has been an increase of more than 700 full-time equivalent band 3 to band 5 staff—wing officers up to **custodial managers**.



# ORAL ANSWERS

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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 11 September 2023

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Monday 18 September 2023**

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