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

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 15 January 2024**

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# House of Commons

Monday 15 January 2024

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HOME DEPARTMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Asylum Application Backlog

1. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What recent progress he has made on reducing the backlog of asylum applications. [900913]

15. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps he is taking to reduce the backlog of asylum applications. [900927]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** Last year we cleared the equivalent of 90,000 legacy claims and processed a total of more than 112,000 claims—the largest volume in two decades. The total asylum backlog is now at its lowest point since December 2022. The improvement of processes continues, and we will continue to review and improve them to accelerate the decision making from hereon in.

**Andy Carter:** I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that update, but there are still four hotels in and around Warrington housing asylum seekers. Will he give us an update on the closing of hotels, and will he also tell us what steps he is taking to speed up the processing of refugees when they are in hotels awaiting the outcome of their claims?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend made an important link between the speed of asylum processing and the need for asylum accommodation in various forms, including hotels. We are moving away from using hotels as that type of accommodation, thus reducing the cost to the public purse, and we will maintain recruitment levels and improve processes so that the speed of processing that we are seeing now can be continued. Although I cannot make commitments about the specific hotels in my hon. Friend's constituency, he should rest assured that we are seeking to drive down the number of hotels on which we rely.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** My constituent arrived in the UK 15 months ago and was interviewed, but has been waiting for more than a year to receive a final response. He is not alone: according to the Refugee Council,

33,085 asylum cases have been lodged in the last six months alone, putting ever more strain on a broken system. The Home Secretary said that the legacy backlog was going down, but what about those more recent cases? What is being done to deal with them?

**James Cleverly:** The improved processes and the increased number of Home Office officials working on this issue mean that not only the legacy cases but the current ones will be dealt with more quickly, which will reduce the need for asylum accommodation of all types. I cannot comment on individual cases because the circumstances are different in each one, but the hon. Lady should rest assured that the lessons we have learned about the increased speed of processing will benefit those who are already in the system. Of course, we are also determined to drive down the number of people who come here in the first place, reducing the pressure on our asylum processing system in doing so.

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

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The shambolic incompetence of this Government across every aspect of its disgraceful mismanagement of our country's asylum system knows no bounds, but today I will highlight a particularly egregious example. We already knew that the number of removals of asylum seekers whose claims had been rejected had collapsed by 50% since Labour left office in 2010, but over the weekend it emerged that the Home Office had lost contact with an astonishing 85% of the 5,000 people who have been identified for removal to Rwanda. Where on earth are those 4,250 asylum seekers who have gone missing?

Will the Home Secretary drop all the smoke and mirrors and acknowledge that the Rwanda plan is just an extortionately expensive and unworkable distraction? When will he adopt Labour's plan to recruit 1,000 additional immigration enforcement officers to a new returns unit, so that we can have a system that is based on common sense—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Stephen Kinnock:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** No, it is not "thank you". I have to get a lot of people in and this is totally unfair. The question was very long, and I was coughing to get the hon. Gentleman to stop, not to continue. That is the signal we need to understand. If the hon. Gentleman does not want a particular Back Bencher to get in, I ask him please to point them out, because this is giving me that problem.

**James Cleverly:** The mask has slipped. The Labour party has said that even if the Rwanda scheme were to be successful, it would not keep it. That shows what Labour Members really think about this. They have no plan, they have no commitment, and they have even said that if something was working they would scrap it. [Interruption.]

### Fraud

2. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of fraud. [900914]

**The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat):** Apologies for my hesitation, Mr Speaker. I was so busy listening to the heckling opposite that it was difficult to focus on what was going on.

This question is about something of which we should be very proud. The fact is that fraud ruins lives, but this Government have managed to get it down by 13% year on year, online and offline. It is extremely important that we continue with that ambitious agenda and ensure that we continue to cut fraud so that we can bring it down completely by the end of the Parliament.

**Nigel Mills:** Would my right hon. Friend agree that the key to reducing levels of fraud is to help people to understand what might be a fraud so that they are not taken in by it? Is there more that we can do to help people to spot the signs and not become a victim in the first place?

**Tom Tugendhat:** The question about what is a fraud is becoming all too prevalent. We have heard of many different kinds of fraud coming up in many different areas, which is why in a few weeks' time we will, I hope, launch a new comms campaign about it. The truth is that fraud affects so many people in so many ways, and we are trying to make sure that people know what is going on so they can claim the help and support that they need, to make sure that we defeat this pernicious evil.

**Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab):** We simply do not have the resources or expertise to tackle fraud. I have a constituent who is still waiting for a charging decision five years after being the victim of fraud. Her retirement has been ruined waiting for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to make the charging decision. Durham constabulary has a single forensic account. Does the Minister believe, as I do, that a lack of specialist resources is leading to unacceptable delays in justice?

**Tom Tugendhat:** I completely understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and that is exactly why this Government have introduced a new national fraud squad—which is now almost fully recruited, at 400—and increased the funding available to forces to fight fraud. Some forces are doing exceptionally well at this already. Avon is doing extremely well and the City of London police is doing exceptionally well in leading on fraud nationally.

### Legal Migration Rules

3. **Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP):** What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on recent changes to legal migration rules.  
[900915]

**The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):** The Home Office engages with the devolved nations through the inter-ministerial group and recognises that each of the nations of the UK has varying immigration needs, reflected in the varied shortage occupation lists for each nation. Immigration will, however, remain reserved. It is not possible to operate distinct systems without effectively creating an internal UK migration border system.

**Steven Bonnar:** Figures from the Office for National Statistics have revealed that the changes to the minimum income threshold for family and skilled workers disproportionately impact Scotland. Median earnings on the west coast of Scotland are £24,700 a year, which is far short even of the climbdown figure of £29,000. Did the Home Secretary even consider that this policy would effectively cut off migration to parts of Scotland that need and would benefit from inward migration?

**Tom Pursglove:** The Government's position is clear: the changes that we are introducing are the right thing. The numbers of dependents we are seeing coming is disproportionate. There will be an opportunity, through the review of the composition of the immigration salary list in the second phase, and through the call for evidence, for exactly those debates to be had and for those views to be made known.

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

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** The Home Office's knee-jerk policy to raise the threshold and its sudden partial reverse ferret to bring it slightly back down again caused a huge amount of distress to people up and down these islands who now do not know what the future holds for them and their families. What equality impact assessment has been carried out on the policy which, as well as affecting Scotland, will disproportionately affect women?

**Tom Pursglove:** When he announced the changes, the Home Secretary made a commitment to lay the information on the projected volumes in the House Library. It seems that the hon. Lady is criticising the Government for not taking the steps that we have taken to say clearly that the changes will not be applied retrospectively. We think that that is the right thing to do and that it has provided reassurance to people. Ultimately, we need to get net migration under control and we think it is a pragmatic and sensible package to take forward.

**Alison Thewliss:** That does not answer the question that I put to the Minister at all. What equality impact assessment has been carried out on this policy? What recognition of wage levels in Scotland has there been in relation to the policy? He cannot tell me.

One of my constituents tells me that they are worried about their spouse, who works as a legal administrator, coming over from Australia. Also, a man is worried about his nephew and partner who will never be able to return from Canada if they want to come back to live in Scotland, and there are many more who are guilty only of falling in love with somebody of what the Government consider to be the wrong nationality. Will the Minister apologise to them for the chaos that these policies have caused?

**Tom Pursglove:** The position is as I have set out. We think the number of people coming to the country in this way is not sustainable and that we are taking forward a pragmatic, balanced package. As I have said, the measures will not be applied retrospectively, so they will not affect existing applications that have been lodged.

### Reported Thefts

4. **Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): What the average length of time was between (a) thefts being reported and (b) first contact with the police in the last 12 months. [900916]

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):** The Government take domestic burglary very seriously, which is why, just over a year ago, we obtained a commitment from the police to attend every residential burglary. That is delivering results and, according to the crime survey, residential burglary has fallen by 8% year on year.

**Sarah Dyke:** I thank the Minister for his response. In 2022, the cost of rural theft in the south-west rose by 16.6% from the year before. Has the Minister made an assessment of the success of the new national rural crime unit in improving police contacts with victims of rural theft?

**Chris Philp:** I agree that combating rural crime is extremely important, and the national rural crime unit is designed to do exactly that. We have also legislated, of course, and we will implement that legislation to ensure that things like all-terrain vehicles and agricultural equipment have to be marked or fitted with an immobiliser. Overall domestic burglary has fallen by 57% since 2010.

### Ten-year Drugs Plan

5. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What progress his Department has made on implementing the Government's 10-year drugs plan "From harm to hope", published on 6 December 2021. [900917]

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):** The commitments in the drugs strategy are being delivered, including investing more than £300 million in additional treatment capacity to create over 50,000 extra treatment places. We are also enforcing hard, such as by closing down more than 2,000 county lines since 2019.

**John Penrose:** Local police in and around Weston-super-Mare have had notable successes in disrupting drug dealing and supply, but new dealers quickly take the place of the old ones. The quantity of drugs and the number of addicts are not declining. Does the Minister accept that although enforcement and education are vital, they are not enough to solve this problem on their own, and that the underlying legal frameworks we use to control these dangerous chemicals have to be addressed, too?

**Chris Philp:** Enforcement is important. Besides closing down those 2,000 county lines, Border Force seized about 19 tonnes of cocaine in the year ending March 2022—the largest amount seized in a single year on record. I have already mentioned treatment. The most important thing is to get people out of their addiction entirely, which is why we are investing so much extra money in treatment.

There are no plans to change the legal framework. Drugs are illegal for a reason. They are highly addictive and harmful, and the out-of-control public drug consumption in those jurisdictions that have liberalised significantly, such as California, San Francisco and so on, is not something we want to see in this country.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): We are seeing escalating consumption and movement of drugs in Northern Ireland, and the drugs are coming from England and the Republic of Ireland. What discussions will the Minister have with the Republic of Ireland to ensure that we stop drugs crossing the border? We want to stop them coming from England, too.

**Chris Philp:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Of course, one feature of the island of Ireland is that there is essentially no border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and he has alluded to the various challenges that poses. I would be happy to take up that issue and to see what more we can do to disrupt the supply of drugs north-south and east-west. I thank him for raising the issue.

### Asylum Seekers: Hotels

6. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What recent progress he has made on ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers. [900918]

14. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What recent progress he has made on ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers. [900926]

20. **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): What recent progress he has made on ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers. [900932]

22. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What recent progress he has made on ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers. [900934]

25. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What recent progress he has made on ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers. [900937]

**The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):** We are making significant progress on closing hotels, with 50 due to be closed by the end of January and more in the coming months. We are also working to move asylum seekers into alternative, cheaper accommodation and have successfully cleared the legacy backlog by deciding more than 112,000 cases, while maintaining the integrity of the system.

**Dr Evans:** Last year, after the police, the fire service and I raised concerns, the Home Office closed the OYO hotel in Earl Shilton. However, Leicestershire still has asylum hotels open, including just over the constituency border in Appleby Magna, for example, and my constituents are concerned. Will the Minister set out a timeline for when the hotels may close or, more likely, will he set out how the least suitable hotels will be closed first so that, as the backlog is dealt with, the closing of hotels falls in line, too?

**Tom Pursglove:** As I set out, we are making good progress. I hear calls from colleagues from throughout the House for closures in their constituencies. We need to stick the course on delivering that, taking into account a number of factors including the ease of exit, the speed of exit, the fact that notice periods come into play and, crucially, value for money, which the taxpayer would rightly expect.

**Maggie Throup:** In welcoming my hon. Friend to his new position, may I urge him finally to make good on his predecessor's promise to close the temporary accommodation centres in my constituency and restore the two hotels back to their intended purpose? Will he also work with his colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that the "local links" rule relating to social housing is amended to prevent Erewash from being disproportionately burdened by new applications once residents are awarded asylum?

**Tom Pursglove:** I hear my hon. Friend's calls for the specific hotels in her constituency to be closed. She can be reassured that we will continue to work closely on this issue with colleagues from across Government to get it right and make sure that we can exit hotels as quickly as possible.

**Mrs Wheeler:** I thank my hon. Friend for his earlier answers. As he knows, I received official notification today that Newton Park hotel, which was a four-star hotel in my constituency before it was taken over entirely for use by asylum seekers, is to have the contract ended at the end of February. That is an enormous relief to those in those in the small village there and to those in other villages that the important V3 bus route goes through. I thank him for keeping to the word of his predecessor that the hotel use for asylum seekers would end in the second tranche of closures.

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the representations she made on this issue. The situation in her constituency demonstrates that the Government's plan is working and we are seeing hotel exits happen. That is a direct consequence of getting on and making decisions, bringing forward alternative accommodation and also, crucially, reducing in-flow into the system in the first place.

**Jack Brereton:** I welcome the progress that has been made on tackling illegal small boat crossings, which has meant it has been possible to end the use of the North Stafford hotel in Stoke-on-Trent. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only through the most unequivocal legislation on Rwanda that we can deliver proper deterrence that will mean that numbers will come down further?

**Tom Pursglove:** The point that my hon. Friend makes gets to the nub of the issue. One of the most important factors in sustaining the progress we have made is reducing the number of in-flows into the UK, particularly via small boat crossings of the channel. That is why my message to the House is clear: if Members want to see hotels close and the progress sustained, they need to be in the Lobby to support the Bill this week.

**Alexander Stafford:** My constituents and I were delighted at the end of last year to see the end of the Ibis hotel in Bramley being used to house illegal immigrants and its return to normal service. Will the Minister reassure me that any forthcoming immigration legislation passed in this House will make sure that this situation will never happen again, by banning the use of hotels outright and making sure that illegal immigrants are sent to Rwanda for processing?

**Tom Pursglove:** As I have said, the key principle behind the Bill is to help us to bring to an end the egregious crossings of the channel organised by evil

criminal gangs. It will help us to ensure that there is greater control of our borders and that there are not these in-flows into the system, which have undoubtedly had the consequence of our needing to respond to that challenge through the opening of hotels. That is precisely what we are trying to put a stop to.

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

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Last week, *The Times* reported that there are 10,000 hotel beds going unused, at a cost of £1.5 million a day—that is in addition to the 3,500 buffer of empty beds held as a contingency in case of Manston being overwhelmed. Are those figures actually correct?

**Tom Pursglove:** The right hon. Lady will recognise that it is of course important for there to be a buffer, to make sure that operationally we have the bed spaces required in a contingency situation to be able to respond to any surges and particular challenges. That is a difficult area but one that we are looking at carefully. Within the hotel estate, we are of course maximising the use of bed spaces wherever possible, which again helps us to get on and close the hotels, in a way that I think she would like to see.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The downside of the volume of asylum applications being granted is the pressure that that is putting on the local authority homeless sections. Will the Minister have another look at the time given to asylum seekers from the date on which their application is accepted to the date on which they have to move out of Home Office accommodation? Will he consider the issue of 28 days versus 56 days, which is the recognised limit under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017? Otherwise, all we are going to do is transfer people from Home Office-funded hotels to local authority-funded ones, with all the extra pressure of financial problems that that creates for local authorities.

**Tom Pursglove:** On the dates, we are working with local authorities to give them as early visibility as possible about the anticipated number of people with decisions that have been granted that they should expect to see. That helps to forward-plan and we are mindful of those points. As things stand, there is no intention to change that 28-day period. Clearly, planning and working with local authorities is critical, but in many cases people have more than 28 days within which to vacate.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Oldham has a proud history of supporting the persecuted. As of March last year, our town is home to 910 asylum seekers, 145 of whom are in hotel accommodation, but there the housing crisis meets the homelessness crisis: 1,000 people in temporary accommodation, including 500 children. Is it not time that the Government reviewed the dispersal policy, to ensure that every part of England plays its fair share? I gently point out that Braintree is home to just two asylum seekers, as opposed to Oldham's 910.

**Tom Pursglove:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I and my officials are carefully considering what more can be done to ensure that there is equitability in

the approach to dispersal. That is critical, and we need to work carefully through some of the pressures and challenges that these issues present, but I gently say to those on the Opposition Benches that a key part of the response is to get the flows into the system down, and they do not have a credible plan for doing that.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): There are currently 56,000 asylum seekers in hotels. The Prime Minister promised to close those hotels some time last year, but since then the figures have gone up by 10,000. Can the Minister confirm that that figure is correct?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am clear in my mind that the figure that the hon. Gentleman has cited, and that the shadow Home Secretary used last week, does not represent the picture as it stands today. They will recognise that there is periodic reporting on statistical releases, but the figures they cite are not representative of the position on the ground today.

### Reducing Migration

7. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce legal migration. [900919]

11. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce net migration. [900923]

23. **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce net migration. [900935]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** On 4 December, I announced a new package of measures to further reduce legal net migration, including limitations on family dependants being brought in by workers and students, creating a salary threshold and raising the minimum income requirement progressively over the next few years.

**Martin Vickers:** My right hon. Friend will know that the net migration figure of over 700,000 is completely unsustainable. Were it to continue, that would represent the creation of 10 new parliamentary constituencies each year. What co-operation does his Department have with the public services that have to meet the demands from the newcomers?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must be conscious of the impact of the level of net migration on local populations and local authorities. We recognise that the figure is too high and we are taking action to bring it down. We work closely with other Government Departments to deliver on that, but while Opposition Front Benchers criticise the headline figures, they also oppose every single step we take to bring that figure down.

**Sir David Evennett:** I commend my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and my hon. Friend the Minister for Legal Migration and the Border for all their work towards delivering on our manifesto commitment to reduce net migration. My constituents are now looking for the results of all their hard work. Will the Home

Secretary outline how his new legal migration package will make the most of our post-Brexit points-based immigration system?

**James Cleverly:** This country has always had a global outlook: the ethnic composition of the Government at the most senior levels is a direct reflection of our global connectivity and those human bridges across the world. We want to ensure this country is able to benefit from the expertise, knowledge and work of the brightest and best from around the whole world in a manner that is controlled, fair, predictable and well enforced.

**Stephen Crabb:** It is good that the Government want to ensure that the brightest and best can continue to come to the UK to study, but does my right hon. Friend recognise that the changes to the family dependant rules for students risk causing enormous damage to some of our elite business schools, which compete in the global marketplace for experienced, outstanding professionals? What work is he doing with the sector to try to overcome some of those challenges?

**James Cleverly:** My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that we are in a globally competitive environment when it comes to this country's quality higher education postgraduate offer. I have no doubt that we are still highly competitive. We will continue to work with the university sector on this and ensure that the people we bring to the UK are here to study and add value, and that no institution in our higher education sector mistakes its role—they are educators, not a back-door visa system.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg the Home Secretary to spread those more enlightened views to some of his colleagues. Migration should not be a dirty word. I am the son of a migrant. I migrated myself to the United States at one stage. My DNA tells me that I am 34% Irish and 32% Swedish. Can every Member of this Parliament have their DNA published so that we can bring some sense to this discussion about migration?

**James Cleverly:** I am not sure that the Government are able to compel such widespread disclosure—perhaps the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority might have a view on such things. Both sides of my family are of immigrant stock: my mother came to the UK in the 1960s, and my father's family in 1066. This country has benefited from controlled immigration in a fair system, where people who play by the rules are rewarded and we say no to those who refuse to play by the rules.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I am a legal migrant, too. Bath has a vibrant hospitality industry that caters for local people and tourists from all over the world, but many of our hotels, restaurants, bars and pubs are already struggling to find enough staff or are under threat of reduced working hours and closure. How will the Home Secretary ensure that the proposed new salary thresholds and measures to reduce legal migration do not worsen those staff shortages?

**James Cleverly:** We liaise very closely with other Government Departments to ensure that our system, which is transparent and fair, also supports the British economy. We work particularly closely with the Department

for Work and Pensions to ensure that those who have talent and ambition but who, for whatever reason, are currently unable to fully engage in the job market are enabled to do so. I myself have a background in the hospitality industry, and we want that industry to continue to thrive. It is not the case that we should automatically rely on overseas labour for that; we can have home-grown talent as well.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): The Home Secretary talked about people coming to UK universities to study. Many people also come to our universities to carry out ground-breaking and economically important research, and they are worried about the rise in the minimum income thresholds, because that means they will be unable to bring their families with them. What assessment has he made of the impact of the new changes on our universities' important research work?

**James Cleverly:** We recognise the contribution of the international pool of talent. Indeed, when I was Foreign Secretary I signed up to a deal with India for talented postgraduates to exchange experience in our respective countries. We will always look to support the genuine draw on talent, but we will also ensure that the higher education system is not used as a back-door means of immigration. The system is about research and education, not a back-door means of getting permanent residence in this country.

### Neighbourhood Policing

8. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of neighbourhood policing levels. [900920]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** Giving the police the resources they need to police local communities and fight crime remains a Government priority. We have delivered on our commitment to recruit 20,000 additional police officers; indeed, we have surpassed that. Decisions about how they are deployed are, of course, a matter for discussion between chief constables, police and crime commissioners, and mayors, who are responsible for their local communities.

**Chris Elmore:** The legacy of Government cuts has left police forces across England and Wales with a £3.2 billion cash shortfall, and 6,000 officers have now been taken away from frontline policing duties in order to fill the roles of former police staff. Can the Home Secretary start to acknowledge the effect of Tory cuts? How will he rectify that and get more frontline police back into our neighbourhoods across the United Kingdom?

**James Cleverly:** As I said, decisions on how a police force balances its important back-office roles and frontline policing roles are rightly decisions for the chief constable. We have given additional resource, and we have delivered on our commitment to have more police officers. Of course we are looking at police funding formulas to ensure that they remain well resourced, but there are more than 20,000—in fact, 20,947—additional police officers in England and Wales. That will ensure that there are more police on the frontline.

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

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said, to this day we are feeling the devastating impact of the Tories' decision to cut 20,000 police officers. Ministers such as the Home Secretary seem to expect credit for desperately trying to reverse it, but the National Police Chiefs' Council was right that the efforts at reversal have moored 6,000 warranted officers in roles traditionally filled by civilians. Again, we have heard from the Home Secretary that we have never had it so good, but there are still 10,000 fewer neighbourhood police. Why will the Government not match our commitment to get 13,000 more police officers and police community support officers out on the beat?

**James Cleverly:** Unless Labour has a plan for paying for those figures, it is just empty rhetoric. The simple truth is that there are record numbers of officers in police forces across the country, including Essex Police, which I visited this morning—it has never had more police officers than it has currently. It is right that chief constables decide how to deploy those police officers. Again, unless we hear a plan to pay for those additional officers, I will not trust Labour's figures.

### Visa Income Thresholds: Universities

9. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed changes to visa income thresholds on the university sector. [900921]

**The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):** We have been mindful of the need to balance the impacts on individual sectors with economic growth, and the needs of the labour market with the need to reduce levels of immigration. As part of our policy development, we undertook analytical work across Government that supports our decisions. A regulatory impact assessment will be developed in due course.

**Richard Thomson:** The director of Universities Scotland, Alastair Sim, has expressed concern that changes to the Government's visa income threshold could affect universities' ability to attract global talent. International students and academics make a contribution in excess of £5 billion annually to the Scottish economy. If the Government recognise the contribution of international students and academics, as they say they do, why are they introducing a policy that threatens to prevent future cohorts of them from making a similar contribution?

**Tom Pursglove:** Individuals will still be able to make a valid contribution in the years ahead, but in a sustainable and managed way. There are no immediate plans to introduce further exemptions to the increased salary threshold, but the salary discounts remain in place. We will continue to engage as the measures are introduced. There are also opportunities domestically for recruitment. At every opportunity, we should be trying to support domestic recruitment wherever we can.

### Police Funding Formula

12. **Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on reviewing the police funding formula. [900924]



**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):**

Work to update the funding formula is continuing, and I will update the House as soon as I can. The House should be aware that next year, 2024-25, police and crime commissioners funding frontline police will see their budgets increase by up to £922 million, which is an increase of about 6%.

**Alistair Strathern:** There is cross-party agreement that the current funding formula is unfair for police in Bedfordshire, with the Conservatives' own PCC acknowledging that there is simply no meat left on the bone for local police. My constituents are fed up with being told that they have never had it so good, or being fobbed off with one-off grants. Will the Minister commit to a date to finally deliver a fair funding formula for my communities?

**Chris Philp:** What I will commit to, as far as the people of Bedfordshire are concerned, is an increase in funding of £10.2 million for next year, 2024-25. That is an extra 6.5% compared with this year. They will also have 1,455 police officers. That is about 200 more than Bedfordshire's police force has ever had at any time in its history.

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is not unusual to hear from two Bedfordshire MPs when it comes to the police funding formula, because this goes all the way back to the last Labour Government, but there is a cross-party view in Bedfordshire that our police force is underfunded. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet all Bedfordshire MPs so that we can press the case for increases in funding for Bedfordshire Police?

**Chris Philp:** I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues. As I say, Bedfordshire Police will receive an extra £10.2 million next year—an increase of about 6.5%—which I am sure will be welcome up and down the county, but I am of course happy to meet my hon. Friend whenever he would like.

**Mr Speaker:** I presume that is all of them, is it Minister? I call the shadow Minister.

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): Police forces are not being listened to when they raise serious concerns about the funding formula and how it limits their ability to tackle town centre crime. The British Retail Consortium reports that more than 850 acts of violence or abuse against shop workers happen every single day. Everyone has a right to feel safe at work, so when will the Home Secretary accept that retail crime is out of control and accept Labour's plan to introduce a new law to protect retail workers from violence and actually stand up for shop workers?

**Chris Philp:** Theft offences are down by 47% since 2010, of course—those are the crime survey figures—but we have recently launched a retail crime action plan, where police are committing to prioritising attendance at incidents of retail crime and always following reasonable lines of inquiry in relation to shoplifting, assaults against shop workers and other forms of offending. In addition, we legislated in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I call Selaine Saxby.

**Neighbourhood Crime**

13. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on reducing neighbourhood crime. [900925]

16. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on reducing neighbourhood crime. [900928]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** This Government recognise the impact of neighbourhood crime. It is the crime that most affects people's confidence—the confidence of individuals, businesses and communities. The strategic response to this is evidence-based and targeted, and getting policing right in this area is incredibly important for maintaining community confidence.

**Selaine Saxby:** I have seen for myself how successful the Government's safer streets fund was in Barnstaple, and I am delighted that it will be extended into Ilfracombe this year. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that councils have the funding to help support those schemes?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that point. I am proud of the fact that, since 2010, neighbourhood crime is down by 51% because of the kind of interventions that she highlighted. I reassure her that we will continue to look at what works, to fund and support, and to make every effort to drive down neighbourhood crime even further.

**Simon Jupp:** Police numbers across Devon and Cornwall are at record levels and deserve our praise. In a recent survey, my constituents in East Devon said that tackling neighbourhood crime is an absolute priority, as ranging from burglaries to thefts from vehicles. Will my right hon. Friend outline what progress this Conservative Government have made on cracking down on neighbourhood crime?

**James Cleverly:** I am very pleased that my hon. Friend's local community is feeling the positive impact of the decisions we have made. Since coming into Government, we have seen serious violence reduced by 26%, and neighbourhood crime down by 27% since the start of this Parliament. We have seen a 36% reduction in domestic burglary, an 18% reduction in vehicle-related theft and a 61% decrease in robbery. We have reduced homicide by 15%, have taken action on drugs and are committed to—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Secretary of State—I said the same to the Minister—please, you were very slow at the beginning; you will not be slow at the end, I am sure.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On Friday I visited five Co-op stores and every one of them had daily experience of theft, with one losing £35,000-worth of goods over six months and staff experiencing assaults. In light of Labour's pledge to introduce 13,000 more community police and a law on retail crime, what is the Secretary of State really doing? Clearly his plan is not working.

**James Cleverly:** We have a retail crime action plan. We have ensured that assaults against shop workers is an aggravating factor and we have made it clear to police forces across the country that we expect them to take action on neighbourhood crime like that and to pursue every reasonable line of inquiry. We are determined to drive down retail crime.

#### Safer Streets Fund

17. **Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the safer streets fund on the safety of women and girls. [900929]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris):** The objective of the safer streets fund and the safety of women at night fund is to enhance public safety in a direct and targeted way, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Since 2020 the Government have invested £150 million across the two funds and the evaluation of round 1 of the safer streets fund, published in January last year, showed that the investment was boosting trust in the police and making communities feel safer.

**Ms Rimmer:** Does the Minister justify the Government cut of 38% of the funding for projects to reduce violence against women and girls in Merseyside? They have cut £400,000, and one project will have to cease.

**Laura Farris:** What I can tell the hon. Lady is that under the safer streets fund, £3.9 million has been allocated to Merseyside, including for a project in St Helens town centre. Let me remind her very gently of what that is funding. It has gone towards lighting, signage and improvement to taxi ranks, and one of the most radical measures of all is that it provides women with a free taxi service home, where the safer streets fund will reimburse the taxi driver the money they would otherwise have received, so that a woman does not have to find herself standing at a windy bus stop or walking home.

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

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): We welcome the safer streets fund, which will go some way to supporting the night-time economy that has been badly hit over 14 years. The Government's efforts to tackle spiking have been completely undermined by the Home Secretary. Spiking is a serious and devastating offence. Why did the Home Secretary think it was appropriate to joke about spiking his own wife, and can he confirm exactly how many drops of Rohypnol he considers to be illegal?

**Laura Farris:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I think it has been widely reported that the Home Secretary was making a joke about not being good enough for his wife. The point is that we are the first Government who have done something about spiking—it is not a new offence, and the measures to change the statutory provisions in the Offences against the Person Act 1861 could have been taken by the last Labour Government. The reason we have sought to clarify the matter in law is that we do not think that enough victims are coming forward, and the reason there are not enough prosecutions is the time lag in getting effective toxicology reports. That is why we are investing

so much money in rapid drinks testing kits, so that hopefully we will be able to get the test done on site on the night, and get more of those offenders behind bars.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [900938] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** This year, the Home Office will continue to build on our progress on the public priorities: a 36% fall in small boat crossings last year, 86 arrests of small boat pilots, 246 arrests of people smugglers, the biggest-ever international operation resulting in 136 boat seizures and 45 outboard motors being seized, the illegal migration package announced, more than 2,000 county lines drugs lines smashed and the introduction of the Criminal Justice Bill to give police leaders more powers. We are relentlessly focused on delivering community safety on behalf of the British people.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Now that we have the Home Secretary here to answer for himself, can he tell us whether he is aware that the police are receiving more than 560 reports of spiking every month, and in December the Home Office said that the reason the crime is so prevalent is that it is seen as funny and a joke? How can we have any confidence in the Home Secretary to deliver action on spiking when he thinks it is a joke?

**James Cleverly:** I am the Home Secretary who has actually introduced action on this. In my first week in the job, I visited Holborn police station to see the work of the Metropolitan police in tackling violence against women and girls. I made it clear to the Home Office that my priority was the protection of women and girls. I am taking action on this issue, and I am absolutely determined to continue doing so.

T3. [900941] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): I am sure the Home Secretary would agree that anti-extremism training in Departments is extremely important. What more can the Government do to ensure that it is training to tackle extremism, rather than anti-Government and party bias training?

**The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat):** My hon. Friend will have seen recently a pretty extraordinary report on allegations about extremism and the failure to train properly, and what is going on in universities around the United Kingdom. In one recent problematic case, it was said that it is very hard to define what a terrorist is. We know what a terrorist is, the law knows what a terrorist is and this Government know what a terrorist is, and that is exactly why we have just proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir.

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

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We welcome the proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Five more lives were tragically lost in the channel this weekend. As criminal gangs profit from those dangerous boat crossings, it shows how vital it is to stop them, but we need the Home Office to have a grip. The Home

Secretary gave no answer earlier on the 4,000 people he has lost from the Rwanda list. Can he tell us if he has also lost the 35,000 people he has removed from the asylum backlog? How many of them are still in the country?

**James Cleverly:** I join the right hon. Lady in expressing sadness and condolences for those who lost their lives in the channel. That reinforces the importance of breaking the people-smuggling gangs. The fact is that we are driving down the numbers of people in the backlog: we are processing applications more quickly and ensuring that decisions are made so that those who should not be in this country can be removed either to their own country or a safe third country. That is why the Rwanda Bill is so important, and why we will continue working on these issues.

**Yvette Cooper:** Returns have dropped 50% since the last Labour Government. The Home Secretary is still not telling us where those missing people are. He appears to have lost thousands of people who may have no right to be in the country, and lost any grip at all. In the ongoing Tory asylum chaos, we have Cabinet Ministers, countless ex-Ministers and the deputy Tory chair all saying that they will oppose the Home Secretary's policy this week—a policy that we know he and the Prime Minister do not even believe in. If the deputy Tory chair this week votes against the Home Secretary's policy, will he be sacked, or is the Prime Minister so weak that he has lost control of asylum, lost control of our borders, and lost control of his own party, too?

**James Cleverly:** Conservative Members of Parliament are absolutely united in our desire to get a grip of this issue. I am not the person who has held up a sign saying, "Refugees welcome"; I am not the person whose colleagues oppose each and every rhetorical flourish. Until the Labour party comes up with a credible plan, I will not take its criticism any more seriously than it deserves.

T4. [900942] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The British people welcome people who come to this country to work and contribute to our economy. But those who abuse our hospitality, commit violent offences and are then sent to prison need to be deported at the end of their sentences. Will my right hon. and learned Friend update the House on how many were deported last year, and what action he will take to ensure that foreign nationals who are violent offenders are automatically deported when they leave prison?

**The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration (Michael Tomlinson):** We are clear that foreign criminals should be deported wherever possible, and we will continue to do so, in stark contrast to the calls to stop the deportation of foreign national criminals from the Leader of the Opposition and the Labour party. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that foreign national offender returns have increased by 19% in the last 12 months.

T2. [900940] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): My constituents often have to wait months to elicit a response for their asylum or Home Office queries. Given the Conservative Government's persistent failure to effectively manage the asylum system, resulting in a backlog of almost 100,000 cases and the excessive use

of expensive hotels, does the Home Secretary not feel that now is the time to adopt Labour's comprehensive plan, which would end the use of expensive hotels within 12 months and significantly reduce the backlog?

**The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove):** I think the hon. Gentleman means Labour's non-existent plan. The fact is that last year, we made 112,000 initial decisions; if the hon. Gentleman has specific cases that he wishes to raise with me as the Minister, I am very happy to have a look at those, but the productivity improvements that we saw last year carry through a lot of learning as we now get on and deal with the backlog. A lot of positive work has gone on, and he should recognise that point.

T7. [900945] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Humberside police now has over 800 more officers than in 2010, which obviously enables it to provide a better service to my constituents. Crucially, it also has top-class leadership, currently provided by Jonathan Evison, the police commissioner, and until recently by Lee Freeman, the former chief constable—I am sure his successor will also provide that leadership. Does the Minister agree that top-class leadership is important, and what is he doing to ensure improvements are made to the present leadership training scheme?

**The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):** I join my hon. Friend in commending Humberside police force on the progress it has made, particularly under recent chief constable Lee Freeman. In terms of improving leadership, of course, Lee Freeman is now one of His Majesty's inspectors, and he can apply what he learned and put into practice in Humberside across the whole country.

T5. [900943] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): On 17 October, the Government pledged in the House to make changes to the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme pathways 1 and 3. When can the House expect an update and a plan?

**Tom Pursglove:** Of course, we are continuing to work very collaboratively across Government on the response to the situation in Afghanistan, fulfilling the commitments we made to provide that sanctuary in the way that we all want to see. We will say more about those efforts as soon as we are able.

T8. [900947] **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): We heard earlier about the effectiveness of the safer streets fund. Falmouth in my constituency, where most of the students live, recently received £67,000; in addition, our brilliant police and crime commissioner Alison Hernandez has been working with Dawn Dines, who helped to successfully change the law on spiking. Can my hon. Friend demonstrate to my Truro and Falmouth constituents how those positive changes will improve conviction rates in the Devon and Cornwall area?

**Laura Farris:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and congratulate her police and crime commissioner on the excellent work she is doing. My hon. Friend will be aware that we have amended the Offences against the Person Act 1861 so that the offence of spiking is captured

specifically and comprehensively in law, in part because we want more victims to come forward, but we are told time and again by the police that the most significant barrier to conviction is the length of time between the offence taking place and a toxicology report being received. We are therefore investing in rapid drink testing research, and we hope to bring testing capacity on site.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): UK Hospitality estimates that 95% of skilled worker visas that were gained last year would be lost under the new regulations. That is a vital sector for my local economy in Edinburgh and for Scotland, so when will the Government recognise that the revision to the salary level was not sufficient and bring it down to a reasonable level?

**Tom Pursglove:** I disagree with the hon. Lady's interpretation of the situation. We should be working in a collaborative cross-Government way, particularly to support domestic employment wherever possible. Comprehensive steps are being taken through the back to work plan to help deliver on that, and there are many people here on other routes who are perfectly able to work and, with the right support, would be doing so. That is precisely where we are going to focus our efforts.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to provide advice to police forces across the country to help them support communities during the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas?

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend is right to ask that question, because sadly, we have seen an absolutely vile upsurge in antisemitism on our streets. We have seen people who claim to be speaking out for equality and justice actually defending people who take slaves, who violate women's and girls' rights, and who here in our own country make the Jewish community feel uncomfortable. That is exactly why this Government have committed £18 million to the Community Security Trust. Very sadly, we have also had to commit £7 million to academic security, because there has also been a massive increase in antisemitism in universities. We are combating all of that.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): How many times must a demonstration in the same cause be repeated, week in and week out, before the well-funded organisers become liable to pay for at least part of the policing costs?

**James Cleverly:** Of course, we recognise that there is legitimacy to public protests. We also recognise that the unprecedented and unwarranted pressure that this is

putting on policing around the country is having an impact on communities. My view is that the organisers have made their point, and repeating it does not strengthen their argument. Unfortunately, we are also seeing some deeply distasteful people weaving themselves in among those protesters, who are protesting on issues that they feel passionately about, but whose good will is being abused by others.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary urgently meet his hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) and me to speak about why it is that, although the whole House passed the Public Order Act 2023 with an amendment to ensure safe access zones for women using abortion clinics, this is now subject to a consultation that would gut the legislation? Can he meet us urgently? The consultation is due to end on 22 January, and it would not actually do what all MPs in this House voted for.

**James Cleverly:** If the hon. Lady writes to me on this issue, I will endeavour to find out the details of the point she has made.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Final question—Tim Loughton.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Last week, the Home Secretary produced a report on safe and legal routes to comply with section 61 of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the amendment I tabled last year. It is very long and generous on the existing legal routes, but can he tell me how my 16-year-old orphan from an east African country with links to the UK, who is a genuine asylum seeker, will be helped to come legally and safely to the UK by what the Government have published so far?

**Tom Pursglove:** My hon. Friend is a very passionate advocate on this issue, and we had a conversation last week about this very point. The fact is that, since 2015, we have welcomed over half a million people through our safe and legal routes. We are introducing the cap precisely because we want to see that generosity extended in the years ahead, but the pressures of illegal migration in particular make that very challenging and difficult. This is precisely the sort of issue I want to study with him as we move forward with the cap, to make sure that we continue to help the most vulnerable people from around the world, working particularly with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and others.

## Defending the UK and Allies

3.32 pm

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** I would like to update the House on the action that we took on Thursday night against Houthi military targets in Yemen.

Since 19 November, Iran-backed Houthis have launched over 25 illegal and unacceptable attacks on commercial shipping in the Red sea, and on 9 January they mounted a direct attack against British and American warships. They fired on our ships and our sailors—it was the biggest attack on the Royal Navy for decades—and so we acted. We did so in self-defence, consistent with the UN charter, and to uphold freedom of navigation, as Britain has always done.

Alongside the United States, with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands, we ordered the RAF to strike two Houthi military facilities in Yemen. I want to be clear that these were limited strikes. They were carefully targeted at launch sites for drones and ballistic missiles to degrade the Houthis' capacity to make further attacks on international shipping. I can tell the House today that our initial assessment is that all 13 planned targets were destroyed. At the drone and cruise missile base in Bani, nine buildings were successfully hit. A further three buildings were hit at Abbs airfield, along with a cruise missile launcher caught in the open. We have seen no evidence thus far of civilian casualties, which we took great care to avoid. I know the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the incredible bravery and professionalism of all our servicemen and women.

The need to maximise the security and effectiveness of the operation meant that it was not possible to bring this matter to the House in advance, but we took care to brief Members—including of course you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the Opposition—before the strikes took place, and I have come to the House at the earliest possible opportunity. I do not take decisions on the use of force lightly. That is why I stress that this action was taken in self-defence. It was limited, not escalatory. It was a necessary and proportionate response to a direct threat to UK vessels, and therefore to the UK itself.

Let me be absolutely clear why the Royal Navy is in the Red sea. It is there as part of Operation Prosperity Guardian, protecting freedom of navigation as a fundamental tenet of international law. The Houthis' attacks on international shipping have put innocent lives at risk. They have held one crew hostage for almost two months, and they are causing growing economic disruption. Global commerce cannot operate under such conditions. Containers and tankers are having to take a 5,000-mile detour around the Cape of Good Hope. That pushes up prices and imperils the passage of goods, foods and medicines that the British people and others rely on.

We have attempted to resolve this through diplomacy. After numerous international calls for the attacks to stop, a coalition of countries gave the Houthis a clear and unambiguous warning two weeks ago. Last week, the UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the attacks and highlighting the right of nations to defend their vessels and preserve freedom of navigation, yet the Houthis continued on their reckless path.

We should not fall for the Houthis' malign narrative that this is about Israel and Gaza—they target ships from around the world. We continue to work towards a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza and to get more aid to civilians. We also continue to support a negotiated settlement in Yemen's civil war, but I want to be very clear that this action is completely unrelated to those issues. It is a direct response to the Houthis' attacks on international shipping. We should also recognise the risks of inaction. It would weaken international security and the rule of law, further damage freedom of navigation and the global economy, and send a dangerous message that British vessels and British interests are fair game.

There is another point here, which is often overlooked. The Houthis' attacks risk worsening the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen itself. The UK helps to feed around 100,000 Yemenis every month, with aid arriving via the very sea routes that the Houthis have in their sights. The threats to shipping must cease. Illegally detained vessels and crews must be released, and we remain prepared to back our words with actions.

But dealing with that threat does not detract from our other international commitments; rather, it strengthens our determination to uphold fundamental UN principles. If our adversaries think they can distract us from helping Ukraine by threatening international security elsewhere, they could not be more wrong. On Friday, I travelled to Kyiv to meet President Zelensky and address the Ukrainian Parliament. I took a message from this House to the Rada that we will stand with Ukraine today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes. If Putin wins in Ukraine, he will not stop there, and other malign actors will be emboldened. That is why Ukraine's security is our security. That is why the UK will stay the course, and it is why I am confident that our partners share our resolve.

Far from our resolve faltering, our military support to Ukraine will increase this year. We will provide the biggest single package of defence aid to Ukraine since the war began, worth £2.5 billion. That will include more air defence equipment, more anti-tank weapons, more long-range missiles, thousands more rounds of ammunition and artillery shells, training for thousands more Ukrainian servicemen and women, and the single largest package of advanced drones given to Ukraine by any nation. All of that is on top of what we have already provided to support Ukraine.

In total, since the war began, the United Kingdom will have provided almost £12 billion of aid to Ukraine. We were the first to train Ukrainian troops, the first in Europe to provide lethal weapons, the first to commit main battle tanks, the first to provide long-range missiles, and now we are the first to keep the promise made at last year's NATO summit, alongside 30 other countries, to provide new bilateral security commitments. Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO, and NATO will be stronger with Ukraine in it, but these commitments will help bridge the gap until that day comes.

Under the new agreement that we signed with President Zelensky, we are building Ukraine's military capabilities; and if Russia ever invades Ukraine again, we will provide swift and sustained assistance, including modern equipment across land, air and sea. Together with our allies, the UK will be there from the first moment until the last. For all of this, I bring a message of thanks from President Zelensky to the British people. Today, I hope

[The Prime Minister]

that the House will join me in sending a message back to the Ukrainian people: that we stand together as one in support of these firm commitments. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

We are building a new partnership with Ukraine, designed to last 100 years or more. Yes, it is about defence and security, but it is also about trade, investment, culture and more. There could be no more powerful sign of our unique bond than Ukraine’s decision to adopt English as the language of business and diplomacy. So, through the British Council, we are going to fund English language training for the Ukrainian people.

In dangerous times, we are investing in defence, hardening our critical infrastructure and building our alliances. We are resolute in our principles: international security; the rule of law; and freedom to determine your own future. An attack on those principles is an attack on everything that we believe in and on which our lives and livelihoods depend. As the home of parliamentary democracy and a leader in collective security, it is our responsibility to defend those principles and to defend our people. That is who we are. That is what Britain does and will always do. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.41 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for the secure briefing last week and for an advance copy of his statement? Let me reiterate that Labour backs this targeted action to reinforce maritime security in the Red sea. We strongly condemn the Houthi attacks, which are targeting commercial ships of all nationalities, putting civilians and military personnel—including British forces—in serious danger. The Houthi attacks are unacceptable and illegal and, if left unaddressed, could lead to a devastating rise in the cost of essential food in some of the poorest countries.

The international community clearly stands against the Houthi attacks. Alongside the UK and the US, four other countries were involved in non-operational support, over a dozen nations are part of the maritime protection force in the Red sea, and many others support the recent UN Security Council resolution, which condemns the Houthi attacks in the strongest possible terms. The UK strikes were limited and targeted, and did everything possible to protect civilian lives. That is a proportionate response.

Military action must of course always be underpinned by a clear strategy, and it is the role of this House to ask the right questions. So I ask the Prime Minister: what confidence does he have that his stated objectives have been met? What process will he follow in the face of continued Houthi attacks? What efforts are under way to maintain the support of the international community? Will he confirm that he stands by the parliamentary convention that, where possible, military interventions by the UK Government—particularly if they are part of a sustained campaign—should be brought before the House? Scrutiny is not the enemy of strategy.

While we back the action taken last week, these strikes still do bring risk, and we must avoid escalation across the middle east. Will the Prime Minister tell us

how the UK will work with international partners so that our rightful actions are not used as an excuse by those who seek to expand violence throughout the wider region, or indeed reanimate the conflict in Yemen?

None the less, our armed forces across the region are showing the highest professionalism and bravery, both in defending commercial shipping and in this targeted action. We thank them. We are proud of them. They continue to show that Britain is a force for good, as does the UK’s unwavering unity in support of Ukraine and against Russian aggression.

On the Labour Benches, we have backed all military support for Ukraine, so again we back the Prime Minister’s announcement of £2.5 billion for Ukraine next year, and we strongly support the agreement on security co-operation, which will give Ukraine vital confidence to plan for the year ahead. I hope that it becomes a template for other allies to follow and that, in time, Ukraine will become a full member of NATO. To those listening in Kyiv, Moscow or elsewhere in the world, let me be clear: whoever is in government in Britain, the UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Returning to the middle east, it is now over 100 days since the brutal events of 7 October. Israel’s right to self-defence is fundamental, as is its duty to comply with international law. The longer the conflict in Gaza rages, the greater the risk of escalation throughout the entire region. On the Israel-Lebanon border, we must urge constraint. We must make it crystal clear to all parties that the UK does not support this conflict extending further in Lebanon.

Within Israel and Palestine, in the west bank, settler violence must stop immediately, and in Gaza we need a humanitarian truce now—not as a short pause, but as the first step on a road away from violence. The need for a sustainable ceasefire is clear to stop the killing of innocent civilians, to create the space for the return of all the hostages, and to provide urgent humanitarian relief to protect against disease and ward off a devastating famine. From that first step, we can begin a bigger push towards peace, a permanent end to the fighting and a lasting political solution. The hope of a two-state solution is fragile, but it is still there and we must fight for it, just as we must remain resolute in the face of aggression that threatens global security, whether in Europe or in the Red sea.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his support for the action that we have taken. He is absolutely right to highlight the international coalition that, over recent weeks, has called out the Houthis’ behaviour, culminating in the UN Security Council resolution strongly condemning the attacks, which he rightly referenced. Our stated aim was to degrade and disrupt the Houthis’ capability to launch attacks on civilian shipping. As I indicated, our initial assessment is that our strikes have been successful in the specific targets that were selected. Obviously, that is an initial assessment, but that remains our case at the moment.

More generally, we want a reduction of tensions in the region and a restoration of stability. That is our stated aim. It is incumbent on the Houthis not to escalate and not to continue what are illegal and unprovoked attacks on civilian shipping that put innocent lives at risk and damage the global economy and the prices that

British citizens and others pay for their everyday goods, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly pointed out.

I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that it was necessary to strike at speed, as he acknowledged, to protect the security of the operations. That is in accordance with the convention. I remain committed to that convention, and would always look to follow appropriate processes and procedures, and act in line with precedent—he will know that there were strikes in 2015 and 2018, when a similar process was followed.

I also provide the right hon. and learned Gentleman with the assurance that he rightly asked for about our international engagement, because there will be malign forces out there that seek to distort our action and to turn it into something that it is not. It is important that we engage with our allies and others in the region, so that they understand what we did and why. I provide him with the assurance that we have done that and will continue to do that, because it is important that there is no linkage between these actions and anything else that is happening. This is purely and simply to respond in self-defence to illegal attacks by the Houthis on commercial shipping.

I welcome the right hon. and learned Gentleman's support for the announcements we made with regard to Ukraine. He is right to point out the importance of the security commitments we signed. Thirty countries at the Vilnius summit promised to do so. This House should be proud that the United Kingdom is again leading by being the first country to sign such a commitment, which I believe will serve as a template for others to follow. I can tell him of the enormous appreciation in Ukraine for the UK doing that, so that there is long-term certainty for the Ukrainian people of our support, as well as further deterrence to Russia and others against future aggression.

In conclusion, the confluence of these two events over the same 24 hours serves to highlight the increasing threats we face as a country. The global environment is becoming more challenging and more unstable. It is incumbent on us to respond to those challenges with increased investment in defence, as we are doing, and by strengthening our alliances, because ultimately we must defend the principles of international law, freedom and democracy, and freedom of navigation that we all hold dear. This Government will always stand ready to do that and to protect the British people.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): The Prime Minister was clearly absolutely justified to respond as he did, particularly after the direct attack against HMS *Diamond*, but given that at the time of the Falklands campaign we had 35 frigates and destroyers and were spending 4.5% of GDP on defence, whereas both those figures can be cut in half to describe our situation today, does he agree that we certainly should not be reducing the numbers of frigates or destroyers, and that we certainly should not be mothballing, or otherwise decommissioning, our amphibious assault ships?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to reassure my right hon. Friend that our intention is to increase defence spending from where it currently is up to 2.5% when circumstances allow. It is worth reminding the House

that we have consistently over the past decade been the second largest spender on defence in NATO—larger than 20 other countries combined. Our plans will continue to provide that leadership.

Within that, there is a very strong equipment plan, underpinned by the £24 billion extra that the Ministry of Defence received in its most recent settlement, which for the Royal Navy includes Type 26, Type 31 and Type 32 frigates. With regard to the specific vessels my right hon. Friend talks about, the Defence Secretary has asked the First Sea Lord to plan how the Royal Marines' excellent work can be taken forward, so that they have the capabilities they need to continue their work and the ability to be deployed globally. When that process concludes, the Defence Secretary will of course update the House.

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

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I would like to begin by echoing the Prime Minister's sentiments in relation to Ukraine. All of us on the SNP Benches remain firmly united behind its struggle against Vladimir Putin's Russia.

When Sir Walter Scott wrote that in war both sides lose, I am not quite sure he had factored into the equation the likes of the Houthis, because they are, of course, the fundamentalist's fundamentalists. Unperturbed by being on the receiving end of Saudi Arabia's bombing for many years, they are, the perceived wisdom would suggest, not just content but perhaps even quite happy to be on the receiving end of American bombs.

That context poses an enormous question for all of us in this House as to what comes next. If, as has been suggested by the Houthis' actions over the course of the last 12 hours or so, the message that we sought to send has not been received, what do we intend to do? What is the plan? What is the Prime Minister's strategy? Will he come to the Dispatch Box and, unlike his predecessors in relation to middle east conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, lay out when and how far he is willing to go in relation to military action? Clearly we need to understand his Government's strategy in this conflict, because we cannot have an escalation that leads to further regional instability. While we would all agree, quite rightly, that we should not fall for the Houthis' narrative that this is directly related to the conflict in Israel and Gaza, we cannot escape the fact that a ceasefire in Gaza is essential for that wider regional stability.

Let me finally say that, although the Prime Minister has sought to defend his decision not to come to the House last week, it is clear that the House should have been recalled. It is what the public would have expected, and I urge him to do better in future.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Ukraine and his support for our approach.

Obviously I will not speculate on future action. What we conducted was intended as a single, limited action, and of course we hope that the Houthis will step back and end their reckless and destabilising attacks, but we will not hesitate to protect our security and our interests where required. We would, of course, follow the correct procedures, as I believe we did in this case.

[The Prime Minister]

Although the hon. Gentleman is right to ask questions, we should also recognise the risks of inaction, because doing nothing would absolutely weaken international security and the rule of law, would further damage the freedom of navigation and the global economy, and—perhaps most important—would send the very dangerous message that British vessels and British interests are fair game, and that is simply unacceptable.

Of course I am happy to answer questions about the situation in Israel and Gaza, but the House should make it very clear to the outside world that there is no link between what we have done last week and the situation there. This was a specific action in self-defence against the Houthis, who are conducting illegal strikes against innocent civilian shipping. That has nothing to do with what is going on in Israel and Gaza, and we must never let anyone think that this House believes that there is a link.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary for his excellent and wide-ranging speech this morning, in which he rightly pointed out that we face dangerous times. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that, while how we spend defence money is important, it is vital and without doubt that defence needs a great deal more money—more than 2.5% and these arbitrary targets—if our brave men and women are to fight a sustained conflict in the years ahead?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree that the Defence Secretary made an excellent speech earlier. He highlighted, as I did, the fact that defence spending has consistently met our NATO obligation. We have been the second largest defence spender in NATO, and in the last settlement defence received the largest increase—£24 billion—since the end of the cold war. My hon. Friend is right that the threats we face are increasing. It is right that we invest to protect the British people against those threats, and that is exactly what the Government are doing and will continue to do.

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): While not having a vote in this House is regrettable, Liberal Democrats support limited strikes against the Houthis to open international shipping lanes, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that this region is a tinderbox. We have seen attacks on US soldiers in Syria and Iraq, the terrorism of Islamic State in Iran, the rockets of Hezbollah, and the Israeli strikes in Beirut—all stemming from the horrifying conflict in Israel and Gaza. Can the Prime Minister tell us what conversations he has had with our NATO and European allies, but also with leaders of Gulf countries, to ensure that these limited strikes remain limited?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said, we are engaging extensively with our international partners, including our Gulf allies. I spoke to the President of Egypt just last week, and will continue to do so. Let me say again, however, that it is important that no one takes away the idea that this House believes, on any side, that there is a link between direct action in self-defence against the Houthis and the situation in Israel and Gaza. They are entirely distinct. We will do everything we can to bring more aid into Gaza, and to make sure that we work

hard for a sustainable ceasefire. That is separate from our ability and necessary duty to defend our interests and our people.

**Sir Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for his firm and principled response to events in the Red sea, but is it not clear from Iran's support for Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis that it will do anything to stop a lasting peace between the Arab states and Israel because the Iranian regime believes that Israel should not exist at all? Would it not be a real defeat for Iran to see it isolated by a meaningful resolution of the Palestinian issue and the supercharging of the Abraham accords in a process to bring peace and stability to the region, all underpinned by an international resolve to confront Iran's proxies wherever they threaten our interests and values?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent remarks and for his work on the Abraham accords, which have done much to bring more peace and stability to the region. He is right to say that the behaviour of the Iranian regime poses a significant threat to the safety and security of the UK and our allies and ensures regional instability where we want to see more peace and stability. I can assure him that we are keeping abreast of all the risks in the area. That is why, for example, the Royal Navy last year and the year before continued to interdict illegal arms smuggling by the Iranians to the Houthis. We will continue to keep in close contact with our allies to take all the measures we can to protect our people and ensure that the Iranians' destabilising influence in the region is reduced to the best extent possible.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. He has been crystal clear on the need to degrade the capabilities of this terrorist organisation, the Houthis, that are causing havoc in the Red sea. He will also know that Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world and is suffering a mass humanitarian crisis with over 21 million people in need of humanitarian aid and support. What will he do to ensure that the civilians of Yemen are not again engulfed in a mass humanitarian catastrophe?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising an incredibly important point. I reassure her and the House—she will know this from her own experience—that we are steadfast in our support to the Yemeni people as one of the largest donors of lifesaving aid to the UN appeal. We are also committing, I believe, £88 million in this forthcoming year—over the last several years we have committed £1 billion—and that will help to provide food for at least 100,000 people every month and deliver lifesaving healthcare through 400 facilities. The Yemeni people are suffering and we are doing everything we can to alleviate that suffering.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Earlier this century, following threats of access to the Suez canal from Somali piracy, the international community united with a widely based taskforce to successfully suppress it. Now that the Houthis are threatening seafarers' lives and international navigation—along with the trade and jobs that depend on it—will the Prime Minister seek the widest possible international taskforce to deal with that? Will he also support the people of south Yemen, who want nothing to do with these terrorists?



**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman is right about the necessity of building international coalitions, and I am pleased to say that that is happening. Operation Prosperity Guardian, which we are proud to be a partner of, is upholding freedom of navigation in the region. As has been mentioned, the UN Security Council resolution that was passed on 10 January is instructive in this sense. It condemns in the strongest terms the Houthi attacks, demands that they immediately cease all attacks and notes the right of member states to act in accordance with international law to defend their vessels. The right hon. Gentleman will also have seen the statement published by around a dozen of our allies before and after the strikes, which I hope will reassure him that there is broad international support for what we are doing and for the calls on the Houthis to desist.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** I represent a constituency with a proud maritime tradition. Families are anxious about commercial shipping staff whose jobs take them through the Red sea, and a scramble towards military action is endangering those UK seafarers. Maritime unions are calling not just for more protection but for co-ordinated diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis. After today's attack on a ship, can the Prime Minister explain to seafarers how dropping bombs will lead to a de-escalation of a situation that is already endangering their safety?

**The Prime Minister:** That question is quite extraordinary. It is Houthi rockets that are endangering the lives of seafarers in the region. We have seen shipping companies welcome the action we are taking, because they are keen to see security and stability restored to the region. That is what we are aiming to do: to disrupt, destabilise and degrade the Houthis' ability to carry out these attacks and to restore stability to region. That is very much the focus of our attention. We are acting in self-defence to protect the lives of seafarers, not endanger them. The right hon. Lady would do well to call out the Houthis to stop what they are doing.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the international law case for his Government's action in the Red sea is, unusually in my experience, relatively straightforward? Does he also agree that the next significant challenge is to maintain and enhance a multinational consensus on deterring and combating more of these attacks, if they occur, and that acting in compliance with and respect for international law assists us in that task?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend is right. I hope he will have seen the published legal summary of our advice on this issue. This proportionate and necessary action was taken lawfully to respond to attacks by the Houthis, and it was the only feasible means to do so. The UK is, as he knows, permitted under international law to use force in such circumstances. It is right that we have due regard for the legal advice in such situations, and I reassure him that we will continue always to have regard to it. While we fight to protect international law, it is important that we also follow it ourselves.

**Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab):** According to the YouGov poll taken last month, 71% of the British public want a ceasefire in Israel-Gaza, yet last week the

Government launched airstrikes in the Red sea in escalation of the situation in the middle east. Although the Government were not under any constitutional obligation to have a parliamentary vote on that military action, or to abide by the result of any such vote, does the Prime Minister believe that the Government have a duty to the British public and the parliamentary community, which represents the British people, in building political support for such military action?

**The Prime Minister:** The Leader of the Opposition rightly said we need to ensure that malign actors do not try to distort what we have done for their own purposes. I gently say to the hon. Lady that to conflate and link our action against the Houthis with the situation in Israel-Gaza just gives ammunition to our enemies who seek to make things worse in the region.

We acted in self-defence, and I have explained the reasons, the processes that we followed and the accountability that I have to Parliament, which I am now discharging. Separately, we will, of course, work very hard to bring humanitarian aid into Gaza and to try to bring about the sustainable ceasefire that we all want to see.

**Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con):** I commend my right hon. Friend for prosecuting this military action. As a matter of law it was highly necessary and clearly proportionate, and his legal position is watertight. Countries around the world depend on that route but, as usual, it is the British and the Americans who do something about protecting it. However, there are reports that more Houthi attacks are taking place this afternoon. Will he take more military action, if necessary?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his support. Of course, he will understand that I will not speculate on future action. This was intended as a limited single action, and we hope the Houthis will now step back and end their destabilising attacks. As I said earlier, we will not hesitate to protect our security, our people and our interests, where required. If we do so, we will, of course, follow the correct procedures and precedent, as we did in this case.

**Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** The Prime Minister is right that Ukraine needs military support, but it also needs to be rebuilt. Last year, the British Government opposed proposals that we should seize \$300 billion-worth of Russian state assets sitting in banks around the world, including in the UK, and use them to rebuild Ukraine. However, I note that the Foreign Secretary said in the United States of America in December that he is now arguing that we should be able to seize those assets. Should we not legislate to ensure Putin pays for the reconstruction of Ukraine?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not entirely sure that I agree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the situation. I agree that Russia must pay for the long-term reconstruction of Ukraine and I have been clear about that. On the G7 leaders call at the end of last year, I was the one who raised this issue and, as a result, the G7 have collectively tasked Finance Ministers with exploring all lawful routes to ensure that Russian assets are made available for that purpose. We are working at pace to

[The Prime Minister]

identify all options for seizing those assets, and I reassure him that we are ensuring, in conjunction with our international allies, that the measures will be safe, robust and compliant with the international rule of law. Again, it is the UK, together with the US, that has been leading that conversation in the G7.

**Sir Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): Houthi attacks on shipping are a global problem, and it is right that we acted, alongside our partners. Where close allies did not participate in those airstrikes, we still need them to act and act alongside us. Will we encourage them to redouble their efforts to interdict arms smuggling from Iran into Yemen and therefore help to degrade further the military capacity of the Houthis?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and we will continue to work with our allies. I hope he will have seen the statement put out by about a dozen of our allies after the strikes reiterating their support for what we have done. He will know that there was non-operational support from a handful of other countries, together with the much larger coalition of nations that are involved, in different ways, in Operation Prosperity Guardian. Where other countries can play a part in interdicting Iranian shipments, bringing stability to the region and protecting international shipping, we of course want to work with them. The Defence Secretary and the Foreign Secretary are having those conversations as we speak.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We live in most challenging times, with instability in the middle east, Europe and Africa. It is important that we have the right kind of leadership and response. We must make sure that our international shipping routes remain open. What is the Prime Minister's assessment of the degradation of the Houthis' capabilities after the action last week? On Ukraine, we must stand united in this House in saying that the Russians must be defeated for the aggression they have shown. We should remain together, united, in saying once again, "Slava Ukraini". Lastly, the Prime Minister talks about a sustainable settlement in Gaza. It is important that we recognise the scale of the humanitarian suffering, so may I ask him for an update on what we are doing to ensure that in Gaza we deliver peace and security, with the hope of a better world as we come through 2024?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the action in Ukraine. Let me touch on his last point, because I agree with him; we are, of course, concerned about the devastating impact of the conflict in Gaza on the civilian population—too many people have lost their lives already—and there is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support into Gaza. I am pleased that the UK is playing a leading role: we have tripled our aid. Recently, the Foreign Secretary appointed a humanitarian envoy to the region to address some of the blockages, and we delivered our first maritime shipment of aid into Egypt—more than 80 tonnes of new aid. When I spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu, I impressed upon him the importance of not only increasing the flow of trucks, but, crucially, if we can, opening up extra crossings into Gaza, so that

we can increase the flow of aid. We will continue to press on Israel to do that, so that we can bring more relief to people who are suffering a great deal.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for a clear statement. It is reported that the drones being used by the Houthis are being helped by Iran. The American Enterprise Institute has reported that Russia has given \$900 million to Iran for drones. Will the Prime Minister assure the House that we are doing everything we can in this country to make sure that none of that money is going through the UK financial system?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me tell my hon. Friend that she is right and we agree with the US assessment that Iran has directly supplied and directly supported Houthi attacks in the Red sea, providing intelligence, especially to enable their targeting of vessels, and providing them with missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. She is right to say that we should do everything we can to prevent that, and I reassure her on that. She will know about the measures we have taken over the past two years on financial transparency and beneficial ownership registers, which allow us to crack down on economic crime and money laundering. Physically, the Royal Navy is involved in interdicting shipments, as it has done successfully last year and the year before. It will continue to have a presence in the region so that we can disrupt those illegal arms flows.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a critical time internationally, but we have a staffing crisis in our Navy, so can we do more to boost the recruitment of sailors by offering science, technology, engineering and maths qualifications? When will we see our Navy back up to full strength?

**The Prime Minister:** Our Royal Navy is one of the top five in the world. It is capable of operating in all the world's oceans simultaneously and we are one of only two countries to operate fifth-generation jets from the sea, so we should be confident and proud of our Royal Navy. As I have said, we are investing in more equipment and capability going into the future. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight some of the recruitment challenges—the Defence Secretary highlighted some of them the other week—but we are doubling down on all our initiatives to ensure that our armed forces have the staff they need for the future, and that those personnel have the equipment and supplies they need to do their jobs effectively.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I fully support my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I welcome both his statement about the action he took on the Houthi and the other part of the statement about Ukraine, because we must support Ukraine and its future.

On the reality of the Houthi, we know that Iran has supported, has supplied and continues to direct the Houthi in their attacks; it supported and directed Hamas in their brutal attacks in October; and it has armed and directs Hezbollah on a regular basis and tells them what to do, through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. We understand all that, so why are we still reluctant to proscribe the IRGC, which is responsible for so much

of the co-ordination of that work? There are still two Iranian banks in the City of London feeding money to those terrible organisations.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the work he personally does in supporting Ukraine. I agree with him about the risks that Iran poses to the UK and to regional stability. We have sanctioned more than 400 Iranian individuals and entities, including the IRGC in its entirety. The National Security Act 2023 implements new measures to protect the British public—it has been described by intelligence chiefs as “game changing”—particularly in tackling espionage and foreign interference, with tougher powers to arrest and detain people suspected of involvement in state threats.

As my right hon. Friend will know, we do not routinely comment on proscription, but I hope he will have seen the statement today about our proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir, on which I know he and colleagues have rightly been focused in previous years.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind):** Some 17 million people in the region are living in hunger and food shortage, the people of Yemen have been bombarded by weapons supplied by Britain from Saudi Arabia for years, and we have a dreadful conflict going on in Gaza, where there are 30,000 people dead or missing. Where is the comprehensive plan by the western nations to try to bring about a comprehensive peace across the whole region, rather than pumping more and more weapons and money into more and more conflicts that will get worse? Does the Prime Minister have any hope for the future that there will be a lessening of conflict, rather than the present, very rapid increase in it?

**The Prime Minister:** I do have hope. As we and others take action to degrade and disrupt the capability of those who are malign actors in the region, that will give the space for positive voices to build the peace that we all want to see and to allow everyone to live side by side with dignity, security and opportunity.

The right hon. Gentleman pointed out some of the humanitarian strife that people are suffering. We should be proud of our record in this House. We have committed over £1 billion of aid to Yemen since the conflict began in 2014. We are currently providing food to at least 100,000 people every month, as well as life-saving healthcare to 400 facilities. Yemen is entirely reliant for food on imports, largely by sea. The Houthi attacks serve to prolong the humanitarian suffering of the Yemeni people and disrupt the very supply of the food that the right hon. Gentleman, I and everyone in the House wants to see delivered to those people.

**Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con):** Yemen has been close to my heart, as it has been for the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), because we were both born there. I thank the Prime Minister for all the humanitarian aid that is going there. What discussions has he had with the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council? What impact does he think the strikes will have on the fragile peace process?

**The Prime Minister:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work in the region. As a UN Security Council penholder on Yemen, the UK is continuing to use our diplomatic and political influence to support UN efforts to bring lasting peace to Yemen through an inclusive

political settlement. We support the Saudi-Houthi negotiations and, indeed, the deal that was announced in December last year by the UN special envoy for Yemen, whom my hon. Friend will know. Ministers continue to be in dialogue, particularly with our Saudi partners, so that we can try to bring to the Yemeni people the peace and stability that they deserve.

**Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** I am grateful to the Prime Minister for stating today that, with the recent strikes, the UK sought to uphold international law and seeks to protect civilians. May I ask what the Government’s strategy is to prevent escalation? Also, last week the Government confirmed that there are currently no RAF aid flights or Royal Navy deliveries planned to take essential aid into Egypt and onwards to Gaza—why?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not entirely sure that the hon. Lady is right on that. We remain committed to increasing the amount of aid that we get into Gaza. We have tripled the financial amount and, as I have said, we recently saw our first maritime shipment of aid into Egypt by the UK military ship RFA Lyme Bay. The hon. Lady will be aware that there are considerable blockages and logistical challenges on the ground, which we are working to help to resolve. That is also why we are putting pressure on the Israelis—I spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu about this—to open up additional crossings such as Kerem Shalom. That will help us to increase the flow of aid into the region, and we absolutely want to see that happen.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con):** Britain has a proud tradition of defending waterways, which is vital for all of us who care about humanitarian crises and the delivery of aid. At the moment, we are seeing Russia trying to stop the movement of grain through Turkey, and the potential of the Houthis to shut off access to the Red sea. It is vital that we keep those international waterways open, because otherwise we will face a catastrophic situation and starvation across many African countries.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, particularly about the Black sea. He will recall that Ukraine’s grain exports disproportionately go to some of the most vulnerable countries in the world. Russia started a campaign of targeting that civilian infrastructure last year. With our support, Ukraine has been able to push back the Black sea fleet and degrade Russia’s major combatant vessels. With the support of the City of London in improving the insurance for ships, we have now seen 300 ships export 10 million tonnes of cargo through the new Ukraine corridor. That highlights the importance of what my right hon. Friend said. Again, in this House, we should be proud of the leading role that the UK has had in making that possible.

**Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab):** The Houthis are an antisemitic terrorist group that have caused havoc in Yemen over the past decade, starting a civil war that has killed more than 350,000 people. Their slogan includes the lines, “Death to America, death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews”. Will the Prime Minister join me in condemning the shameful pro-Houthi chanting that we saw at many protests in the UK over the weekend?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend the hon. Lady for her remarks and I wholeheartedly agree with her. We will absolutely not tolerate that kind of language on our streets. We have been crystal clear about that. We have said to the police that they should take all decisive action against those who promote and encourage terrorism and, indeed, those who incite hatred and division on our streets. I hope the hon. Lady will have seen today's proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is another organisation that uses language similar to that she describes. Its promotion of terrorism is rooted in antisemitic ideology. I hope that gives her reassurance that we will confront this and stamp it out wherever we see it, because it is not in accordance with British values. Jewish people in this country deserve to be able to walk our streets in freedom and security.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision last week to take military action in the Red sea, and the substantial increase in aid for Ukraine. Will he take this opportunity to reiterate and make it absolutely clear that it would be utterly against the national interest, and indeed the security interests of the world, for the British Prime Minister to be hobbled in the decisions that he makes about taking military action by the need to consult in advance? Does he not agree that the responsibility that he bears is intrinsic to his seals of office and should not be given up?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. In this case, it was necessary to strike with speed and protect the security of the operations. I believe that that is in accordance with the convention and, indeed, precedent on these matters. My hon. Friend is right: the Government need to protect the security interests of the United Kingdom. That means that sometimes we have to act decisively, quickly and securely. Fundamentally, we need to maintain the prerogative powers that allow the Executive to act in such emergencies, but of course I am responsible for those decisions, I do not take them lightly, and Parliament is responsible for holding me to account for them.

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): Past mistakes in the middle east should have taught this House that military intervention that starts out as limited can quickly escalate, risking a sequence of events far larger and more terrible, and even risk dragging us into war. It is for that reason that, according to reports in *The Times*, Foreign Office officials were "incredibly nervous" about last week's military assault in Yemen. Driving the region's instability is Israel's horrifying assault on Gaza, which has now lasted more than 100 days. Rather than giving Israel the green light to continue its brutal bombardment of Gaza, and risking a wider conflict, will the Prime Minister seek to de-escalate the situation and call for an immediate ceasefire?

**The Prime Minister:** Perhaps the hon. Lady would do well to call on Hamas and the Houthis to de-escalate the situation.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Too many people give a free pass to the terrorists who perpetrated the worst murder of Jews. We have just seen an example of that, just as we saw examples of it on our streets this

weekend, where people screamed, "Yemen, Yemen, turn another ship around"—completely unacceptable. One thing that links the Houthis, Hezbollah and Hamas is their genocidal intent towards Jews and their hatred of everything that we stand for in the western democracies, which is why it is incumbent on us to defend those values. I agree with everything that the Prime Minister has said, and urge him once more to ensure that our police take action against those on our streets who openly support terrorism.

**The Prime Minister:** I reassure my hon. Friend that the police have extensive powers to arrest those who incite violence or racial hatred. Of course, we keep all laws under review. We are working with the police on whether we need to strengthen those powers, but I have been absolutely clear that there must be zero tolerance for antisemitism and any forms of racism. We will not stand by when we see it happen, and the police should ensure that those who do that face the full force of the law.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Foreign Secretary said yesterday that the purpose of the air strikes in Yemen was to send a message, but the message that we intend to send is not necessarily the message that gets received. The message seems to have been sent to many in the region that the UK is intervening in the war very clearly on the side of Israel. What plans do the Government have to manage and contain the escalation that is likely to ensue? Simply proclaiming that the activity was intended to be limited, not escalatory, does not make it so.

**The Prime Minister:** That is why we took this action as a last resort, after extensive attempts at diplomacy, including a UN Security Council resolution. The hon. Lady could help, because this Parliament could speak with one voice so that the outside world and our allies in the region know that this has nothing to do with Israel and Gaza, and everything to do with our self-defence.

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): Diverting shipping via the cape puts a financial burden on us all, none more so than the Egyptians, due to reduced traffic through the Suez canal. Will my right hon. Friend explain what discussions he has had with his Egyptian counterparts on their involvement in the multinational response?

**The Prime Minister:** I spoke to President Sisi just last week. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the economic impact on people around the world: 15% of global trade passes through this corridor, and we are already starting to see the impact of rerouting on the prices of shipping, and ultimately on the prices that British people will pay for their goods. My primary conversation with the President at the moment, though, is about increasing the flow of aid into Gaza, where Egypt is doing an extraordinary amount. We will continue to give it all the support that it needs.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said that the stated aims of this action were to degrade the capacity to strike. We have had confirmation that today another cargo ship—a US cargo ship—has been struck by a ballistic missile. There have been

explosions at the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. The Defence Secretary told the media this morning that this Government were prepared to

“take the decisions that need to be taken”

if the attacks continue. Given the news that the attacks have continued, will the Prime Minister set out what those decisions are and how he intends to involve Parliament in that process?

**The Prime Minister:** It would not be right to speculate on future action, but what I can say is that our strikes were intended to degrade the Houthi capability and, as I said, they did—initial assessments show that they effectively destroyed 13 targets at two sites, including drones, an airfield and a cruise missile launcher.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Yemen with my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), we have seen at first hand how this brutal, misogynistic, homophobic and antisemitic terrorist regime, backed by Iran, presiding over the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis and responsible for throwing tens of thousands of young men to their deaths on the frontline, have acted. Since 2022, they have benefited from a tentative ceasefire. Is this not a lesson in how sustainable ceasefires cannot be achieved with terrorist organisations unless and until they have been deprived of their arms and have succumbed to democratic legitimacy?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on Yemen. I say very simply that I agree with him and he makes an excellent point.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I appreciate why the Prime Minister is trying not to link this to Gaza, but the reality is that the longer the Gaza war goes on, the greater the instability in the middle east. It is nearly 100 days since he gave his first statement after the terrible, horrendous actions by Hamas. He justified the actions this week with regard to the protection of marine rights. In those 100 days, 7,000 Palestinian children have been killed. What effective action is he taking to protect the right to life of Palestinian children and to prevent what is, in reality, the indiscriminate killing of Palestinian children by the Israel Defence Forces?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, we are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the fighting in Gaza on the civilian population. Too many people have lost their lives already, which is why we continue to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and for civilians to be protected. It is something that I continually raise with Prime Minister Netanyahu when I speak to him, and it is why we are doing absolutely everything we can to get more aid into Gaza to help those children and everyone else affected by what is happening.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): I very much welcome this robust statement, but I agree about proscribing the IRGC. Operationally, given the continued threat to international shipping and, by extension, to our own economy, will the Prime Minister consider tasking the carrier group that is ready to deploy from Portsmouth to the Gulf? More strategically, does he agree that interruption to our global supply chains underlines the symbiotic relationship between our security

and the UK economy? If we rightly seek to play a greater role in upholding international law as our world becomes ever more contested, we need to expedite upgrading our defence posture, not least in the maritime space.

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend makes a very good point about the interconnectedness of the world. The instability that we see, whether it is in the Red sea or, indeed, the illegal war conducted in Ukraine by Russia, has had a direct impact on the economic security of British people here at home. That is why it is right that we invest in defence and protect people, and that is why I know that he will continue to engage in dialogue with the Defence Secretary about how best to deploy that extra defence investment to ensure that we have the capabilities we need.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Please resume your seats. We have already had an hour on this statement and it looks as though a considerable number of Members still wish to get in. Please ask short questions so that I can help get everyone in.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The right of innocent passage is a fundamental principle of international law and cannot be interrupted by non-state actors. However, although the Prime Minister might wish that this was not the case, international law is not a menu. It comes as a package; we cannot pick and choose which bits we want to uphold and which we want to ignore. Is he unable to see how ignoring Israel’s egregious breaches of international law in Gaza, while purporting to act in defence of it in Yemen, actually undermines international law and the rules-based order?

**The Prime Minister:** No. Israel has the right to act in self-defence against Hamas, who conducted a terrorist attack on it, and we continue to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and for civilians to be protected in that conflict.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): The House should be in no doubt that conflating issues relating to Israel and Hamas is not a mature way to look at the problem that the Prime Minister had to consider last week. He has made the right decision on the evidence, in accordance with law. Had he failed to take that action, he would have been exposed to justifiable criticism in this House. In the light of the approach that he is taking, with regard to Ukraine and the work we are doing with the Ukrainian Government, will more be done to help our friends in Ukraine to develop further their justice processes, which in the long term will improve the good governance of that independent country?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend makes an excellent point and I am pleased to tell him that the Attorney General is deeply involved in the work he suggests. We are supporting the work of the office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine in particular but, more generally, the agreement that I just signed with President Zelensky ensures our mutual commitment to helping him reform the public administration in Ukraine. That is something he is passionate about and keen to do, and he will have our support in doing it.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has heard the support for limited, targeted action against the Houthis, and I listened carefully to what he said about the efforts to prevent civilian casualties, which was unfortunately an issue I had to raise many times in relation to the previous conflict in Yemen. Can he say a bit more about what we are doing practically to ensure that strikes are tightly targeted against Houthi military capabilities? He rightly made the point that they were being done to protect civilian shipping, but can he say more about what we are doing to prevent civilian casualties?

**The Prime Minister:** Obviously, the hon. Gentleman will respect the fact that we do not comment in depth on the choice of targets, but we do use carefully calibrated intelligence, in conjunction with our military partners. The targets were selected specifically to degrade military capabilities and narrowly focused on taking out military hardware that could be used to attack commercial shipping. I can reassure him that every effort was made to minimise civilian casualties, and our initial assessment says that has been successful.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Foreign Secretary said over the weekend that the world is in the most dangerous situation it has been in for decades. The UK has seen military deployments in Ukraine, Kosovo, Guyana and now the Red sea. It is crucial to ensure that our armed forces have the appropriate support and the resources they need. The Prime Minister has said that the Government are committed to an aspiration of 2.5% spending on defence. When does he see that aspiration becoming a reality, and will the Government now look at increasing that further to 3%, in line with the Foreign Secretary's statement?

**The Prime Minister:** We have been investing in anticipation of the threats increasing, which is why at the last spending review the Ministry of Defence received a £24 billion cash increase—the largest sustained increase since the end of the cold war. Since then we have invested an extra £5 billion in increasing stockpiles and improving the sustainability of our defence nuclear enterprise. In 2025, when we have the next spending review, we will of course set out the target and the path towards 2.5%.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and assure him that the Democratic Unionist party will stand with him and with our Government in sending a clear message to those who would seek to attack either our shipping routes or our positions. We will not be silenced by those who believe that they can work in the shadows to supply Yemen, or indeed any other country, with intelligence or arms. Will he affirm that the friendship and approach between the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, Canada and many other nations remains strong enough to stand together against any attempt to undermine our current position?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. He is right about the importance of working with our allies. He will have seen that all the countries he mentioned are joint signatories to the statement that was put out in advance and after the strikes.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Of course we have a right to defend ourselves, and of course sinister forces, such as the Houthis and Iran, are exploiting these tensions, but as we have influence on the Americans because we step up to the mark, can my right hon. Friend work with the American President to ensure that, just as he is completely vigorous in defending Israel and its right to exist, he is even as vigorous in defending the right of the Palestinian people to their own state, in peace and justice, without a settlement being imposed on them every week?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to my right hon. Friend that we want to see the long-term future of a two-state solution where Palestinian and Israeli people can live side by side in security and freedom, and with dignity and opportunity. That is the future that we are all striving for, and the events of the past few months have just reminded us that we need to double our efforts on making that happen.

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): I regard with the utmost seriousness the threat posed by Houthi forces to mariners in the Red sea, but does the Prime Minister accept that upholding the right to freedom of navigation in the region is an international challenge that should be dealt with through international diplomacy aimed principally at securing a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza, and that, by joining US-led military action without reference to the UN, we are in danger of exacerbating the threat posed to British citizens by terrorism?

**The Prime Minister:** Again, the hon. Gentleman has wrongly linked and conflated the situation in Israel and Gaza with the illegal attacks by the Houthis on innocent commercial shipping. That is simply wrong. As I pointed out in my statement, extensive diplomatic avenues had been pursued before military action was taken as a last resort, including a UN Security Council resolution.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for his action. He has acted clearly on robust legal advice, and the legal position in international law is surely clear. Does he agree, first, that it is unhelpful—and frankly dangerous—to make bogus comparisons; and secondly, that the greatest risk of escalation going forward will be in failing to act robustly when clear and egregious breaches of international law take place?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with everything my hon. Friend says. He is absolutely right that there is a risk in inaction. To have done nothing in the face of these attacks would have been to damage the security of our people and our interests.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to protecting the fundamental tenets of international law and upholding the fundamental principles of the United Nations, but is it equally as distinct and limited to this action as it is to all other situations?

**The Prime Minister:** I did not completely follow what the hon. Gentleman said, but I said that our actions in this case were specific to the case at hand. We acted in self-defence because there were escalating attacks from

the Houthis and defiance of international diplomacy. It was right that we took action to protect the security and interests of our people.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Given the global shortage of basic ammunition, artillery rounds and air defence systems and missiles, is it not time that we upscaled our industrial defence capacity so that we can continue to support our friends in Ukraine and replenish our own stocks?

**The Prime Minister:** That is an excellent point. In a word, yes. That is why we have invested £2.5 billion in rebuilding our stockpiles. Beyond the money, we do need to build our defence industrial capability. That is a challenge shared across NATO that I have discussed extensively with partners, including the NATO Secretary-General. Of course, part of our agreement with Ukraine is how we can mutually help to support and grow our defence industrial complexes.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): The death and destruction in Gaza is intolerable. Well over 20,000 children and innocent civilians have already been killed by Israeli forces, more than 100 Israeli hostages are still held by Hamas, and there is the real risk of an escalating wider regional conflict. We desperately need an end to the violence, so can the Prime Minister explain exactly what diplomatic progress he has achieved towards securing a sustainable ceasefire and peace in Gaza?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for being, I think, the first Member on the Opposition Benches to remind the House that Hamas still holds 100 Israeli hostages—it is good that he pointed that out. He is right: we are continuing to do everything we can to bring about that sustainable ceasefire, including working with the Qataris and others to secure the release of hostages and put more aid into Gaza, because I want to see what the hon. Gentleman wants to see. No one wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer; it must be a sustainable ceasefire, and that is what we will work hard to bring about.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The International Atomic Energy Agency recently confirmed that Iran is once again ramping up its uranium enrichment activity to near weapons grade, so in welcoming today's statement and the action we have taken, I also urge my right hon. Friend to give the House his assurance that he and his counterparts among our allies are not losing sight of the really big question about whether Iran should be allowed to have a nuclear weapon. Has he considered whether it is the right time to activate the snap-back sanctions provisions of the joint comprehensive plan of action?

**The Prime Minister:** That is an excellent point. There is absolutely no credible civilian justification for enrichment at the levels that the IAEA has reported in Iran. We are determined that Iran must not develop a nuclear weapon, and we are actively considering next steps with our international partners. That means all diplomatic tools, including—as my right hon. Friend said—using the snap-back mechanism if necessary.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): We all stand behind Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, but does the Prime Minister accept that if we believe

that the UK's security is important in relation to Ukraine, we are giving relatively less than other countries such as Germany? Can and should we be doing more?

**The Prime Minister:** We should be proud of our record. We have been one of the largest contributors to the effort in Ukraine, but it is also important to recognise that we have consistently been the first country to act, and that has galvanised others. That is an important role that the Ukrainians especially recognise. I went through the capabilities that was true for, but again, crucially, we were the first country out of the 30 that promised to sign a security commitment. As others follow, that will enhance and improve Ukraine's deterrent against Russia, and that is something we should be proud of.

**Matt Hancock** (West Suffolk) (Ind): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister is in the Chamber, opening himself up to democratic scrutiny, but I also welcome the fact that he took the decision to act—took that heavy duty and responsibility—before coming to this House. It is folly to ask for a vote in advance of action, and it is in the interests of our national security that the Prime Minister can act. That precedent goes a long way back, well before the precedents he has cited of 2015 and 2018. It is the constitutional basis on which we defend ourselves as a country.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his support and his comments. He is right that this is not a decision I took lightly, and right to point out that publicising an action like this in advance could undermine its effectiveness and risk lives. Of course, it is Parliament's responsibility to hold me to account for such decisions, but it is my responsibility as Prime Minister to make those decisions.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister may not be aware—perhaps he is—that I am not the greatest expert on international relations, but I was born on 17 August 1940, when the German bombs were falling all over and I was sheltering in a shelter. I have been a Labour friend of Israel ever since I went to the London School of Economics, but I do not trust Netanyahu's Government, although I do support the limited action that the Prime Minister has announced. As someone who was born in the blitz, I care very deeply about actions that might lead to an even greater conflagration in the middle east. That is the danger—it seems to me that it is exactly what Putin and Iran want. Please, let us be careful in our steps, although I do support this limited action.

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments, and reassure him that the action we took was—I believe—necessary, but it was limited, proportionate, and in keeping with international law. That is the approach we will always take in such matters.

**Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): This year, I was proud to once again celebrate Christmas and new year with Huddersfield and Colne Valley's vibrant Ukrainian community, just as I have done for many years. They told me first hand how proud and appreciative they are of the UK's steadfast support for Ukraine. Will the Prime Minister continue to make the case, not only

[Jason McCartney]

to the British people but to our NATO and international allies, for why we must make sure, alongside Ukraine, that Putin's evil aggression does not succeed, and remind people of what the dire consequences would be if it ever did?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If Putin were to succeed, it would not just embolden him, but embolden our adversaries around the world, and that is why it is important that we continue to invest in Ukraine. As I say to all our allies, an investment in Ukraine's security is ultimately an investment in our security, and that is why we must stand with it for as long as it takes.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Government of Japan clearly brought the resolution to the UN last week for specific reasons, and it was a very detailed resolution that was voted on. One part of it, which they think is extremely important, is the part to deal with the "root causes" of the conflict in relation to Yemen. Can I give the Prime Minister an opportunity to reflect again on the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn): what is the Government's plan now to play a part in the ending of that conflict? What comes next?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said previously, we are supportive of the Saudi-Houthi negotiations and of the deal announced in December by the UN special envoy. We have been in dialogue specifically with the Saudis on this issue, and we continue to want to see a lasting peace in Yemen brought through an inclusive political settlement.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his decisive action. The threat posed by Houthi rebels to global trade demonstrates the importance of maintaining well-resourced armed forces on land, at sea and in the air. Given the current challenges in recruitment and retention of service personnel, will my right hon. Friend consider further support for cadet units, such as the excellent ones at Ilkeston and Long Eaton in my constituency, to ensure that we have a trained supply of recruits who are ready and willing to serve?

**The Prime Minister:** May I say to hon. Friend that that is an excellent idea, and I pay tribute to all her local cadets for the incredible job they do? I am sure the whole House will have experience of that in their own constituencies. I can say that we are introducing a number of ways to improve recruitment in the armed forces and look at more innovative ways to attract people into it, and I know the Defence Secretary will have heard what she said with interest.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): Military action in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, in which the UK has played a part, has frequently resulted in unintended consequences, triggering further cycles of conflict in and around these countries. Will the Prime Minister accept that the US and the UK bombing Yemen risks escalating tensions at a time when violence is spreading in the middle east, and will he commit to allowing Parliament to vote on any further action?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the hon. Lady's characterisation of what we did was not right. It was not bombing Yemen; it was taking targeted, limited action against Houthi military sites that were launching attacks on civilian shipping. As hon. Members have said, it is also worth pointing out the risks of inaction, which she failed to mention, because doing nothing would send a dangerous message that British vessels, British interests and British lives are fair game, and that would be unacceptable.

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the action he has taken and for the leadership he has shown. Can he tell the House what discussions he has had with key influencers and key allies in the region such as Qatar, Egypt and others that have played a prominent part in seeking to de-escalate tensions in the area?

**The Prime Minister:** I can reassure my right hon. Friend that I and both the Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary are having those conversations. I spoke to President Sisi recently and, indeed, all other leaders in the middle east towards the end of last year. As we speak, the Foreign Secretary is engaged, together with his colleagues, in extensive dialogue to make sure our allies and partners understand what we did and why, and that we remain committed to seeing a peaceful future for everyone living in the middle east.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency have been denied access to a Russian-occupied Ukrainian nuclear power station for two weeks and have not yet received 2024 maintenance plans for the facility. Can the Prime Minister tell me what assessment the UK Government have made of that situation?

**The Prime Minister:** I think that just highlights Russia's continuing malignant activity, which serves to cause everyone alarm, particularly when it comes to the security of nuclear power. The IAEA must have free access to all the sites it needs to, and it has been a long-standing concern that it has not been able to have that. We continue to call out Russian behaviour at the UN and elsewhere, and that is what we will do to make sure that it is accountable.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): The freedom of navigation is an uncontested right, whether it is in the South China sea or the gulf of Aden. Before I was in this place, I was a shipping broker. Could the Prime Minister reassure the shipping industry, of which London remains one of the foremost capitals, that we will be able to lay on more support with armed convoys through the gulf of Aden and into the Red sea, and that we will supply as much reassurance as possible and equipment for the maritime protection force that has been mentioned by others?

**The Prime Minister:** I hope my hon. Friend will have seen the welcome response from the shipping industry and leading shipping companies, which have welcomed the action we have taken to restore security to the region. We are members of Prosperity Guardian, which is something the shipping industry is keen to see, so that we can bring that safety of transit for all their clients. We will be in regular dialogue with them, as the Transport Secretary has been, in the coming days and weeks.



**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Since the outbreak of war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, as well as the crisis in shipping security, which has now led to the UK military response to protect British interests, fighting between Hezbollah and Israel has been intensifying, risking a wider escalation engulfing Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and other countries. Can the Prime Minister be more specific and tell the House exactly what he is doing, working with the US and regional partners, to bring an end to the war in Gaza and to stop a full-blown regional conflict, which we are all very concerned about?

**The Prime Minister:** We are calling on Hamas and using our influence with their partners in the region to release hostages, and we are making sure we get as much aid into Gaza in the interim, because we know there is a need for it. We are concerned by the impact being caused, and the UK is playing a leading role in alleviating the suffering.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his clear statement on this necessary military action in Yemen. Can I join him in paying tribute to our brave armed forces? Can he reaffirm that this action is important for protecting freedom of navigation and the safety of shipping, which has direct and indirect impacts on world trade and the UK economy?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the impact of what is happening in the Red sea on British families at home. Some 15% of global trade passes through this corridor, and as we are seeing, if that has to reroute, it will have a direct consequence on the prices that British families pay. As we saw with the Ukraine and Russia situation, we cannot ignore what is happening. We need to act to protect British people and ensure their economic security.

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Of course the Houthi rebels must stop their attacks in the Red sea. The Prime Minister was correct in his statement to speak of the dire humanitarian crisis in Yemen. He has spoken at the Dispatch Box today about the aid delivery to Yemen, yet he failed to mention that under successive Conservative Governments humanitarian aid to Yemen has fallen since 2018, both as a cash figure and as a proportion of official development assistance. If the Prime Minister accepts that there is a humanitarian crisis—not just in Yemen, but across the globe in Gaza, Ethiopia and other countries—will his Government return to 0.7%? That move would be supported by Members from all parts of the House.

**The Prime Minister:** We are the fifth largest donor to the UN appeal in Yemen, with a billion pounds since the conflict started. We are providing food to at least 100,000 people every month. It is a record that we should be proud of, where the UK again is leading by example and making an enormous difference around the world.

**Mr Jonathan Djanogly** (Huntingdon) (Con): Since 1875, the Royal Navy has had the key objective of keeping the Suez canal open for commercial shipping, so this action should have come as a surprise to no one, and I commend the Prime Minister on his decisive action in that regard. However, listening to the statement today, I am not

hearing much of a connection with Gaza. What I am hearing again and again in questions is connections to Iran. It is easy to look at the symptoms, but the causes also need to be looked at. Will my right hon. Friend be working with our international allies to deal with the question of Iran?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the linkage is with the behaviour of the Iranian regime. We agree with the US assessments, and I can reassure him that we are working closely with partners. Obviously, we are taking steps to protect ourselves here at home with the National Security Act 2023 and other measures, but internationally we want to see Iran's influence on the region create less instability. That is why, for example, our interdiction of illegal arms shipments is so important, and we will remain actively engaged on how we can do more.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Clearly we could not ignore attacks on international shipping, and we were right to act with international partners. We must continue to work to broaden that partnership in dealing with the situation as we go forward. Having said that, can the Prime Minister say how we measure success with this limited engagement? How do we deem it to be safe for international shipping to return to the Red sea? What is the end plan?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. On its merits, as I said, our initial assessment is that we have been successful in destroying the specific targets that were selected, but that remains an initial assessment. We want to see what he spoke about: a return of safe shipping to the region. The Transport Secretary is engaging regularly with companies about their passage, and we will continue to do everything we can, working together with our allies, to ensure that safe passage through the region.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): The Iranian-backed Houthis are a terrorist group who have killed hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and are fighting the internationally recognised Government in Yemen. The action that the UK took with allies last week was absolutely correct. What further efforts are the Government making to augment the already impressive international coalition, with more countries stepping up and playing their part, to ensure freedom of navigation, which is so important for global free trade?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we will continue to engage diplomatically to broaden that coalition. As he knows, 14 countries have signed the statement—the UN Security Council resolution—but ultimately everybody is impacted when freedom of navigation is imperilled as it is, not just through the security of their citizens, but because of the shock to their domestic economies from higher inflation. So I am confident that we will continue to have a broad coalition for condemning what the Houthis are doing and calling on them to desist.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): After the horrific events of 7 October, the Prime Minister told the House that the UK was working to prevent escalation. He said: “we are increasing our presence to prevent broader regional instability at this dangerous moment.”—[*Official Report*, 16 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 24.]

[Chris Law]

Yet in the following months, nearly 24,000 Palestinians have been killed, and there has been cross-border fighting with Hezbollah, air raids in Lebanon and Syria, and now Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red sea, resulting in US and UK strikes in Yemen. Does he accept that the attempts to prevent escalation and broader instability are failing, that the cycle of violence must stop, and that that requires an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and an end to the indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza?

**The Prime Minister:** In Gaza, no one wants to see the conflict go on a moment longer than is necessary. We support a ceasefire, but it must be a sustainable ceasefire that will last. That is what we will continue to work to bring about.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister, who was right to act with force, determination and firepower against the Houthi terrorists to protect international shipping and keep the Red sea shipping lanes open. With the recent deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland opening up the real possibility of international and regional recognition of Somaliland as an independent country, which would help to enable stability in the horn of Africa, the southern end of the Red sea and the Gulf of Aden, does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK should follow Ethiopia's example and start the process to recognise Somaliland as a sovereign, independent country?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank hon. Friend for his support of our action. He will know that the Foreign Office and Ministers are regularly engaged with our partners in Africa. What we want to do is bring prosperity and security to the region, and we will continue to dialogue with everyone to ensure that that happens.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Having been born in Aden, I am obviously saddened that the democratic and humanitarian crisis in Yemen over the last nine years has not provoked such an active response against the Houthis. Who advised the Prime Minister not to come to Parliament? How will he ensure that the peace agreement in Yemen is actively and vigorously monitored and pursued?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, we support the Saudi-Houthi negotiations and the deal announced in December by the UN special envoy on Yemen. I urge the Houthis to stop jeopardising the best chance of peace in Yemen in years and engage constructively, so that we can expand the benefits that the truce has brought to the Yemeni people. Of course, we need to see progress from them on that. Once that is done, hopefully all of us can look forward to a brighter future for the Yemeni people.

**Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): There are credible reports that the Houthis, who launched missiles at HMS Diamond and the ships of our American allies, were trained in their use in Iran by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC is therefore a direct threat to our servicemen and women, just as for many years it has been a threat to British citizens on the streets of the United Kingdom. I heard what my right hon. Friend said about the sanctions that have been applied to the IRGC,

but may I urge him to recognise that now is the time to proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, because that is what it is?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with my right hon. Friend about the destabilising influence of the Iranian regime. We will continue to work constructively with our allies to ensure that we do not just protect our citizens at home, but reduce and degrade Iran's ability to destabilise the region further.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's announcement on funding for Ukraine and the UK-Ukraine security co-operation agreement, which, in line with the NATO-Ukraine commission's programme, focuses now on increasing Ukraine's defence industrial base and ensuring that it can provide long-term assistance against Russia's aggression. Can he tell us what discussions he had with President Zelensky about exactly how both Government and UK manufacturers will be involved in implementing that in full?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the necessity of doing that. It was a feature of our conversations last week, but we also facilitated a visit by some of our leading defence companies to Ukraine at the end of last year to further the co-operation between our two countries. There is a path forward to see how we can build that—to build the defence industrial base in Ukraine to help it to defend itself in future.

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I associate myself with all the comments made by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition on the commitment to root out antisemitism. It is unacceptable for British Jews to be held responsible for the actions of Israel as a Government, as is the idea that they can have any effect on the Israeli Prime Minister or his Cabinet. In the same vein, given the rise of Islamophobia, it has been a new low and a painful blow today for the Prime Minister to say to a British Muslim in this House, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), that she should tell Hamas and the Houthis to stop doing what they are doing. That is an Islamophobic trope. Maybe the Prime Minister will reflect, withdraw and take the opportunity to show leadership and apologise. Coming back to the question, the Government—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. I think the hon. Lady has asked a question.

**The Prime Minister:** I have said to all Members consistently not to conflate these conflicts and, when calling on the UK to de-escalate tensions, to recognise that the people causing these situations in the first place are the Hamas terrorist organisation and the Houthis. It has nothing to do with anything other than recognising the instigators of this violence and illegality, and ensuring that that is uppermost in everybody's minds when we have these conversations about the best way to respond.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Can we focus on the questions, please?

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Only a handful of MPs have had the chance to scrutinise the Foreign Secretary since his appointment last year. In fact, news presenters have had more opportunities to

scrutinise him than we have. Parliament is supposed to be sovereign, and we must be able to scrutinise major decisions, such as last week's air strikes. What steps is the Prime Minister taking to ensure that we in this House can scrutinise the Foreign Secretary, and debate and vote on military action?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has made regular statements over the past couple of months on foreign affairs. I am here answering questions about last week's actions, and the Procedure Committee is actively looking at how we ensure proper accountability and scrutiny—I gave evidence on that particular topic to the Liaison Committee in December.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** We must support the recognised Yemeni Government, not least by helping them to address the huge problems of malnutrition and hunger. The Government have slashed aid by almost £200 million. The Prime Minister has already answered several questions on humanitarian aid, but will he reverse the cuts to the aid budget to address the human suffering in Yemen, which only fuels the success of the Houthi terrorists?

**The Prime Minister:** I was proud that we hosted a food security summit, which was warmly welcomed by vulnerable countries last year. Perhaps the hon. Lady could tell the House how she would propose to pay for the £5 billion increase in the aid budget that she proposes.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** While the Prime Minister has clarified that the strikes in Yemen are disassociated from Gaza, the Iranian arc has drawn a different conclusion, not least as the strikes took place the same day as the International Court of Justice case brought by South Africa. We know that the only way forward is de-escalation. Given that assaults continue on the merchant navy, and assaults in Gaza continued over the weekend, when will the Prime Minister condemn Israel's attacks on civilians and call for an immediate ceasefire?

**The Prime Minister:** I have addressed that previously. With regard to South Africa's referral of Israel to the ICJ, that development is unhelpful. We do not agree with it and I do not believe it is right. As we have previously stated, Israel has a right to take action in self-defence against Hamas. It is important that it does that in accordance with international humanitarian law, and we will continue to make that point to it.

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** We are now in a very dangerous moment, when the war in Gaza risks spreading into a much wider and even more deadly war across the middle east. There is a real risk that our country will find itself in yet another war in the middle east that it cannot get out of easily. To avoid any wider war, do we not now need an emphasis on de-escalation and diplomatic efforts? Does the need to seek such a wider diplomatic solution not make it more urgent to be pushing for a ceasefire in Gaza?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, no one wants to see the conflict in Gaza go on a moment longer than is necessary. We support a ceasefire, but it must be a sustainable

ceasefire that will last. That means Hamas no longer in power in Gaza and no longer able to threaten Israel with rocket attacks and other forms of terrorism. Hamas simply do not represent the Palestinian people's legitimate aspirations.

**Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab):** Some in the House may recall that one of my constituents was held captive by the Houthis for five years, simply for being in possession of a British passport. The House will know that we were able to get him safely returned, but we should be under no illusions about the nature of the Houthis. May I re-emphasise the importance of minimising civilian casualties in any action the UK is involved with? Will the Prime Minister impress that not only on our highly professional armed forces, but our partners in any further action taken by the UK?

**The Prime Minister:** I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. Again, our initial assessment is that we were successful in minimising civilian casualties in this case.

**Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD):** There are times when a Government need to take military action without the approval of Parliament, including for operational security or the element of surprise. However, last week's strikes were signalled very plainly in the media. The strikes could have been debated, voted on and supported by this House in advance of action. Tomorrow, I will table a Bill that would require parliamentary approval for the engagement of UK armed forces in armed conflict, even if it is retrospective. Will the Prime Minister support it?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, it was necessary to act with speed to allow our armed forces to maintain the vital security of their operations and to ensure their effectiveness. I believe that that is in accordance with the convention on the deployment of military force. As I said previously, we must maintain the prerogative powers that allow the Executive to act in such emergencies, but I am here in Parliament to explain the action in full and take responsibility for it.

**Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op):** The Prime Minister, earlier in his statement, said that the Houthis were aided by Iranian military intelligence assets to target British shipping. Does that mean that the UK Government consider Iranian military intelligence assets to be legitimate targets for future military strikes?

**The Prime Minister:** I think what I said was that we agree with the US assessment that Iran supported Houthi attacks and provided intelligence in a general sense to enable Houthi targeting of vessels. I have talked about the destabilising influence of Iran in the region and the threat it poses to the UK. That is why we have taken significant and decisive action to protect ourselves against that threat and will continue to work with our allies to restrain its malign influence.

**Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** As much as the Houthis might wish to conflate their piracy with support for the Palestinian people,

[Debbie Abrahams]

their indiscriminate attacks on shipping from across the world indicate otherwise. But while I agree that under international law there was justification for this military intervention, what was the Prime Minister's assessment of the risk that the action could ignite conflict across the middle east, and of apparent double standards in when the UK or its allies choose to observe international law?

**The Prime Minister:** We always strive to ensure that we comply with international law, as we did in this case, but we should also recognise the risks of inaction. Doing nothing would very clearly weaken international security and the rule of law, and damage freedom of navigation and the global economy. Crucially, it would send a very dangerous message: that British vessels, British lives and British interests are fair game. That is not something we could allow to stand.

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): In his statement, the Prime Minister told us that one of his motives was the ordinary people of Yemen. He said that the Houthis' attacks risked worsening the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen itself, before patting himself on the back over the number of people the UK helps to feed in Yemen. He is not wrong about the Houthis, but surely the cuts in the international aid budget pose the biggest threat to Yemen and the people of Yemen. Two years ago, the Government cut it from £221 million a year to £81 million—an eye-watering cut. Will the Prime Minister restore that aid, and if not, does he understand why we in the SNP remain unconvinced of his motives?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said, we are proudly one of the largest contributors of aid to Yemen. It is the Houthis who, by disrupting shipping, are disrupting the very supplies of food that are necessary to feed their people. When it comes to increasing the aid budget, I took the decision I did because I believed it was in our country's best interests, given its financial situation post covid. We now know that Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom economy, so perhaps the hon. Lady can explain to the British people what taxes she would increase to pay for an increase in the aid budget.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister is right to say that there is a consequence of inaction just as there is a consequence of action, and clearly the Houthis gave no alternative to the response that has come from the UK and our allies. However, the Prime Minister also said—incredibly, I thought—that their attacks on shipping were completely unrelated to the appalling civil war in Yemen, for which they are entirely responsible and which has claimed nearly 380,000 lives. Surely the attacks had everything to do with that conflict.

There is a concern that the Houthis' political position has been strengthened inside Yemen and beyond as a result of the actions on both sides. What assessment has the Prime Minister made of the impact of these actions on the peace process, and can he spell out not what we have done and been involved in, but what more we will do to achieve a political solution and a political settlement in Yemen?

**The Prime Minister:** What I said was that our response was not linked to the conflict in Gaza and should not be conflated as being so. As I have said, we are the penholder on Yemen in the UN Security Council, so we are having extensive diplomatic engagement with allies, notably the Saudis, to see whether we can support the deal that was announced in December, and we will continue to do so. Obviously, the onus is on the Houthis to engage with that process to bring about peace and stability for the people of Yemen.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Nothing angers me more than those who choose to use the plight of the Palestinians to further their own nefarious ends. That applies to Iran primarily, but also to its proxies. Does the Prime Minister accept that the best way to pull the rug from under the Iranian regime is to achieve that two-state solution by way of an immediate bilateral ceasefire in this conflict?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said previously, we do support a ceasefire but it must be sustainable, and multiple things have to happen for it to be so. As I have also said previously, we remain committed to a two-state solution, because I believe in a future—as do the Government and, I think, the House—in which Palestinian and Israeli people can live side by side in peace and security and in which everyone can live their lives with dignity and opportunity. That is the future that we are striving to build.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's remarks about the situation in Ukraine and our commitment in that regard. However, the escalation and conflagration of the situation in the middle east, which has seen 23,000 deaths of civilians including children, is not only shocking but is now extending to a crisis of other nations and across the world. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to see a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza, and that ultimately, 30 years on from the Oslo accords, we have to see a "land for peace" negotiated deal?

**The Prime Minister:** No one wants to see this conflict go on a moment longer than is necessary. We support a ceasefire, but it must be a sustainable ceasefire that will last. That means Hamas releasing hostages, but also no longer being able to threaten Israel with rocket attacks and other forms of terrorism. In the meantime, we will do everything we can to get more aid into Gaza.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is obvious that the longer the conflict in Gaza goes on, the more innocent civilian casualties there will be and the greater the risk of wider escalation in the region. Is it not the case that if the UK is to be seen as an honest broker, the Prime Minister, as well as rightly condemning Hamas, needs to call out Israel for clear breaches of humanitarian law and call for an immediate ceasefire? With actors such as China now calling for an international conference to set a timetable for a two-state solution, would it not be better if the UK were doing something constructive to get that two-state solution in place?

**The Prime Minister:** We continue to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and for civilians to be protected. Too many civilians have been killed and, as I have made clear, Israel should do more to ensure that its campaign is targeted on Hamas leaders and their operatives.

**Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Farea Al-Muslimi, a research fellow at Chatham House, has argued that the attacks on Yemen will have the opposite effect of instigating a widened Houthi campaign, including attacks on US and UK installations across the Arabian peninsula. If the Houthi operations continue as they have done in the last couple of days, and if the UK and US military responses persist, what is the endgame? How much death and destruction is this country risking if we do not prioritise the cessation of military action not only in Yemen and the Red sea but, crucially, in Gaza, the west bank and Israel?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady talks about the cessation of military action in the Red sea, but it is the Houthis who are conducting illegal strikes on civilian shipping. To do nothing in the face of that would be to weaken our security and leave British interests and lives at risk.

**Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): We have seen from earlier events in Iraq, Libya and elsewhere that military intervention by the United Kingdom and United States has resulted in destabilisation and subsequent civil wars, with massive loss of civilian life. What, if any, diplomatic efforts is the Prime Minister making to prevent this from happening in Yemen?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have pointed out, 14 countries signed a statement earlier this year calling on the Houthis to desist from what they were doing and saying that there would be consequences, and we have had a UN Security Council resolution condemning Houthi activity and noting the right of states to act in self-defence. That is what we did: we acted in a proportionate and necessary way following the direct threat to UK vessels and therefore to the UK itself.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Many people are deeply worried about the escalation of hostilities and the growing instability across the region. There must be an accelerated determination to bring about an urgently needed ceasefire in Gaza and hostage release. If the bombing does not deter the awful actions of the Houthi rebels, what is the Prime Minister's plan B?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said, in all cases there is a risk of inaction in the face of attacks on civilian lives and British interests, and it would have been wrong to do nothing. There has been extensive diplomatic activity and this military action was limited, proportionate, necessary and in self-defence. I believe that that was the right course of action, and to do nothing would have been wrong.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Prime Minister rightly said that we must condemn the Houthis and their illegal strikes on innocent civilians to protect the rule of law, so will he also condemn Israel's illegal strikes against innocent civilians, including 10,000 dead children, to protect the self-same rule of law?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said repeatedly, we are deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the fighting in Gaza on the civilian population. Too many

people have lost their lives already and there is a desperate need to increase humanitarian support to Gaza. That is what we are doing, as well as calling on Israel to abide by international humanitarian law and do everything it can to protect civilian life.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is greater conflict in the middle east now than there has been for many years—in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, as well as in Yemen, Israel and Palestine—much of it stoked by hostile actors. The Prime Minister has told us what his military response is, but what specific diplomatic initiative is he pursuing to promote Britain's historic role to achieve peace in the middle east?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman will know that I was one of the first foreign leaders to visit the region after the attacks, and I met all the leaders from across the region, including all the Arab states and President Abbas from the Palestinian Authority. We are working with them to make sure they have the capability for a post-Gaza future and on how best to deliver that, as well as working with other Arab partners on increasing the supply of aid and to work towards a more peaceful long-term future.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Prime Minister is right to point to the consequences for all our constituents of the Houthis' direct attacks on shipping. He is also right to talk about the dangers of inaction, but can I add my voice to those who have pointed to our inaction in this place towards the Islamic Revolutionary Guard? We now see the malign hand of Iran throughout the middle east, creating situation after situation. Does the Prime Minister not think the time has come to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation?

**The Prime Minister:** We do not comment on proscription decisions, but I agree with the hon. Lady that the behaviour of the Iranian regime, including the IRGC, poses a significant threat to the safety and security of the UK and our allies. That is why we have sanctioned over 400 individuals, including the IRGC in its entirety. We have passed new laws such as the National Security Act to give us the powers we need to keep us safe, and we will continue to work closely with allies to make sure we implement the most effective ways of reducing Iran's malign influence in the region.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The Prime Minister has emphasised throughout this urgent statement that our action was not an act of escalation, but surely the key determinant of that is how it is perceived by forces in the middle east and by the wider Arab population. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt—countries we would not describe as anti-western in any way—have all expressed varying degrees of concern. Is the Prime Minister not worried that many of the key players in the region view the military action as escalatory?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not believe that we can outsource our foreign policy to the perception in other countries. We should recognise the risks of inaction. To do nothing, as I said, would be to weaken international security and the rule of law. It would further damage freedom of navigation and the global economy, including

[The Prime Minister]

for British families. Crucially, to do nothing would send a dangerous message that British vessels, British interests and British lives are fair game. That would be completely unacceptable, which is why it is right that we acted.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for five minutes short of two hours.

## Points of Order

5.27 pm

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In line with the House's rules, I informed the Member in question that I would be referencing him.

In the statement, the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) implied that I had given a "free pass" to the terrorists who carried out the 7 October attacks. That claim is grotesquely untrue. My question to the Prime Minister in no way had that implication. I was calling for de-escalation in the region and for an immediate ceasefire, so the hon. Gentleman's accusation is absolutely untrue. In this House and elsewhere, I have repeatedly condemned the actions of Hamas and called for the release of all hostages. Moreover, his gross accusation plays to a racist trope by implying that, because I am a Muslim, I support Hamas. With rising Islamophobia and racist tropes asking British Muslims to prove their loyalty, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I ask you for guidance on how to get a full retraction and an apology from the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole?

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As loth as I am to engage in this silliness, let me be absolutely clear to the hon. Lady that not only did I not reference her, but I have on numerous occasions—[*Interruption.*] If she will listen to my response, I have said on numerous occasions that too many people have failed to call out what I think is unacceptable behaviour. I have said that before, and I am not going to stop saying that, on occasion, I think people have given a free pass to this behaviour and have not dealt with it with a fair hand. That is an open point of debate. I have called out people on my own side for that—[*Interruption.*] Will she listen to me? It has absolutely nothing to do with this.

I do not want to engage in this silliness, but I say to the hon. Lady that I have absolutely no intention of implying that she is any way—[*Interruption.*] Let me respond. I have no intention of implying that she in any way supports that. I am sure she does not, I did not say that and I would never say it. However, I am also not going to not say what I think in this House or to stop calling people out. On this issue, I think too many people in this place are giving a free pass to one side while not acknowledging the horrors that the other side suffered.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I will allow that, on both sides, to stand on the record.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on the parliamentary convention regarding the deployment of UK armed forces for armed conflict. The Prime Minister will have heard the consternation from across the House about MPs having a say on this deployment of troops in the Red sea. There is a convention, forged in the fire of the Iraq war debates, that this House should have its say in advance of any military action. That was confirmed on the Floor of the House in 2011—under the then Prime Minister, now the Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron—when the then Leader of the House said:

"We propose to observe that convention except when there is an emergency and such action would not be appropriate."—[*Official Report*, 10 March 2011; Vol. 524, c. 1066.]

We were told for weeks that these strikes were about to happen, so this was not an emergency. The Prime Minister mentioned a process in 2015, which I presume was to do with Iraq. However, in that justification, which again was given on the Floor of the House, the Minister said that it was not military action. In fact, it is only the 2018 lack of vote and debate that is the aberration since 2002. So my question is this: does this Prime Minister observe that convention? What is the guidance for this House? What is the process to ensure that we can hold the Government to account on this matter, which should have urgent consideration?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for advance notice of it. Since 2011, the Government have recognised the convention that before troops are committed this House should have an opportunity to debate the matter. The Government have undertaken, in the Cabinet manual and in statements to this House, to observe that convention, except when there is an emergency and such action would not be appropriate. It is for the Government to explain to the House why prior parliamentary authorisation was not appropriate in this case. As she will have heard, the Prime Minister was asked directly by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) about pre-authorisation and the House heard his response to that question.

## BILL PRESENTED

### AIRPORTS (PROHIBITION OF NIGHT FLIGHTS) BILL

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

Sarah Olney, supported by John McDonnell, Andy Slaughter, Munira Wilson, Christine Jardine, Dr Rupa Huq and Ed Davey, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of prohibiting scheduled flights from landing or taking off between the hours of 11pm and 6am.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 78).*

## THE SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

*Ordered,*

That the Speaker have leave of absence on Tuesday 16 January to attend the memorial service of the Right Honourable the Baroness Boothroyd, former Speaker of this House.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

## Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill (Instruction)

*Bill to be considered in Committee*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Before the House resolves itself into Committee, I draw Members' attention to the instruction motion on the Order Paper, in the name of Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, to allow the Committee to make provision for the whole of the United Kingdom. The motion is subject to selection by the Chair, and the Speaker has decided to select it. I call Sammy Wilson to move the motion.

5.33 pm

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** I beg to move,

That it be an Instruction to the Committee on the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill, That the Committee have leave to make provision for the whole of the United Kingdom.

First, let me thank Mr Speaker for selecting this motion, and the Clerk for the help and advice that has been given. The reason for tabling the motion is that the Bill, as it makes clear, applies only to the export of animals from Great Britain and does not include Northern Ireland, so an important piece of animal welfare legislation will not apply to the whole of the United Kingdom. A significant part of the UK will be excluded, because a significant number of animal exports come from Northern Ireland.

That exclusion is important, because the most likely source of exports of animals that will suffer as a result of long journeys is Northern Ireland. As a result of the exclusion of Northern Ireland from the Bill, animals can be taken from Northern Ireland, exported through the Irish Republic, taken on a 23-hour boat journey to the European mainland and then carried down to the south of Spain, France or further abroad. The degree of suffering that animals are likely to experience as a result of the exclusion of Northern Ireland from the Bill is very severe, yet the whole point of the Bill is to reduce animal suffering and ensure that live exports, which could lead to animal suffering, do not happen.

Let me remind the House what that journey entails. In a letter from the previous Minister for Agriculture in Northern Ireland, I was informed that when animals were taken from Northern Ireland on a 300-odd mile journey through the Irish Republic to Rosslare, there was no necessity to feed them at that rest point. They could be put on a ship for a 23-hour journey without being fed, and that still enabled the exporters to comply with EU safety regulations. I put it to the House that if the Bill is about reducing suffering for animals when it comes to live exports, then this is a huge gap that needs to be closed.

The Minister is likely to tell us that there are a number of reasons why this cannot be done. The first reason is that if we include Northern Ireland, a substantial number of exports from Northern Ireland to the Irish Republic—and there are substantial exports—would be affected. If this instruction were accepted, there would be an opportunity for the House to consider an amendment, in the name of my party colleagues, to restrict the export of animals to the main destinations in the Republic of Ireland only, so it would not affect that trade. However,

[Sammy Wilson]

that amendment cannot be considered unless this instruction is taken by the House and Northern Ireland is included in the scope of the Bill.

The Minister is likely to argue that that would be contrary to World Trade Organisation rules and so there is no point even proposing such an amendment, but the Government should be testing this area, because even under WTO rules, exceptions can be made. Trade with certain countries or regions can be excluded on the basis of the impact on animal health and welfare. When tested, it might well be that the rule will prove ineffective, but at least by including Northern Ireland in the Bill and accepting the amendment, which can subsequently be debated by the House and voted on, that exception can be tested. The first argument—that there is no point doing this because any subsequent amendments could not work—is not true. The second argument—that it would stop exports to the Irish Republic—can be dealt with.

Another argument that the Minister has not used to date—I do not know whether it is because he does not feel it is politic, or because he does not believe it is important—is that under the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework, certain laws made in this House cannot apply to Northern Ireland. According to the EU, the reason for that is to safeguard the EU single market and ensure that no damage is done to it. I do not see how anyone could argue that the export of live animals from Northern Ireland to the EU single market damages the EU single market. It does not stand to reason.

Even though this is an unusual procedure, there is no reason why Northern Ireland cannot be included in the Bill. I point out to the Minister that, less than a year ago, this House accepted, without Division, a similar instruction in relation to Dáithí's law on the transfer of organs for health reasons. It did so because there was support for it in Northern Ireland. I am not aware of any political party in Northern Ireland that would oppose the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the animal welfare legislation going through the House tonight.

I promised Mr Speaker that I would be brief, so I will conclude soon. I ask the Minister to accept this motion without Division. There is a logic to this. The Government have an objective of protecting the welfare of animals. A gap has been identified, and that gap can be closed. The inclusion of Northern Ireland in the Bill would reinforce the Government's claim that Northern Ireland is fully part of the United Kingdom. Here is an opportunity for the Minister and the Government to show that that is the case. By including Northern Ireland in this legislation, we can protect the welfare of animals, which will be subject to extreme suffering as a result of being exported all across the European Union.

I hope that the whole House will accept that there is absolutely no case for excluding Northern Ireland on constitutional grounds, on the grounds of animal welfare, or on the grounds of the objectives that this Government have set themselves to protect animal welfare. I hope that the House will accept this instruction without any opposition, so that Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom will be recognised, animal welfare will be protected, and the Government's objectives will be achieved for every part of the United Kingdom.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** The Minister has indicated that he would like to respond to the instruction at the end, so I will call him and any other Front-Bench speakers before then.

5.41 pm

**Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance):** I, too, will be very brief on this matter. I have enormous sympathy for this motion of instruction. Just for the record, while we did actually suggest a motion of instruction on Dáithí's law, it did not actually come to that point, because the Secretary of State intervened beforehand in a very sensible way.

We must recognise that Northern Ireland is part of a different legal framework and also a different context, particularly in relation to the large-scale movements on the island of Ireland. Indeed, the Ulster Farmers Union, no less, has made representations on the need to treat the issue on the island of Ireland differently from what is happening in Great Britain.

We also appreciate that the DUP wishes to table an amendment to make an exemption for movements on the island of Ireland. The difficulty is that, if we end up with a situation where this is not addressed at a European Union level, we will simply see re-exportation involving companies based in the Republic of Ireland, which will defeat the purpose that we are trying to achieve.

For this matter to be addressed, the answer really lies at EU level, with the Northern Ireland Assembly—hopefully restored—having a pivotal role in that regard and working very closely with local stakeholders, including the Ulster Farmers Union and local animal welfare organisations. I am conscious that the European Union is actively considering the issue. Perhaps I could ask the Secretary of State, when he responds, to comment on what steps the UK Government could take to support those wider efforts within Europe—I appreciate that, at least for now, we are not part of the EU—and how that can best be taken forward.

It is fair to say that the people of Northern Ireland care as deeply about animal welfare as our colleagues elsewhere in the UK, but we have to find a bespoke solution that addresses our very particular circumstances. We therefore have to proceed in that light. I appreciate that there are complications here, which require more work to be done. Thank you very much.

5.44 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to speak on this issue, which I have been watching carefully for some time. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union and as a landowner. Discouraged by the fact that the Bill is not UK wide, my party has tabled amendments, which as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said, we trust the Government will accept. It is essential that animal welfare protection rules are UK wide. My constituents feel incredibly strongly about this issue. As my right hon. Friend has said, even with the EU's tentacles wrapped around the issue, a Bill that is designed solely to enhance animal welfare should still apply to Northern Ireland. Our amendments to protect Northern Ireland and its citizens should be accepted.

The Minister and I, and others present, were on the same page on Brexit, and we both sought the same Brexit. Unfortunately, the Bill's not being UK wide



indicates that we were not recipients of the same Brexit. I know that the Minister appreciates our circumstances and why we tabled the amendments. For some, the search for an elusive “best of both worlds” for the framework highlights only that Northern Ireland is left with no legislator providing protection for animals. I am not sure which person is prepared to wash their hands of that responsibility. Having looked through my mailbox, I am not prepared, and nor is my party, to allow Northern Ireland to be omitted without challenge. This House is where legislative change happens and where the protection must be enshrined.

As is well known in this place, I represent the constituency of Strangford—a combination of urban and rural communities. As such, the impact on farmers is of great interest to me. It must be at the heart of all Government policy. The comments of the Ulster Farmers Union and the National Farmers Union are clear. I understand that the Minister will visit Northern Ireland shortly, and I suspect that these issues might become part of the conversation. I understand that his visit was supposed to take place this week, but other commitments prevented that. We look forward to welcoming him to my constituency and to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart).

When our farmers are expected, rightly, to implement a higher standard of animal welfare, it is essential that nations without such a priority are not allowed to undercut us in trade negotiations. That should be binding policy. Will our farmers be protected? Will there be difficulties, and undercutting, in trade negotiations? Those are key issues for my neighbours. I live in the middle of a farming community, among those who are involved in dairy, beef and sheep farming.

The Government have been quick to rectify differences in legislation between Northern Ireland and the GB mainland on matters—the Minister will know these examples; I am not pointing the finger—such as abortion, relationships and sex education teaching, the Irish language, and Dáithí’s law. The latter was accepted by us all, while the first three examples were opposed by my party, yet the Government seem content for divergence on this Bill, which concerns changes that affect each part of the United Kingdom. I struggle to understand that. I am a tad flabbergasted that on incredibly personal moral issues the Government can and will step in, yet in the realm of animal welfare they are content for two sets of rules to remain in place. For the reasons I outlined, perhaps that too can be explained.

It is essential that the legislation introduces a higher quality of animal welfare for the entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so I respectfully, humbly and sincerely say to the Government that our amendments would make us all equally subject to the law, as we should be. I ask the House to secure animal welfare standards throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am a great believer—I have said this many times—that we are always better together. I say that to everybody, especially my colleagues from Scotland, because I really believe in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that it is where we want to be, but we want to have the same laws. I want to be as British as the Minister. At this moment in time, I do not believe that I am.

5.49 pm

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I rise to support the instruction tabled by my colleagues and me. Northern Ireland’s industry takes the welfare of all animals seriously, and I have never shirked from enhancing the welfare conditions of animals, whether on the farm or being transported. Both are of high standards, and I know that our farming industry would refute any suggestion that the standards applied to live animal exports from Northern Ireland are substandard. However, there is always room and a desire, from both our farming community and the general public, to enhance our animal welfare standards, which are a priority across the United Kingdom.

If we remove a pathway for the fattening and slaughter of animals born on these islands, it is absolutely vital that the Government support investment in that aspect of the agri-food industry to increase capacity within that element of our food supply chain. Farmers are looking with suspicion at the direction of travel, which seems to want to drive down production in the UK through legislation that restricts elements of our supply chain, while at the same time we seek out trade agreements with third countries where animal welfare standards are barely an afterthought. On consistency, there is food for thought for the House and the Government.

To most people, our instruction is a simple ask: to see the laws made for GB apply to Northern Ireland in relation to live animal exports, while allowing the common-sense essential provisions for ongoing transit of animals to the Irish Republic. I note the comments by the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), and I believe them to be disingenuous as our amendments actually cover exports to the Republic of Ireland.

It is for this House to determine the rules for live animal exports pertaining to Northern Ireland, as we are part of the United Kingdom and this matter is not devolved. We are always told, “This is a devolved issue. Let the Northern Ireland Assembly decide on it.” The matter is not devolved and, as I have said, animal welfare is a priority for so many. This is our Parliament, yet the Government appear content to allow those with no democratic mandate to determine laws within a part of the UK. The Windsor framework and protocol leave us a place apart. I urge the Minister to accept, without a Division, this simple ask, which would allow us to stay aligned with the rest of the United Kingdom.

5.53 pm

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in the debate on the instruction. I should be clear at the outset that I do not intend to detain the House any longer than is needed, but I think it is important to say a few words on the instruction.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) is rightly proud of Northern Ireland’s history and heritage within our United Kingdom, and he will find no disagreement from Labour on that. I reassure him that I heard his concerns clearly and have a great deal of sympathy with the substance of his points. As we consider the instruction before the House, I want to be clear that this is an important Bill, and a Bill that would be

[Ruth Jones]

strengthened by the amendments in my name on the Order Paper. The issues it pertains to are long overdue for attention and action.

There is not often much agreement between Labour and the Government, but we agree on this. Labour will not be able to support the instruction in the name of the right hon. Member for East Antrim, because if we accepted the instruction and the follow-through of its intent, we would put the United Kingdom Government at risk of breaching World Trade Organisation rules and guidelines, and that is not a situation we can be in. However much we may want to play politics, we need to put the people and trade of this country first, along with the Good Friday agreement.

I accept that the Democratic Unionists will be frustrated if the instruction is not approved by the House and that, without it, they will not be able to secure the changes they want, but given the nature of the situation, the instruction simply will not work at this time and on this issue. Therefore, if pushed to a Division, Labour will oppose it.

5.54 pm

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** The instruction would need to be agreed if we are to consider certain amendments tabled by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) in Committee of the whole House. I am enormously sympathetic to his plight and arguments. I am grateful to him for meeting me privately last week to discuss his proposals, which seek to add Northern Ireland to the territorial scope of the Bill. In effect, his proposal is that the ban on livestock exports for slaughter would apply on a UK-wide basis, rather than GB-wide.

There is a crucial difference, as he is aware, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK with respect to the movement of livestock. Farmers in Northern Ireland routinely move animals to the Republic of Ireland for slaughter and fattening. Indeed, in 2022, around 3,500 cattle, 17,000 pigs and 337,000 sheep were moved in that way. The Bill must not jeopardise the access that Northern Irish farmers have to the Republic. That is a point on which I hope the right hon. Gentleman and I agree, as all hon. Members across the House would. His aim is to create a targeted exemption to the expanded ban: the prohibition would not apply to slaughter movements with an end destination in the Republic of Ireland. Unfortunately, that proposal is not an option that is available to us. That is because a range of international agreements and their core principles, including WTO rules, prevent discrimination against different countries in that way. Given that such a carve-out is not possible, extending the Bill to Northern Ireland would end all livestock exports for slaughter and fattening from Northern Ireland, including to the Republic of Ireland, and that is why the Bill is drafted in that respect on its territorial extent.

**Sammy Wilson:** The Minister knows that eight exceptions are listed by the WTO where it is possible to target trade interventions, and one of them is on the basis of animal health. Does he accept that taking animals from the north of Northern Ireland through the whole island of Ireland, on a 24-hour boat journey to southern France or southern Spain without food, risks animal health

and is therefore an exception that we should at least be testing with the WTO, but we cannot do that if we do not accept the instruction?

**Mark Spencer:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows from our discussions last week, I am enormously sympathetic to his view but, as he will be aware, those movements from the Republic of Ireland to the continent of Europe are a matter for the European Union. That is what we heard from the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry). My understanding is that the EU is looking at some of those rules as we speak. That is, of course, a matter for the Republic of Ireland and the EU, and we cannot in this House legislate for other nations.

If we were to transpose “Republic of Ireland” and “Belgium”, for example, other nations would challenge completely one nation being favoured above others. We could not say, “We won’t export animals for fattening or slaughter to anywhere in the world, apart from Belgium.” That would be challenged instantly by the international trade bodies, and we would lose in court—that is the legal advice I have been given—so the Government are not in a position to put forward legislation that we know is not legally sound.

I am enormously sympathetic to the view of the right hon. Member for East Antrim and, of course, I agree with him. I do not want to see sheep and cattle moved from Belfast all the way to Madrid. That is not what we want to see happen, but we do not have the power to stop that at this moment. That is why it is critical that we protect the Northern Irish economy. Extending livestock exports from Northern Ireland in that way would be devastating if we were to stop them moving to the Republic. I understand his desire for a modified ban to apply in Northern Ireland. However, it is just not possible under our international obligations, and making such a provision for the whole of the United Kingdom in this Bill is not appropriate at this time. I therefore appeal to him, respectfully and hopefully, to find a way to withdraw his motion, in the knowledge that we have enormous sympathy for his position.

**Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con):** Having listened intently to the Minister and to my friends on the Opposition Benches, and having served in Northern Ireland as a Minister and in other roles, my question is this: what is to stop—as we are trying to do—the live transportation of animals for slaughter going from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and then going on? We are not preventing something that we are trying to prevent. I know the legal advice, but sometimes Ministers have to challenge the legal advice. I am not saying that the legal advice is right or wrong, but sometimes it has to be challenged. It clearly does not make sense if we can move animals around inside Great Britain and transport them to Northern Ireland, and then say to Northern Ireland, “You can’t adhere to the rules in the rest of the United Kingdom.” Do not get me wrong, I am very supportive of this Bill, and I do not want to jeopardise it in any shape or form, but there seems to be a conflict of interest between what we are trying to do as a Government and what we are succeeding in doing, which is alienating the farmers of Northern Ireland.

**Mark Spencer:** I am grateful for that intervention. It is important, first, to remember that we are talking only about animals being exported for either fattening or for

slaughter. Under the phytosanitary rules of the island of Ireland, the movement of cattle, sheep or pigs from England to Northern Ireland will then incur a 30-day standstill within Northern Ireland before they can be moved to the Republic. That makes it not commercially viable to use that route to get to slaughter or to fattening. I hope that colleagues will understand with sympathy our frustration that we are unable to extend the rules to Northern Ireland.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the ban on using the Great Britain land bridge for live exports is one of the ways this Bill will provide big barriers to live exports continuing from Northern Ireland?

**Mark Spencer:** My right hon. Friend is right in that live exports from Northern Ireland to the Republic will be able to continue; that is good for the Northern Irish agricultural economy and we do not want to stop that trade. However, this Bill, when we get to debating the actual Bill, is about stopping those long journeys from GB into continental Europe. We have not seen those since Brexit, but we want to ensure that they cannot return in the near future.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Would the Minister term the conundrum posed by the Democratic Unionist party as one of the Brexit benefits that the Government have so often extolled the virtues of?

**Mark Spencer:** This Bill is genuinely a Brexit benefit: we are able to take control of our ports within GB and stop the live export of animals for slaughter or for fattening. That is a genuine Brexit benefit and one that I hope we can now start to debate. I hope the right hon. Member for East Antrim will withdraw his motion.

**Sammy Wilson:** I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

*Motion, by leave, withdrawn.*

## **Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill**

*Considered in Committee*

*[Relevant documents: First Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee of Session 2021-22, Moving animals across borders, HC 79; and the Government response, HC 986.]*

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

### **Clause 1**

#### PROHIBITION OF EXPORT OF LIVESTOCK FOR SLAUGHTER

6.4 pm

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 2, page 1, line 16, after “goats,” insert “(da) alpaca,”.

*This amendment would add alpacas to the definition of livestock covered by the Bill.*

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 1, line 16, after “goats,” insert “(da) deer,”.

*This amendment would add deer to the definition of livestock covered by the Bill.*

Amendment 4, page 1, line 16, after “goats,” insert “(da) llamas,”.

*This amendment would add llamas to the definition of livestock covered by the Bill.*

Amendment 1, page 1, line 17, at end insert “(f) reindeer.”

*This amendment adds reindeer to the definition of “Relevant livestock”.*

Amendment 5, page 2, line 7, at end insert—

“(7A) An appropriate national authority may by regulations extend the list of ‘relevant livestock’ in subsection (4).

(7B) ‘Appropriate national authority’ in relation to the power under subsection (7A), means—

(a) in relation to livestock kept in England, the Secretary of State;

(b) in respect of livestock kept in Scotland, the Scottish Ministers;

(c) in respect of livestock kept in Wales, the Welsh Ministers.

(7C) The Secretary of State may not make a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (7A) unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(7D) Regulations made by the Scottish Ministers under subsection (7A) are subject to the affirmative procedure (see section 29 of the Interpretation and Legislative Reform (Scotland) Act 2010).

(7E) The Welsh Ministers may not make a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (7A) unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, Senedd Cymru.”

*This amendment would allow the appropriate national authority to extend, by statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure, the list of livestock species which may not be exported for slaughter.*

Clause stand part.

Clauses 2 to 7 stand part.

**Ruth Jones:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak from the Opposition Benches on the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill. We have tabled amendments inspired by Labour's track record of delivering on animal welfare, from ending the testing of cosmetic products on animals and stopping the cruelty of fur farming to cracking down on horrific hunting practices. They allow us to compare our record with that of this Conservative Government and their shameful failures. They have bottled their manifesto promises to end the import of hunting trophies and crack down on puppy farming, to name just two of their animal welfare failures. As I indicated on Second Reading, Labour welcomes this legislation, but we regret that it has taken so long to bring this unnecessarily cruel trade to an end. We will seek through our amendments to make the Bill as fit for the future as possible.

It will be no surprise to the public that Labour is the party of animal welfare. Before turning to the amendments in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon North (Steve Reed), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), I would like to acknowledge and thank the many campaigners and stakeholders watching these proceedings for their hard work, campaigning and commitment. Our amendments do not seek to delay the Bill or to put the Government off doing anything at all. Labour wants to make this Bill as strong and purposeful as possible and see it signed into law at the earliest opportunity.

The Tories have taken a weak approach to animal welfare in recent years, from pulling Bills that were meant to be debated in this place to caving in to the extremists on their Back Benches.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): The Labour party has long called for a ban on live exports for fattening and slaughter from and through Great Britain. Why does my hon. Friend think the Government have taken so long to bring in this Bill and why does she think they scrapped the Kept Animals Bill?

**Ruth Jones:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am not sure I know the answer to those questions, and I would be grateful if the Minister answered them in his winding-up speech. The delay has been too long, as my hon. Friend says, and for too long animals have continued to suffer unnecessarily. That is why amendments 2, 3, 4 and 5 are necessary and I am delighted to speak in support of them today.

The Minister will know that the export of live animals from the UK grew substantially during the 1960s and 1970s. Live sheep exports ranged between 85,000 to 411,000 from the 1960s to the 1980s. At the same time beef and veal, including live exports, increased from approximately 65,000 in the early 1970s to nearer 200,000 in the 1980s, and live pig exports rose dramatically from 30,000 to 60,000 in the 1970s, peaking at 619,000 in 1982.

Those dramatic rises and the patterns we have seen more recently make amendments 2, 3 and 4 more important. They are probing and preventive in equal measure. The amendments force us to think about the macro picture facing us and highlight a major inadequacy in this Bill: Ministers have chosen to list the species covered by this legislation on the face of the Bill. We agree and support covering the listed species, but what happens when they

are banned? Where will those seeking to profit from the live export of animals look next? With apologies for the pun, Mr Evans, which species and which animals will be moved up the pecking order?

Amendments 2, 3 and 4, like amendment 1 in the name of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), which we support, would help to force Ministers to take up and recognise a comprehensive, bigger-picture approach—not a race to the bottom to get the bare minimum over the line and no more of a Government simply wanting an easy life. We will demonstrate to our constituents, from Newport West to Northampton North and from Epping Forest to Erewash, that this Parliament takes animal welfare seriously and we have a plan to get things right.

I turn now to amendment 5 in my name and those of my colleagues. This important amendment would allow the appropriate national authority to extend, by statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure, the list of livestock species that may not be exported for slaughter. As clause 1 of the Bill sets out, the prohibition on live exports would currently apply to calves, sheep, pigs, wild boar, goats and equines. While those are historically the main farmed animal groups subject to live exports for slaughter, it is not an exclusive list, and other animals could potentially be exported live from GB.

It is also the case that a lack of historical precedent for a particular animal is not a guarantee that live exports will not take place in future, especially as UK livestock farming continues to evolve. That is why we must be vigilant and take whatever preventive measures we can, which we have a unique opportunity to do today with amendment 5.

Labour believes it reasonable for the Secretary of State and the devolved Governments in Holyrood and Cardiff Bay to have the power to extend the export ban to other species if they feel that the science justifies such a move. It may be that the power is never needed, but it seems sensible to allow for the possibility that other species may need to be added to the exclusion list in future, without the need for further primary legislation. Amendment 5 would provide that power, enabling the Secretary of State in England, and Ministers in Scotland and Wales, to add groups of livestock to the Bill through a statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure. That would effectively future-proof the Bill and properly make it fit for purpose.

**Keir Mather** (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I am proud to support the Bill and the Labour party's amendments to add deer, alpacas and llamas to the livestock covered by the ban. However, I am conscious that the Government faltered on ending imports of hunting trophies and shied away from cracking down on puppy farming, so how can we ensure that the Bill will be properly enforced if our amendments are successful?

**Ruth Jones:** My new hon. Friend is quite right: we must ensure that we future-proof the Bill today. I am not convinced at the moment that the Government are completely sympathetic to all our amendments, which I find surprising.

If the Minister is looking for comparable examples, a similar power exists in the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022. Section 5(2) essentially states that, should the science materialise in sufficient strength to persuade the

Secretary of State of the need to identify other animals as sentient beings, other species can be added to the legislation via secondary legislation. The suggested addition to this Bill would follow that precedent, and I urge the Minister to do the right thing by accepting the amendment. If he does not want to do it for me, I hope that he will do it because the Minister who took the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act through the House, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), did exactly the same thing, for which I pay tribute to her.

This simple, holistic measure could help to expedite the progression of the Bill through Parliament. Would not that be a good thing for one and all? I want the Minister to know that in tabling amendment 5, I am trying to be helpful. I hope that he will accept my help and amendment 5. If the same principle is good for some animal welfare legislation, it has to be good for all animal welfare legislation.

Let me turn to the other amendments before the Committee. I have already indicated that amendment 1—rather like my amendments 2, 3 and 4—will do important work and would have the support of the Labour party if pushed to a vote. Today we are seeking to amend the Bill to ban the live exports of alpacas, llamas and deer, and to ensure that species can be added to the legislation at a later date. It is about future-proofing the legislation and making it fit for purpose. Amendment 5 is important.

I noted today a very interesting piece in *The Telegraph*, of which I know the Minister is an avid reader, talking about constituency-led multi-level regression and post-stratification polling carried out in September 2023. It found that more than two thirds of the British public feel that a political party that announced plans to pass more laws designed to improve animal welfare and protect animals from cruelty would have the right priorities. I hope that the Minister will accept our amendments, or, if not, be as detailed as possible in explaining his excuses. The people of this country are crying out for change and for a Government with the right priorities. If the Tories cannot deliver that, they should get out of the way, because we can.

**Theresa Villiers:** I am delighted that the strong cross-party support for the Bill is evident in the Chamber this evening. We all want to end live exports. After the disappointments of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, it is heartening to see the rapid progress that this new Bill is making through the House. The earlier Bill was blighted by a range of Opposition amendments on other issues that were not relevant to the core problem of preventing animals from suffering in long-distance transportation. I welcome the fact that the amendments tabled for today are less controversial and more specific to the matter that the Bill seeks to address.

I would certainly like to see the ban on live exports apply to Northern Ireland, but I am also very much aware of the need to comply with international trade rules. Animals are routinely moved across the border into the south for slaughter. Those are essentially local movements, so they do not give rise to the same animal welfare concerns as long-distance transportation and exports. Preventing those north-to-south movements entirely would be problematic, but finding a way to legislate to allow those exports to the Republic of Ireland to continue while stopping all others from the UK is not straightforward, particularly as the most

favoured nation principle means that whatever trade benefits we give to one country outside of a formal trade agreement should generally be offered to all trading partners. I accept that there are exceptions to that, some of which include public concerns and ethical considerations, but it is a problem that is not easy to solve.

6.15 pm

It is not just the Windsor framework standing in the way of applying this new law to Northern Ireland, but the Committee should recognise that the ban on using Britain as a land bridge for such exports is likely to make them pretty difficult to continue in practice. I hope that the question of Northern Ireland is one to which we can return on a future date as part of wider reform to address the inadequacies of the Windsor framework, so that the Bill can genuinely apply across the board. I would certainly like to hear from Ministers whether we can take action to prevent any re-export of UK animals from the Republic of Ireland. For the moment, however, as much as I understand and sympathise with the points made by the DUP this evening, the priority must be to get the Bill in statute as the best means to prevent the resumption of transport of live animals to continental Europe for slaughter.

Mr Deputy Speaker, with a few honourable exceptions, the Labour party did everything it could to thwart Brexit and prevent the referendum result from being respected. Time and again, Labour MPs stood up and demanded a second referendum, or they wanted us locked forever in the regulatory orbit of the EU, applying its single market rules without any say over them. If Labour had succeeded, we would not be having this debate today. The trade in live exports would have continued as it had for decades, protected by the European Court of Justice and single market rules.

During the seemingly endless Brexit votes, there were many times when it felt as if Labour remainers would succeed in stopping Brexit. The current the Leader of the Opposition was among the most vocal on that. It felt as if the power of the remain-supporting establishment would be too strong, but people in this country held out. The 2019 election result sent a clear signal that they wanted us to get Brexit done. Thanks to that decisive result, and the exit treaty that it enabled the Government to negotiate, we can now finally make our own decisions over our own laws in this country, including on animal welfare and live exports. The right to be governed only by laws made by the people whom we elect to this Parliament, and whom we can hold to account, was hard won over centuries. Now that it has been restored to us, let us use it to improve protection for vulnerable sentient creatures who have no means to defend themselves from cruel treatment.

The fact that we rear millions of animals for food means that we have a special responsibility to ensure the welfare of farmed animals, which would not exist without our intervention. To let them be exported over excessively long distances—subject to the stresses, strains and suffering with which we are all so familiar—to jurisdictions with lower standards, and poorer compliance with such rules as do exist, means failing to live up to that moral responsibility to those farmed animals.

We in this country have some of the most extensive legal protections for animals of any country in the world, as well as a domestic farming sector that is committed to

the highest standards of animal welfare. That reflects this country's long-standing recognition of the importance of animal welfare, which dates back to before the Victorian era. It was not just the anti-slavery campaign that motivated William Wilberforce; it was also the need to protect animals, as he was one of the founder members of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, when it was set up in 1824.

Mr Deputy Speaker, today allows us to use our new Brexit freedoms in a really positive way: to continue our country's long-held mission to prevent cruelty to animals, implement a change for which our constituents have been calling for many years, and ensure that the animals we produce in this country retain the protection of the laws we make in this country. Along with others in this House, I have championed reform in this area for many years—as an MEP, a Secretary of State, and a Back Bencher. I strongly urge hon. Members to support the Bill in the Division Lobby this evening, so that we can end live exports once and for all.

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans):** I remind hon. Members that the occupant of this Chair is acting not as Deputy Speaker, but as Chair of the Committee of the whole House—I did try, but anyway, we all now know.

**Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op):** Thank you, Chair.

This is an issue that I am personally passionate about—I have spoken on animal welfare issues from both the Back Benches and the Opposition Front Bench many times since coming to this place six years ago. I am very pleased that Labour Front Benchers are supporting the Bill, but recognise the need to strengthen its provisions and for the protection of animal welfare to go much further. All animals deserve protection. I know two things about the British public: one, they are disappointed that it has taken us so long to get to this point; and two, they want to see much more. Where is the ban on keeping primates as pets? Where is the foie gras ban? Where is the action on puppy smuggling, and why has the trophy hunting ban not gone through as an Act?

The Bill is long overdue. In the 2019 general election, the Conservative party included this prohibition and many other animal welfare policies in its manifesto. Five years have passed, and we have had setback after setback. Maybe that reflects the number of Prime Ministers we have had over that period and their varying views on animal welfare, but this is the last in a series of delays that are being put right. Last year, when I was a Front Bencher, I was hugely disappointed that the Government abandoned the kept animals Bill. When I was at the Dispatch Box trying to bring that Bill back, they even voted against a number of their own policies. The British public will not forget. Maybe the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is different now, but the Minister is the same Minister who opposed us on that occasion. How many animals have needlessly suffered because of this delay? There are victims here—it is not a victimless delay.

It took a private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) to tackle animal exploitation in the wild tourism industry, a measure that we all supported. The approach of the Government for a whole year, which they now seem to

have abandoned, was to try to achieve animal welfare improvements through private Members' Bills. I am glad that we are now back to having Government Bills on these issues, but where is the animals abroad Bill?

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Just to help the hon. Member, could he refer to the amendments or new clauses that he is addressing? His speech sounds awfully like a Second Reading speech.

**Alex Sobel:** Thank you, Chair. I will come to those now.

The amendments in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) include a number of provisions to extend the scope of the Bill. I want to say a little bit about alpacas, which I believe are dealt with in amendment 2. In my constituency, I have seen a growth in alpaca farming. There are alpacas in Cookridge in my constituency, on the way to Leeds Bradford airport; Meanwood Valley urban farm, which is just over the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), has alpacas; and, on Queensway in Yeadon, I recently spotted a number of alpacas in a field. This is clearly an area of expansion in the British farming industry, but there is also now quite a lot of alpaca breeding, so there is no need to export live alpacas to this country, because there is sufficient depth of alpaca farming to carry on that work. The same goes for other animals, including llamas and deer. We are overrun with deer; we certainly do not need the export of them.

**Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con):** Being overrun with deer is usually a forestry issue. They are wild animals and are not covered by this Bill, and they are certainly not covered by these amendments.

**Alex Sobel:** I thank the right hon. Member. Obviously, there are wild deer and deer farmed for venison; both types exist in this country.

I do not want to hold up the debate for too long, so I will conclude. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West said, the Labour party is the party of animal welfare—that is a strong priority for Labour. We have long called for a ban on live export for slaughter. Every year, millions of farm animals are at risk of facing long-distance journeys, including the new animals that we have tabled amendments to cover. Amendment 5 aims to future-proof the Bill. Particularly as the climate changes, farming will change, and we need to be able to evolve and update the legislation as practices change. I support amendments 2, 3, 4 and 5, which stand in the name of my hon. Friend, and I hope to see the Bill go much further.

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con):** I strongly welcome the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill. It is absolutely right that we ban the disgusting practice of live export for slaughter. We have driven it from Dover, and when the Bill becomes law, it will mean that it cannot come back. That is fantastic news.

This is an issue of great interest and impact for my constituency, because at the peak of that activity, we saw 100 transportations through the port of Dover. Excellent local campaigners, particularly Yvonne and Ian Birchall from Kent Action Against Live Exports, have worked tirelessly over decades to get us to this position,

and I congratulate them on that. They have been very diligent in keeping me and many Members from across the House informed of the pernicious activities involved in this particularly despicable trade, but I have never heard them mention a concern about reindeer, which are dealt with in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I will come on to the other breeds mentioned in the amendments that are before the Committee.

This issue is still live in the constituency that I have the honour to represent. It came to the fore with the introduction of Irish Ferries, which became the third ferry provider into Dover a short time ago. I strongly welcome Irish Ferries to Dover, but when that company arrived, I had to seek assurances from it that it would not be engaging in live exports across the channel. The reason for that has been very well explored in the instruction debate: it is something that can and does happen in the island of Ireland. In relation to the land bridge issue, it is concerning that a difference between parts of our United Kingdom will continue to exist. It is unfortunate that a change as important as the one we are making today, which is enabled by our Brexit freedoms, throws fresh light on a gap that has been growing since the implementation of the Windsor framework. I would welcome the Minister's comments on the effectiveness of the road bridge, because we are legislating, which means that this issue is important enough to legislate on. An answer that relies on a commercial solution suggests a weaker position in relation to that land bridge than some of us would like to see.

Let me turn to the Opposition's amendment 5, tabled by the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). I note that it seeks to apply a regulatory extension—secondary legislation—for deer, llamas and alpaca in relation to this important issue. I am mindful that even the campaign group Compassion in World Farming has said in the last 48 hours that it is not aware of any activity that would fall into the fattening and slaughter definition we are looking at today for those particular breeds. The reason I draw this to the Minister's attention is the context of the comments he made about the World Trade Organisation and other international trading laws to which the UK is subject. I pause at that point to repeat that those are laws to which the UK as a whole is subject, not just Great Britain.

6.30 pm

Does the Minister think that amendment 5 would be weaker and more open to challenge than an amendment in primary legislation, as he is doing in the Bill on the other specific breeds? It is important to address this point, because the House of Commons Library has confirmed that the WTO issue—the application of international trading laws and our domestic compliance with them—is open to challenge in relation to the primary legislation we are bringing forward today. I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on the amendment before us, since it is of a different nature within the legislative framework and may be treated differently. In that context, I draw back to the remarks I made about the assessed risk or likelihood for these particular breeds, because if this is just a theoretical or umbrella arrangement, the Minister may have a reflection on whether that is more or less likely to be challenged in relation to our international trading obligations.

I strongly welcome the Bill. I am very pleased that it has got to this stage, and I look forward to the other stages being concluded rapidly. I think there are important issues to address in relation to the amendments before us, and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. I remind the remaining speakers that they should be focusing on the amendments and clauses. They should be speaking to those, not making a Second Reading debate speech.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Of course, my party tabled amendments to the Bill that cannot be discussed and decided on because of the House's earlier decision about the instruction to include Northern Ireland in the scope of the Bill. We will support many of the amendments that have been tabled, because we believe that the scope of the Bill should be as wide as possible and that while it mentions specific animals, there are other animals that may well be subject to exports in the future.

I do not know if those who tabled the amendments have noted the irony of what we are discussing. This is a Bill to ban the export of live animals, and we are seeking by various amendments to make sure that any other animals not named in the Bill can also be included. Here is the irony: since 2020, the area of the United Kingdom to which the Bill applies has not exported any live animals; the only part of the United Kingdom where there are substantial exports of live animals is the part of the United Kingdom that is not included in this Bill. I do not know if people have noticed the irony of that.

In fact, I remember that at the time when there was criticism of the Government for not bringing forward this legislation, one of their defences was that we had not had any live exports. Of course, we could have live exports in the future, but the Bill addresses an issue that is not an issue for the area included in the scope of the Bill and it ignores the part of the United Kingdom where there are massive exports. Some speakers have said that at least the problem of exports will be made a bit less of an issue because the land bridge is no longer available for exports from Northern Ireland to the rest of Europe. However, that is not the answer, because exporters will of course simply use a more circular and tortuous journey through the Irish Republic.

I first became involved in this issue maybe 20 years ago when I was on a motorbike holiday through the Alps in France. I had not spoken to anybody who could speak English for about two weeks, and I noticed a lorry with a Northern Ireland registration number. I was a member of Belfast City Council at the time, and we had closed our abattoir because the conditions did not meet EU standards. I thought, "There's somebody from Northern Ireland. I'm going to follow that lorry, and when it stops, at least I'll have somebody I can talk to." I thought I would find somebody who could speak English and could understand my sort of English.

I followed the lorry along a long and windy road through the Alps outside a town called Nyons, and it finally stopped at an abattoir in a small village and unloaded its sheep. The sheep came from outside Ballymena, and the driver told me they had come down through the Irish Republic, across the sea, through France and up

[*Sammy Wilson*]

into the Alps. That journey had taken me on a motorbike—and not because I was going slow either—about three days, and these animals were being transferred to a slaughterhouse. Because I was interested in the issue, I wanted to see what the slaughterhouse was like. We had closed that slaughterhouse in Belfast, but the place to which these animals were being transferred for slaughter from Northern Ireland was like an outhouse of the slaughterhouse that we had closed in Northern Ireland because it did not meet EU standards.

That awoke me to the issue, because I did not think that animals were transported such a distance. This Bill, even with the amendments that have been tabled, will still leave that route open. The objective that the Government are seeking to achieve will not be achieved. It is ironic that we have a Bill about animal welfare that ignores the main source of concern about the transport of animals across the continent of Europe.

I know what the Minister said about the challenges, but I wonder whether he has considered the challenges for this Bill under WTO rules, which the Library has highlighted. There is a reason for not including Northern Ireland, but would he like to comment on the challenges that the Government anticipate may occur and what their response would be? Are they going to use the response of making exceptions?

Lastly—I emphasised this in my speech earlier and other Members have mentioned it—unlike the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), who is not here, I am more concerned about the objective of the Bill of protecting the welfare of animals than about protecting the relationship we have, through the Windsor framework, with the EU. I find it disgraceful that someone who represents a constituency where I know there is large concern about animal welfare is more concerned about keeping good relations with the EU than respecting and dealing with animal welfare considerations in the region with the biggest exports of live animals in the United Kingdom.

I wish the Bill well, and it may well be that without it there would be a return to live animal exports. It may well be that it is addressing a problem that is not there in GB. It is there in Northern Ireland, but it is not going to be addressed. I hope there will not be a loophole, because unfortunately, as a result of the agreements that the Government have made with the EU in respect of Northern Ireland, even the Hunting Trophies (Import Prohibition) Bill, which the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) has spent so much time on, is in jeopardy of being circumvented, because the hunting trophy exports could come through Northern Ireland and get into GB. That is one of the problems that need to be addressed, and it will not be addressed by this legislation, which will only exacerbate the difference between the part of the United Kingdom that I belong to and the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** The right hon. Gentleman has been speaking eloquently this evening on two important principles that I hope every Member of the House will support: the principle of the Union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the principle of ending suffering through improved animal welfare. While I am sorry that the amendment he sought did not come to a vote this evening, I hope

that the Government will reflect on the fact that, whether it is in live animal exports from the United Kingdom or the importation of the body parts of endangered species, those principles of the whole Union and animal welfare should be paramount.

**Sammy Wilson:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which I hope the Minister will listen to, because otherwise—despite all the amendments that have been tabled and that, if pushed to a vote, we will support—the problem will still exist, it will not have been addressed and the protection of animals that the Bill is designed to provide will not be fulfilled.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I rise to speak about the amendments, in particular those tabled by the Opposition Front Benchers. They did so in good faith, but I do think there are issues with them. If we look at this issue as a nation and are honest about why there has been so little or no exporting of live animals, it is public opinion that made that happen. That is what stopped it at Dover and some of the smaller ports.

I had the honour of being a researcher for the late and departed Sir Teddy Taylor, the former MP for Rochford and Southend East. Among many things, he campaigned hard to ban the live export of animals. Before I came into this House, I did a little bit of journalism among many other things, and as journalists, we followed lorries, as the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) did, down to Italy, believe it or not, without them stopping for fodder or water.

I get where the amendments are coming from, but to suggest that animals such as llamas or deer might at some future time be moved for fattening and slaughter is stretching the imagination. This place is for debate. The Labour Front Benchers disagree with me—I absolutely get that—but I am sent here to express a view. We have major problems with deer in our forests—not just muntjac, but other species—to such an extent that some farmers are going to give up their leases on some of the National Trust land they farm. They say it is not viable. We are not going to export those deer—we will not send them across for fattening. Llamas are not going to be sent for fattening and slaughter. The Bill is targeted at an industry.

I have every sympathy with my friends from Northern Ireland, and I know exactly where they are coming from, but it will not be financially viable for wholesalers—that is normally who it is—to take cattle from the Province into the Republic and send them on that huge sea journey. That journey is not cost-effective and just will not happen.

We are sent here to protect and not just to talk about financial viability, and this Bill is important. Yes, I would like to have seen it earlier, as I think we all would. It was a manifesto commitment that I stood on, and I think manifesto commitments are important. However, we cannot divide this sovereign Parliament and give those duties to, for instance, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. I do not think that is right; it is for this country to set what is right and wrong in terms of those international obligations.

6.45 pm

**Sammy Wilson:** The right hon. Gentleman said that the closure of the land bridge will make it less commercial for animals to be exported that way. I had a response



from an agriculture Minister in Northern Ireland talking about the export of animals from Northern Ireland via Dublin and then on to Rosslare and Le Havre. He said:

“Analysis by my officials has shown that calves exported from Northern Ireland via a Republic of Ireland port (Dublin or Rosslare) are rested on the truck in the Republic of Ireland for at least one hour before sailing to France. It has not been considered necessary to date to feed the calves during this rest period to achieve compliance with the EU regulation”.

The practice was already happening before this legislation. It closes one route—the land bridge—but is likely to lead to even greater suffering. The EU regulations and Department officials do not even consider it cruel to rest the animals for one hour and then send them on a 24-hour boat journey without any food.

**Sir Mike Penning:** This House thinks the practice is cruel, and that is why we are changing things with this legislation today. Frankly, what our European friends do, now that we are out of there, is down to them. We can talk to them, be friends with them and do lots of things with them, but we do not have to do what they tell us to do anymore. That is crucial.

There is one amendment that I would have been the first to support, had the Opposition or the Government wanted to table it, and that is on foie gras. I cannot understand why they have not. I spoke on Second Reading about amendments that should have been tabled. Why on earth is something whose production is banned in this country, because it is cruel, allowed to be imported and sold in this country? That is a mistake in the Bill. I am sure that amendments might be tabled in the other House. If they were tabled in this House, they would be agreed. Those amendments should be made to the Bill, but perhaps I will speak a bit more on that on Third Reading.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak tonight in favour of the Labour amendments and to briefly pay tribute to constituents who have raised these important matters with me and other colleagues. I stress the significant public interest in this issue. Like other colleagues, I have had a large amount of correspondence. We all want to see this change. We do not want to see live animal exports in any shape or form, and I appreciate the effort my colleagues have gone to in identifying future risks, which should be taken seriously.

I welcome the legislation, but I regret the delays in it coming to the House. I also ask the Government again to support wider measures to improve animal welfare. I commend the work of the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) who just spoke about the possibility of tackling foie gras. Those are serious points, and the hon. Member for Crawley has done excellent work on trophy hunting. I was proud to be able to support that work.

I will turn to the Labour amendments, which are in the name of the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). As she said, the Bill leaves open the possibility of other animals being exploited. She is right to point that out, because some of the species mentioned in the Labour amendments are farmed in the UK. There is deer farming and the hunting of deer in woodland. I have seen llamas being farmed in the Thames valley. I understand there is a

possibility that these species could be traded. I am concerned by that, and we are right to raise these points from the Opposition Benches.

The point that my hon. Friend made about the way that the live animal export trade developed rapidly and expanded between 10 and 20 times in scale over a 10-year period is a salutary reminder of what some unscrupulous business people are willing to do in this industry. I urge the Government to think again about these probing amendments, which are wise and sensible and highlight some serious future risks as agriculture changes and develops. We would be wise to address that by looking at the species in the amendments and adding them to the Bill to ensure that those animals are protected in the same way as other animals. I urge Ministers to consider the thoughtful amendments tabled by Labour Front-Bench Members.

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** I am pleased to speak in support of Labour’s amendments 2 to 5, particularly those regarding banning the live export of alpacas, llamas and deer, and ensuring that species can be added to the legislation at a later date. As the shadow Minister said, Labour supports the Bill, but the amendments would ensure that the legislation is future-proofed and fit for purpose.

The ending of the cruel trade in live exports for slaughter and fattening is long overdue. Millions of farmed animals are at risk of facing long journeys, which can cause mental exhaustion, physical injuries, hunger, dehydration and stress because, as we know, animal welfare can be compromised during long-distance live transport, which can include inappropriate stocking densities, inadequate ventilation and temperature control systems, and unsuitable feeding and watering facilities.

As has been mentioned, proposals to ban livestock exports were previously included in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which was thrown out by the Government last May, but the public have been pressing for urgent action. A recent parliamentary petition calling for the UK Government to

“Find the time to take the Kept Animals Bill through Parliament and make it law”

was signed by more than 100,000 UK residents. My constituents across Luton, Caddington, Slip End and Hyde feel strongly about this issue, whether they are farmers who care deeply for the living standards of their livestock or consumers who expect to be able to buy ethically reared produce.

Labour has long called for a ban on live exports for slaughter and fattening from or through Great Britain. We recognise that it is important not only to pass the Bill but to table amendments to improve it as an important step in asserting our reputation as a nation of animal lovers prepared to act against any cruel treatment that they face. In fact, Labour has a track record of doing so in government, from ending the testing of cosmetic products on animals in 1998 to stopping the cruelty of fur farming in 2000, the introduction of the Hunting Act 2004, and bringing in the landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006. Unlike Labour with those actions, the Government have dithered and delayed somewhat, as has been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House. They delayed action on livestock exports and reneged on a manifesto promise to end, as was so eloquently put previously, the sickening import of hunting trophies.

[*Rachel Hopkins*]

I reiterate my support for amendments 2 to 5. I welcome the Bill's ending of livestock exports and the fact that it will contribute to continuing on the path to improving animal welfare standards.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means:** I call the SNP spokesman.

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Dame Eleanor. I will speak from a Scottish perspective. The Bill legislates in an area that is largely devolved to Scotland and the Scottish Government, and we in the SNP are committed to maintaining high animal welfare standards and protecting our farmers and our agricultural communities. The Scottish Government have given consent to the Bill, and the relevant legislative consent motion has been laid in Holyrood by the Scottish Minister. The SNP Scottish Government prefer consistent animal transport legislation right across Great Britain and that, of course, makes it necessary to have UK-level regulation in this area. However, we must continue to make it clear that any changes must not disadvantage Scottish farmers, particularly regarding livestock movements between the Scottish islands and the Scottish mainland. The Bill does indeed make provisions in this area and seeks to protect Scotland's unique characteristics in doing so.

In relation to amendments 2 to 4, tabled by the Opposition, and indeed amendment 1 tabled by the Liberal Democrats, we see no notable cause for concern. We are supportive of the aims of amendment 5, tabled by the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on the Opposition Front Bench, so should the Government not agree to the amendment and the House divide later tonight, we would vote for it.

The SNP and the Scottish Government stand resolute in their commitment to safeguarding animal welfare, pledging to legislate continuously to enhance the wellbeing of animals both in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. As we forge ahead, we are looking to ensure that our actions align with our values of compassion and responsibility towards the animals that share this world with us.

I will have more to say in the remaining stages of the Bill, but for now I thank all those interested parties, stakeholders and animal welfare activists and campaigners on reaching this milestone. It has been two years and four DEFRA Ministers since the kept animals Bill was first mooted—and, of course, shelved. There is so much more work to be done in specific areas; we can go into more of that at the next stage. It is pleasing for many interested parties across the United Kingdom that we have reached this point, and I congratulate them on that.

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** I am delighted to speak to the amendments and grateful to hon. Members for their continued interest and engagement in ensuring that this ban on live animal exports for slaughter is effective and comprehensive. The question of which species should be included in the ban is indeed crucial and is one to which we have given careful consideration. When we carried out a wide-ranging consultation on banning live exports in 2020, we were clear about the species that we were seeking to apply the

ban to. We received no evidence then, and have received none since, that a ban on other species was at all necessary.

In the 10 years prior to EU exit, the live export trade for slaughter and for fattening mainly involved sheep and unweaned calves. The numbers of deer, llamas and alpacas kept in the UK are extremely low compared with the species for which a significant slaughter export trade had existed in the past. For example, the June 2021 agriculture census records showed that there were about 45,000 farmed deer, 12,000 alpacas and 1,000 llamas in the United Kingdom, compared with 33 million sheep and 10 million cattle. About 35,000 cattle and 220,000 sheep are slaughtered every week in England and Wales.

I can reassure the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who is not in his place, on his concerns in relation to his amendment about reindeer. Although reindeer are kept in the UK, they are not really farmed, and they are small in number. Of course, they are imported mostly for use in visitor attractions, especially at Christmas.

We are not aware that any species proposed in the amendments are exported for slaughter or for fattening. It is important to make that distinction: we are talking about the export of animals for slaughter and for fattening. The numbers of llamas and alpacas might be increasing, but they are not consumed as meat in the United Kingdom. Although there is no evidence of demand for trade in live exports from the EU to elsewhere, the definition of relevant livestock covers all live exports where major animal welfare concerns have been identified and a trade existed in the past.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): The Minister is detailing the species involved in the Bill and those potentially not involved. I heard what my friends in the Democratic Unionist party said about animal health and welfare issues in Northern Ireland, and I am sympathetic, not least on the supply of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland. Although the point has been made that there have not been live exports from the mainland since Brexit, the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee has taken much evidence from World Horse Welfare—horse is a species included in the Bill—that hundreds if not thousands of horses have been illegally exported to Europe under the guise of sport or breeding when they were actually for slaughter. This welcome Bill will stop that illegal movement of horses.

**Mark Spencer:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for not only his comments but his campaigning against the export of horses for slaughter. He is a tenacious campaigner in this area and I pay tribute to him for his work.

7 pm

I understand the desire by hon. Members to ensure that the ban applies to all livestock species. I share their ambition to see exports on the hoof rather than on the hoof. However, I firmly believe that the current definition is comprehensive. It is enough already, particularly taking into account the past data on slaughter export trade. I hope that I have reassured Members on that point. I therefore ask hon. Members to withdraw amendments 1 to 5.

Amendments 6 to 12 have been withdrawn, so let me turn to some of the general points made by colleagues in the debate. There was commentary that as a Government

we have done very little on animal welfare. Indeed, hon. Members mentioned the three or four things that the Labour party did while it was in power, but it would be remiss not to remind the House briefly of some of the things that this Government have done, not least recognise animal sentience in law and launch the committee to advise Government.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. Is the right hon. Gentleman certain that he wants to do that at this stage, or does he want to save it for Third Reading, where it would be more appropriate?

**Mark Spencer:** I could do it in both if you allow, Dame Eleanor.

**The Chairman:** I am suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman might not want to do that.

**Mark Spencer:** I am not someone who understands subtlety all the time, but on this occasion you seem to have broken through, Dame Eleanor. I will take your inspiration and leave my comments for Third Reading.

I hope I have done enough to reassure colleagues across the House that the amendments are not necessary, but we take them seriously. To be clear, if there were a change in the dietary habits of our colleagues in the European Union, and they decided to consume other species of animal such as llamas, alpacas, squirrels or whatever, we would be able to come back to this House to introduce new legislation to stop that trade. But at this time, the Bill covers all those necessary exports. I hope that colleagues will decline the amendments and support the Bill as tabled.

**Ruth Jones:** I do not wish to detain the House any longer than strictly necessary. I welcome the speed with which we have gone through the Committee stage this evening, but it beggars belief that it has taken so long to bring this unnecessarily cruel trade to an end. That is why Labour supports the Bill. We have long called for the ban on live exports for slaughter and fattening from or through Great Britain. It has already been said in expert speeches that, every year, millions of farmed animals are at risk of facing long-distance journeys to export them for fattening and slaughter, causing unnecessary suffering. We are willing to withdraw amendments 2 to 4, but we wish to pursue amendment 5. I will leave it there. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

*Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Amendment proposed:* No. 5, page 2, line 7, at end insert—

- “(7A) An appropriate national authority may by regulations extend the list of “relevant livestock” in subsection (4).
- (7B) “Appropriate national authority” in relation to the power under subsection (7A), means—
- in relation to livestock kept in England, the Secretary of State;
  - in respect of livestock kept in Scotland, the Scottish Ministers;
  - in respect of livestock kept in Wales, the Welsh Ministers.
- (7C) The Secretary of State may not make a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (7A) unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.

(7D) Regulations made by the Scottish Ministers under subsection (7A) are subject to the affirmative procedure (see section 29 of the Interpretation and Legislative Reform (Scotland) Act 2010).

(7E) The Welsh Ministers may not make a statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (7A) unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, Senedd Cymru.”—(*Ruth Jones.*)

*This amendment would allow the appropriate national authority to extend, by statutory instrument subject to the affirmative procedure, the list of livestock species which may not be exported for slaughter.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 217, Noes 293.*

**Division No. 42]**

**[7.3 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Ady</i> )	David, Wayne
Abrahams, Debbie	Davies-Jones, Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Day, Martyn
Ali, Tahir	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Amesbury, Mike	Dixon, Samantha
Anderson, Fleur	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Dodds, Anneliese
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Dorans, Allan ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )
Barker, Paula	Doughty, Stephen
Beckett, rh Margaret	Dowd, Peter
Begum, Apsana	Duffield, Rosie
Benn, rh Hilary	Dyke, Sarah
Betts, Mr Clive	Eagle, Dame Angela
Blackman, Kirsty	Eagle, rh Maria
Blake, Olivia	Edwards, Jonathan
Blomfield, Paul	Efford, Clive
Bonnar, Steven	Elliott, Julie
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Elmore, Chris
Brennan, Kevin	Eshalomi, Florence
Brock, Deidre	Esterson, Bill
Brown, Alan	Evans, Chris
Brown, Ms Lyn	Farron, Tim
Bryant, Sir Chris	Fellows, Marion
Burgon, Richard	Fletcher, Colleen
Butler, Dawn	Foord, Richard
Byrne, Ian	Fovargue, Yvonne
Byrne, rh Liam	Foy, Mary Kelly
Callaghan, Amy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )	Furniss, Gill
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Gardiner, Barry
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Gibson, Patricia
Carden, Dan	Gill, Preet Kaur
Chamberlain, Wendy	Girvan, Paul
Chapman, Douglas	Glendon, Mary
Cooper, Daisy	Grady, Patrick
Cooper, rh Yvette	Grant, Peter
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Green, Sarah
Cowan, Ronnie	Greenwood, Lilian
Coyle, Neil	Greenwood, Margaret
Crawley, Angela ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i> )	Griffith, Dame Nia
Creasy, Stella	Gwynne, Andrew
Cruddas, Jon	Hamilton, Fabian
Cryer, John	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Cummins, Judith	Hanvey, Neale
Cunningham, Alex	Hardy, Emma
Daby, Janet	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Dalton, Ashley	Harris, Carolyn
Davey, rh Ed	Healey, rh John
	Hendrick, Sir Mark
	Hendry, Drew
	Hillier, Dame Meg

Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hollern, Kate  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kyle, Peter  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Lockhart, Carla  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lynch, Holly  
 MacAskill, Kenny  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonald, Andy (*Proxy vote cast by Ian Mearns*)  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorrin, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Murray, Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osamor, Kate

Osborne, Kate  
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reed, Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turner, Karl  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)  
 Whitley, Mick  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Winter, Beth  
 Wishart, Pete  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Kim Leadbeater and**  
**Andrew Western**

#### NOES

Afolami, Bim  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aiken, Nickie  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)

Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, rh Edward

Atherton, Sarah  
 Atkins, rh Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Bacon, Mr Richard (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Badenoch, rh Kemi  
 Bailey, Shaun  
 Baillie, Siobhan  
 Baker, Duncan  
 Baker, rh Mr Steve  
 Baldwin, Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Baynes, Simon  
 Bell, Aaron  
 Beresford, Sir Paul  
 Berry, rh Sir Jake  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bottomley, Sir Peter  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Bradley, Ben  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Brady, rh Sir Graham  
 Brereton, Jack  
 Brine, Steve  
 Bristow, Paul  
 Britcliffe, Sara  
 Browne, Anthony  
 Bruce, Fiona  
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Butler, Rob  
 Cairns, rh Alun  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa  
 Carter, Andy  
 Cash, Sir William  
 Cates, Miriam  
 Caulfield, Maria  
 Chalk, rh Alex  
 Chishti, Rehman  
 Choqe, Sir Christopher  
 Churchill, Jo  
 Clark, rh Greg  
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon  
 Clarke, Theo  
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan  
 Clarkson, Chris  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse  
 Colburn, Elliot  
 Collins, Damian  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Courts, Robert  
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey  
 Crabb, rh Stephen  
 Crosbie, Virginia  
 Daly, James  
 Davies, rh David T. C.  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Dr James  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davies, Philip  
 Davis, rh Sir David  
 Davison, Dehenna  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Docherty, Leo  
 Donelan, rh Michelle  
 Double, Steve  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick

Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Edwards, Ruth  
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Fell, Simon  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Frazer, rh Lucy  
 Freeman, George  
 Freer, Mike  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Graham, Richard  
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Gullis, Jonathan  
 Hammond, Stephen  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Hands, rh Greg  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Harrison, Trudy  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Heapey, rh James  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Adam  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Howell, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Keegan, rh Gillian  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
 Loder, Chris  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)  
 Mackrory, Cherylyn  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Marson, Julie  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Jason  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McPartland, rh Stephen  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew

Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Mr Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Ross, Douglas  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Russell, Dean  
 Rutley, David  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Scully, Paul  
 Seely, Bob  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Sunderland, James  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Tracey, Craig  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie  
 Trott, rh Laura  
 Tuckwell, Steve  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Villiers, rh Theresa  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggin, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, rh Craig

Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wood, Mike  
 Young, Jacob  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Robert Largan and**  
**Scott Mann**

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Third Reading*

7.18 pm

**Mark Spencer:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It has been a privilege to shepherd the Bill through the House, delivering on our manifesto commitment to end live animal exports.

**Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. We are happy to see the legislation, although I am disappointed that no amendments were made. The Government have already got rid of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. They stated that they expected legislation to cover further areas of animal welfare through private Members' Bills, and so on, but we have seen only one private Member's Bill relating to animal welfare. Does the Minister expect further legislation on animal welfare—for instance on puppy smuggling—and if so, when?

**Mark Spencer:** A number of Opposition Members have commented that the Government have done very little for animal welfare. It is worth my pointing out that we have recognised animal sentience in law, and launched the committee that will advise the Government on how policy decisions should be made. We have ramped up enforcement. We have increased the maximum sentences for animal cruelty from six months to five years of imprisonment. We have launched the consultation on financial penalty notices, with the power to charge up to £5,000 in fines, in addition to existing penalties under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. We have introduced new protections for service animals under Finn's law. We have improved farm animal welfare. We have launched the animal health and welfare pathways, with new annual vet visits and grants for farmers.

We have implemented a revised welfare-at-slaughter regime, and introduced CCTV in all slaughterhouses. We have banned traditional battery cages for laying hens, and permitted beak-trimming only via infrared technology. We have raised standards for meat chickens. We have significantly enhanced companion animal welfare. We have revamped the local authority licensing regime for commercial pet services, including selling, dog breeding, boarding and animal displays. We have banned third party puppy and kitten sales with Lucy's law. We have made microchipping compulsory for cats and dogs. We have introduced offences of horse fly-grazing and abandonment. We have introduced new community order powers to address dog issues. We have provided valuable new protections for wild animals, and have banned wild animals in travelling circuses. We have passed the Ivory Act 2018, including one of the toughest bans on elephant ivory sales—[*Interruption.*] I have a long way to go yet. We have given the police additional powers to tackle hare coursing. We have banned glue traps. We have

[*Mark Spencer*]

supported private Members' Bills which were passed in the last Session, including the Bill to ban the trade in detached shark fins, and launched the consultation to ban the keeping of primates as pets.

Apart from those few items, we have done very little.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): I thank the Minister for going through such a detailed and lengthy list; I can only apologise for interrupting him. That list clearly shows that the Government have animal welfare at the heart of their policies. On behalf of the people of South Leicestershire and on behalf of animal welfare organisations such as the excellent Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, I thank the Government for doing the right thing.

**Mark Spencer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I am also grateful to all my colleagues who have supported the legislation during its passage through the House.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) *rose*—

**Ashley Dalton:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mark Spencer:** I will give way to my hon. Friend, but I will come back to the hon. Lady.

**Tim Loughton:** I am grateful to the Minister—

**Ashley Dalton:** With respect—

**Tim Loughton:** Hold on!

**Hon. Members:** Sit down!

**Ashley Dalton:** I am sorry; I apologise.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Tim Loughton.

**Tim Loughton:** Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Given the hugely impressive list that the Minister has just read out, putting the United Kingdom in the vanguard of animal welfare matters—and this is yet another piece of trailblazing legislation to add to that—is there any indication that our former European Union partners are intending to follow suit and up their game in this regard when it comes to the transport of live animals?

**Mark Spencer:** As my hon. Friend will know, I am not responsible for EU legislation. During conversations with friends in the EU, I have been told that they are currently looking at the issue of live animal transport, but that is, of course, a matter for them.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I, too, thank the Minister and the Government for their fantastic legislation and great track record, of which we can be truly proud. Is it not the case that this Bill would not have been possible when we were EU members, and that we have put right that wrong? I urge the EU to catch up.

**Mark Spencer:** As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

**Ashley Dalton** *rose*—

**Mark Spencer:** I have held the hon. Lady back for too long, so I will give way, but I am conscious that we need to move on.

**Ashley Dalton:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I shall be very quick.

With respect to the Minister, I did not ask him what the Government had done; I asked him what measures that were in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, which was thrown out by the Government, we might expect to see in the future. I know what the Government have done, because I pay attention. I am asking what they intend to do.

**Mark Spencer:** I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that tonight is a big step forward. We have a huge chunk of the kept animals Bill, and I believe that early in March there will be a private Member's Bill, on which we will of course deliver. Let me contrast that with what happened under Labour by taking the hon. Lady back to July 2009. This was the answer to a question from a Labour Member about what Labour intended to do about the export of live animals:

“The export of live animals is a lawful trade and to restrict it would be contrary to free trade rules. Such trade must, though, adhere to the standards set out in health and welfare rules.”—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2009; Vol. 496, c. 716W.]

The Labour Government had the opportunity to do this in 2009, and chose not to.

Let me now turn to Third Reading. I do not want to detain the House for too long, but I am hugely grateful to Members on both sides of the House who have contributed to the scrutiny of the Bill and have been present during its passage to ensure that this trade is consigned to history. I know that the topic of live exports is close to the hearts of a great many Members, and it is been cheering and wonderful to hear so many parliamentarians speak in support of the Bill.

**Sammy Wilson:** While the Minister is receiving accolades from the Members behind him for the work that he has done on animal welfare, may I express, on behalf of people in Northern Ireland, the disappointment that is felt about the fact that a Conservative and Unionist Government have not applied the same law to the place where most live animal exports come from? The Minister has not extended the animal welfare protections because the Government are more interested in cosyng up to the EU than in dealing with the issues that affect people throughout the United Kingdom.

**Mark Spencer:** I am not going to argue with the right hon. Gentleman. We agree on much more than we disagree on, and I will not sour this moment by being drawn into such an argument. The right hon. Gentleman knows how much sympathy I have for his political desires, and I am enormously sympathetic to his desire to hold the United Kingdom together. He has my commitment to work with him and his colleagues to ensure that the United Kingdom remains intact.

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): When the Minister read out that long and impressive list of achievements, I think he failed to mention the complete ban on animal testing, a decision made by the Home Secretary last year. Does he agree that that is yet another example of the Brexit dividend?

**Mark Spencer:** It was not an extensive list. There are many examples of the Government taking action, and we will continue to do so.

**Sir Mike Penning:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mark Spencer:** I will, because my right hon. Friend has been involved with the Bill throughout its passage.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank the Minister for giving way, because after sitting here for three hours or so, I would have been very disappointed not to be able to bring up the subject of foie gras yet again—you gave me the look, Madam Deputy Speaker, which was understandable. The Minister produced a long list of what we had done, but what we can do in the future is ban the import of foie gras. Its production is banned in this country because it is cruel. Why are we still importing it, and why are we not banning it?

**Mark Spencer:** The Bill deals with the export of live animals, not the import of products. I am sure that there will be many opportunities for colleagues to continue to raise animal welfare issues, and they will of course have a sympathetic ear from the Government.

Let finally put on record my sincere thanks to animal welfare groups, particularly Compassion in World Farming but also the National Union of Farmers and other stakeholders that have helped with consultation responses, for their support as the Bill has made progress. Let me also thank my excellent civil service colleagues, who have been very supportive throughout the drafting of the Bill, for their work to help bring it to this point. The Bill will reinforce our position as a world leader on animal welfare, and that is something of which we can all be very proud. I look forward to following its progress through the other place, and I commend it to the House.

7.28 pm

**Ruth Jones:** I do not want to detain the House for any longer than is strictly necessary.

This is an important Bill, and I welcome its relatively speedy journey through the House. It beggars belief that it has taken so long to bring an unnecessarily cruel trade to an end, and that is why Labour supports the Bill, even if it is long overdue. Indeed, we have long called for a ban on live exports for slaughter or fattening from or through Great Britain. It has been said already that every year millions of farmed animals risk facing long-distance journeys as they are exported for fattening and slaughter, causing them unnecessary suffering. These journeys can cause animals to become mentally exhausted, physically injured, hungry, dehydrated and stressed, and that is why Labour has sought to strengthen the Bill to make it fully fit for purpose.

The Labour party has a proud track record of delivering progress on animal welfare in government. The Minister has been proud to shout about what his Government have done over the course of 14 long years, but he did not really answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) about their future plans on puppy smuggling, ear cropping and hunting trophy imports, so I look forward to hearing imminent news on those important areas as well. When Labour was in government, we made progress on animal welfare, including ending the testing of cosmetic products on animals in 1998 and stopping the cruelty of fur farming in 2000. We introduced the Hunting Act in 2004 and we brought in the landmark Animal Welfare Act in 2006. We continue that fine tradition with our support for this Bill tonight.

I would like to acknowledge the team who have worked with me and supported me as the Bill has travelled through the House. I thank my colleagues in the shadow DEFRA team—my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed)—as well as all the people who support us day in, day out, especially Adam Jodge in my office.

I thank all the organisations who have helped, as the Minister has done, including Compassion in World Farming and the NFU. I also acknowledge the work of the officials in the Department and the Minister's private office, and I am grateful to the Minister—it is not often I say this—for the time he has taken to talk to us. I also thank the wonderful team in the Public Bill Office, who are just brilliant. As the Bill moves on to the other place, my final thanks go to the campaigners, stakeholders and true believers who want realistic, pragmatic and strong animal welfare rules and regulations here in Great Britain.

I wish the Bill well and look forward to proper, timely and real action on animal welfare in the months and years ahead.

7.31 pm

**Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on Third Reading. It was important, when the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill was set aside, that a commitment was made to bring legislation forward, and this is a key element of it. It is a key element of our manifesto commitment that we will fulfil, and frankly those on the Opposition side of the House should stop bleating about this element. We will get the other aspects done. I myself am taking a private Member's Bill through that covers one element of the kept animals Bill. We should not be playing tit for tat on this. It is about something that really matters, the welfare of animals, and this is a really important stage.

The Minister has read out a litany of what we have achieved in our time in office. The one person who cannot speak in this debate is my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who took through the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 with the support of the Government. As the chief executive of the RSPCA said, that was a monumental moment for animal welfare legislation, empowering the courts to hand out sentences that more accurately reflect the seriousness of these crimes.

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

I strongly support the Bill. I say to the House, and to the other House, that it is a simple, straightforward Bill and it could get through by the end of March and be done by Easter, without question. This is not the moment to add other elements left, right and centre. Let us keep it simple and keep our manifesto commitments. I hope the House of Lords respects the will of this House, and I look forward to the Bill not coming back but becoming an Act before the end of the spring.

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

7.33 pm

**Steven Bonnar:** It is a pleasure to speak in the Bill's Third Reading debate. Before I begin, I thank all Members and parties for the collegiate and cross-party manner in which we have worked to finally drag the Government to this point, as well as to all stakeholders, animal rights campaigners and the National Farmers Union of Scotland. Together, we are resolute in our pursuit to enhance animal welfare standards and we will persist in our legislative efforts to achieve our shared goals. I would like to single out my hon. Friends who sit on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which is so ably chaired by the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill). I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Angus (Dave Doogan) for their previous excellent work on the Committee and across all matters of animal welfare. I also pay tribute to Josh Simmonds-Upton and Aaron Lukas for their support and for the fantastic amount of work they have put into this area.

As this Parliament comes to an end, after repeated failures by the Government to bring the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill forward, we might finally see a live export ban in the UK that follows the lead and the wishes of the Scottish Government, who have remained steadfast in their determination to see this Bill come to fruition. I say "finally" because it has been two years and four DEFRA Ministers since we first heard of the kept animals Bill, but finally the promised livestock export ban has come.

In Scotland we remain cautious, but why? Because the Bill must be delivered in a way that protects Scotland's traditional crofting and island communities and does not undermine our agricultural sector. We in the SNP have noted with great concern the dalliance of the UK Government to prioritise animal rights and welfare abuse mitigations by the shelving of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. We are concerned because we are wholly committed to protecting the welfare of animals and will continue to bring forward legislation to improve the welfare of animals in Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points about how long it has taken to get to this stage. Does he share the concern of many of my constituents that the Government do not seem to be treating animal welfare with any great priority, given the way in which they have treated the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill?

**Steven Bonnar:** My hon. Friend is right. The reality is that this place does not match the ambition that we have in Scotland and in Holyrood to maintain the highest possible standards of animal welfare, while protecting our communities and the fantastic, exquisite produce that our farmers make.

The Scottish Government have experience in managing stringent animal welfare standards to the highest levels. We are matching the EU's ambitions, but we are concerned that the UK is lagging behind. There is no question about that. Currently, livestock can move for 28 hours with a one-hour mid-journey break, followed by a 24-hour rest period before the next movement. During these journeys, it is unquestionable that the animals will be distressed, that their normal or instinctive behaviour will be restricted, and that unavoidable vehicle motion might cause stress. Other concerns include exhaustion, dehydration and overcrowding. The Scottish Government's preference is to have consistent animal transport legislation across Great Britain. That will necessitate UK-level regulation, so the Scottish Minister has tabled a consent motion in the Scottish Parliament.

However, it is important to emphasise that any changes must recognise Scotland's established patterns of livestock movement from the islands and the remote areas of Scotland to the mainland, and must not disadvantage Scottish farmers and crofters by banning movement between the islands and the mainland. The ban must also not include animals being exported for breeding, which is a vital part of Scotland's agricultural sector, especially in trade with the Republic of Ireland, as we have heard today.

This is an area of largely devolved policy, and the SNP is determined to maintain the highest standards of animal welfare, as well as to protect our farmers and ensure that our exquisite produce retains its world-beating status. The Scottish Government will continue to work with the UK Government and other devolved Administrations to ensure the Bill's smooth implementation. Our officials remain vigilant, closely monitoring and engaging with DEFRA on matters that might extend into Scotland or potentially impact the country, with a particular focus on livestock exports, which are a vital facet of our agricultural landscape.

7.38 pm

**Sammy Wilson:** I simply want to use the opportunity of Third Reading to emphasise the point I made on Second Reading and in Committee, as we come to the conclusion of the debate on this Bill. As a citizen of the United Kingdom, I represent people who believe that being a member of the United Kingdom means that the laws that apply should apply to them as well as to everybody else. I find it obnoxious that a Bill that the Government say is to help animal welfare should not apply to the part of the United Kingdom to which I belong. This is an example of the long-term danger that I and my party have highlighted—namely, that as a result of the Windsor framework and the Northern Ireland protocol, there will be regulatory divergence, legal divergence and eventually constitutional divergence between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

It does not matter how the Government try to dress it up. I had a long discussion with the Minister last week, and I know he is sincere. I know he has a love for



Northern Ireland, but the truth of the matter is that, no matter what he wants and no matter how he views things, he cannot live up to the promise of wanting to work to ensure that the same standards apply in Northern Ireland as apply in other parts of the United Kingdom, because the first duty of this Government, it seems, is to ensure that they do not annoy their masters in Brussels to whom they have subjected themselves as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank my right hon. Friend for responding to this very important issue on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party. Does he agree that the notion that the Bill is trailblazing, and the consequent backslapping, sends a dire message to the people of Northern Ireland who want to see us improve and enhance our animal welfare standards even further? The message from this Government is very much that Northern Ireland does not matter in this regard.

**Sammy Wilson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Northern Ireland is regarded as a place that has to be treated differently. As I said earlier, the irony is that there have not been any live exports from GB to outside GB since 2020. The Bill leaves out the part of the United Kingdom where animal welfare concerns should be highest, because, at present, we are the area of the United Kingdom that exports animals. We export animals to the south of France, the south of Spain and all over the place, with those journeys taking days.

Before the Government congratulate themselves, they should address the main problem that, because of EU diktat, this Bill cannot apply to the part of the United Kingdom from which animal exports primarily occur—the part of the United Kingdom to which I belong. So much for taking back control. I hope the Government will address this problem.

Unless the application of EU law to Northern Ireland is addressed, we will see more examples of divergence. In fact, when we consider the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill tomorrow, we will find that this immigration legislation cannot apply to Northern Ireland, leaving Northern Ireland as a back door. There is a big problem that needs to be addressed, and it cannot be ignored. The people of Northern Ireland, those who are Unionists, cannot be ignored.

More importantly, where the Government set objectives, as they have for animal welfare in this Bill, those objectives can be thwarted by the constitutional arrangements that have been put in place between this Government, the European Union and Northern Ireland.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

That the draft Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Amendment of List of Safe States) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 8 November 2023, be approved.—*(Suzanne Webb.)*

*The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 49.*

### Division No. 43]

[7.44 pm

#### AYES

Afolami, Bim	Daly, James
Afriyie, Adam	Davies, rh David T. C.
Aiken, Nickie	Davies, Gareth
Aldous, Peter	Davies, Dr James
Allan, Lucy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Davies, Mims
Anderson, Lee	Davies, Philip
Anderson, Stuart ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Davis, rh Sir David
Andrew, rh Stuart	Davison, Dehenna
Ansell, Caroline	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Argar, rh Edward	Docherty, Leo
Atherton, Sarah	Donelan, rh Michelle
Atkins, rh Victoria	Double, Steve
Bacon, Gareth	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Bacon, Mr Richard ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Duddridge, Sir James ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Duguid, David
Bailey, Shaun	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Baillie, Siobhan	Dunne, rh Philip
Baker, Duncan	Edwards, Ruth
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Baldwin, Harriett	Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Barclay, rh Steve	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Baynes, Simon	Eustice, rh George
Bell, Aaron	Evans, Dr Luke
Beresford, Sir Paul	Fabricant, Michael
Bhatti, Saqib	Farris, Laura
Blackman, Bob	Fell, Simon
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Firth, Anna
Bowie, Andrew	Fletcher, Katherine
Bradley, Ben	Fletcher, Mark
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Fletcher, Nick
Brady, rh Sir Graham	Ford, rh Vicky
Brereton, Jack	Foster, Kevin
Brine, Steve	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bristow, Paul	Frazer, rh Lucy
Britcliffe, Sara	Freeman, George
Browne, Anthony	Freer, Mike
Bruce, Fiona	Fuller, Richard
Burghart, Alex	Garnier, Mark
Butler, Rob	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Cairns, rh Alun	Gibb, rh Nick
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Gibson, Peter
Carter, Andy	Gideon, Jo
Cash, Sir William	Glen, rh John
Cates, Miriam	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Caulfield, Maria	Gove, rh Michael
Chalk, rh Alex	Graham, Richard
Chishti, Rehman	Grant, Mrs Helen ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )
Chope, Sir Christopher	Green, Chris
Churchill, Jo	Green, rh Damian
Clark, rh Greg	Griffith, Andrew
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Grundy, James
Clarke, Theo	Gullis, Jonathan
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Hammond, Stephen
Clarkson, Chris	Hancock, rh Matt
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hands, rh Greg
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Colburn, Elliot	Harris, Rebecca
Collins, Damian	Harrison, Trudy
Costa, Alberto	Hart, Sally-Ann
Courts, Robert	Hart, rh Simon
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Crabb, rh Stephen	Heapey, rh James
Crosbie, Virginia	Henry, Darren
	Higginbotham, Antony

Hinds, rh Damien  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Adam  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Howell, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hughes, Eddie  
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Javid, rh Sir Sajid  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenrick, rh Robert  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kawczynski, Daniel  
 Keegan, rh Gillian  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lamont, John  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Levy, Ian  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
 Loder, Chris  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)  
 Mackrory, Cheryl  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Marson, Julie  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Jason  
 McCartney, Karl  
 McPartland, rh Stephen  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Damien  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, Anne Marie  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Opperman, Guy  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penning, rh Sir Mike  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Quince, Will  
 Randall, Tom  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Richardson, Angela  
 Roberts, Mr Rob  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Mary  
 Ross, Douglas  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Russell, Dean  
 Rutley, David  
 Sambrook, Gary  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Scully, Paul  
 Seely, Bob  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shapps, rh Grant  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, Royston  
 Solloway, Amanda  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, Iain  
 Streeter, Sir Gary  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie

Trott, rh Laura  
 Tuckwell, Steve  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Villiers, rh Theresa  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Wallis, Dr Jamie  
 Warman, Matt  
 Watling, Giles  
 Webb, Suzanne  
 Whately, Helen

Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggan, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, rh Craig  
 Wood, Mike  
 Young, Jacob  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Robert Largan and  
 Scott Mann

#### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Blackford, rh Ian  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Bonnar, Steven  
 Brock, Deidre  
 Brown, Alan  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Cowan, Ronnie  
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson*)  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Day, Martyn  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dyke, Sarah  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Farron, Tim  
 Farry, Stephen  
 Flynn, Stephen  
 Foord, Richard  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Green, Sarah

Hanvey, Neale  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Lake, Ben  
 Law, Chris  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 MacAskill, Kenny  
 Mc Nally, John  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McLaughlin, Anne  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morgan, Helen  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Qaisar, Ms Anum  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thomson, Richard  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wishart, Pete

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Peter Grant and  
 Gavin Newlands

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

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

#### IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 19 October 2023, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Suzanne Webb.*)

*The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 53.*

**Division No. 44]**

**[7.58 pm**

#### AYES

Afolami, Bim  
 Afriyie, Adam  
 Aiken, Nickie  
 Aldous, Peter  
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart

Ansell, Caroline  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Atherton, Sarah  
 Atkins, rh Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Bacon, Mr Richard (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Badenoch, rh Kemi  
 Bailey, Shaun

Baillie, Siobhan	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Jones, rh Mr Marcus	Randall, Tom
Baker, Duncan	Eustice, rh George	Jupp, Simon	Redwood, rh John
Baker, rh Mr Steve	Evans, Dr Luke	Kawczynski, Daniel	Richards, Nicola
Baldwin, Harriett	Fabricant, Michael	Keegan, rh Gillian	Richardson, Angela
Barclay, rh Steve	Farris, Laura	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Roberts, Mr Rob
Baynes, Simon	Fell, Simon	Kniveton, Kate ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Bell, Aaron	Firth, Anna	Kruger, Danny	Robinson, Mary
Beresford, Sir Paul	Fletcher, Katherine	Lamont, John	Ross, Douglas
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Fletcher, Mark	Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea	Rowley, Lee
Bhatti, Saqib	Fletcher, Nick	Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Russell, Dean
Blackman, Bob	Ford, rh Vicky	Levy, Ian	Rutley, David
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Foster, Kevin	Lewer, Andrew	Sambrook, Gary
Bowie, Andrew	Francois, rh Mr Mark	Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Saxby, Selaine
Bradley, Ben	Frazer, rh Lucy	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Scully, Paul
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Freeman, George	Loder, Chris	Seely, Bob
Brady, rh Sir Graham	Freer, Mike	Longhi, Marco	Selous, Andrew
Brereton, Jack	Fuller, Richard	Lopez, Julia	Shapps, rh Grant
Brine, Steve	Garnier, Mark	Lopresti, Jack	Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Bristow, Paul	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Britcliffe, Sara	Gibb, rh Nick	Loughton, Tim	Simmonds, David
Browne, Anthony	Gibson, Peter	Mackinlay, Craig ( <i>Proxy vote cast by John Redwood</i> )	Smith, Greg
Bruce, Fiona	Gideon, Jo	Mackrory, Cherylyn	Smith, Henry
Butler, Rob	Glen, rh John	Macleane, Rachel	Smith, Royston
Cairns, rh Alun	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert	Mak, Alan	Solloway, Amanda
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Gove, rh Michael	Malthouse, rh Kit	Spencer, Dr Ben
Carter, Andy	Graham, Richard	Mangnall, Anthony	Spencer, rh Mark
Cash, Sir William	Grant, Mrs Helen ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Marson, Julie	Stafford, Alexander
Cates, Miriam	Green, Chris	Maynard, Paul	Stephenson, rh Andrew
Caulfield, Maria	Green, rh Damian	McCartney, Jason	Stevenson, Jane
Chalk, rh Alex	Griffith, Andrew	McCartney, Karl	Stevenson, John
Chishti, Rehman	Grundy, James	McPartland, rh Stephen	Stewart, Iain
Chope, Sir Christopher	Gullis, Jonathan	McVey, rh Esther	Streeter, Sir Gary
Churchill, Jo	Hammond, Stephen	Menzies, Mark	Stride, rh Mel
Clark, rh Greg	Hancock, rh Matt	Mercer, rh Johnny	Stuart, rh Graham
Clarke, rh Sir Simon	Hands, rh Greg	Merriman, Huw	Sturdy, Julian
Clarke, Theo	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Metcalfe, Stephen	Sunderland, James
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Harris, Rebecca	Millar, Robin	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Clarkson, Chris	Harrison, Trudy	Milling, rh Dame Amanda	Syms, Sir Robert
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hart, Sally-Ann	Mills, Nigel	Thomas, Derek
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Hart, rh Simon	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Throup, Maggie
Colburn, Elliot	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Collins, Damian	Heapey, rh James	Moore, Damien	Tomlinson, Justin
Costa, Alberto	Henry, Darren	Moore, Robbie	Tomlinson, Michael
Courts, Robert	Higginbotham, Antony	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Hinds, rh Damian	Morris, Anne Marie	Trott, rh Laura
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hoare, Simon	Morris, David	Tuckwell, Steve
Crosbie, Virginia	Holden, rh Mr Richard	Morrissey, Joy	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Daly, James	Hollinrake, Kevin	Mortimer, Jill	Vara, rh Shailesh
Davies, rh David T. C.	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Morton, rh Wendy	Vickers, Martin
Davies, Gareth	Holloway, Adam	Mullan, Dr Kieran	Vickers, Matt
Davies, Dr James	Holmes, Paul	Mumby-Croft, Holly	Villiers, rh Theresa
Davies, Mims	Howell, John ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Mundell, rh David	Walker, Mr Robin
Davies, Philip	Howell, Paul	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Wallis, Dr Jamie
Davis, rh Sir David	Huddleston, Nigel	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Warman, Matt
Davison, Dehenna	Hudson, Dr Neil	Neill, Sir Robert	Watling, Giles
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Hughes, Eddie	Norman, rh Jesse	Webb, Suzanne
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hunt, Jane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	O'Brien, Neil	Whately, Helen
Docherty, Leo	Hunt, Tom	Opperman, Guy	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Donelan, rh Michelle	Jack, rh Mr Alister	Pawsey, Mark	Whittaker, rh Craig ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )
Double, Steve	Javid, rh Sir Sajid	Penning, rh Sir Mike	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil	Penrose, John	Wiggin, Sir Bill
Duddridge, Sir James ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Percy, Andrew	Wild, James
Duguid, David	Jenkinson, Mark	Philp, rh Chris	Williams, rh Craig
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Jenrick, rh Robert	Poulter, Dr Dan	Wood, Mike
Dunne, rh Philip	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Pow, Rebecca	Young, Jacob
Edwards, Ruth	Johnston, David	Prentis, rh Victoria	Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Ellis, rh Sir Michael	Jones, Andrew	Pursglove, Tom	
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jones, rh Mr David	Quin, rh Sir Jeremy	<b>Tellers for the Ayes:</b>
	Jones, Fay	Quince, Will	<b>Robert Largan and Scott Mann</b>

## NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i> )	Green, Sarah
Begum, Apsana	Hanvey, Neale
Blackford, rh Ian	Hendry, Drew
Blackman, Kirsty	Hosie, rh Stewart
Bonnar, Steven	Jardine, Christine
Brock, Deidre	Lake, Ben
Brown, Alan	Law, Chris
Callaghan, Amy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )	Lucas, Caroline
Chamberlain, Wendy	MacAskill, Kenny
Chapman, Douglas	Mc Nally, John
Cooper, Daisy	McLaughlin, Anne
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Moran, Layla
Cowan, Ronnie	Morgan, Helen
Crawley, Angela ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i> )	Nicolson, John ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )
Davey, rh Ed	O'Hara, Brendan
Day, Martyn	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Dorans, Allan ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Dyke, Sarah	Stephens, Chris
Edwards, Jonathan	Sultana, Zarah
Farron, Tim	Thewliss, Alison
Farry, Stephen	Thompson, Owen
Fellows, Marion	Thomson, Richard
Flynn, Stephen	Whitford, Dr Philippa ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i> )
Gardiner, Barry	Williams, Hywel
Gibson, Patricia	Wishart, Pete
Grady, Patrick	

**Tellers for the Noes:**

**Peter Grant and  
Gavin Newlands**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

## Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament

8.10 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):**  
I beg to move,

That Maria Eagle be removed from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under Schedule 1 to the Justice and Security Act 2013 and Dame Angela Eagle be appointed to that Committee under section 1 of that Act.

I thank the right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her services to the Committee.

8.11 pm

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I just wish to put on the record the Committee's appreciation of the hard work of the right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on the Intelligence and Security Committee. She served for a period of almost two years. She made major contributions to our annual reports published in December 2022 and December 2023 and in our major subject reports on China, published in July 2023, and on international partnerships in December 2023. Her contribution will also have an effect on our future reports on Iran and cloud technology due to be published before the end of the Parliament. Her legal training also made a valuable contribution to our examination of key legislation of relevance to the Committee, on which we were advised to tender advice.

Finally, even in the right hon. Lady's departure, by her being replaced by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), we find that we have a minimum of typesetting alterations to undertake given that they share the same surname. We are grateful to the right hon. Member for Garston and Halewood and we are grateful to her replacement for stepping into the void. Our loss is the Labour party's Defence Front Bench team's gain.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Business without Debate

### CHURCH OF ENGLAND (GENERAL SYNOD) (MEASURES)

*Ordered,*

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure (HC 341), a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 December 2023, be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Penny Mordaunt*.)

### CHURCH OF ENGLAND (GENERAL SYNOD) (MEASURES)

*Ordered,*

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Church of England Pensions (Application of Capital Funds) Measure (HC 342), a copy of which was laid before this House on 19 December 2023, be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Penny Mordaunt*.)

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*Ordered,*

That Kevin Brennan be discharged from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Alex Sobel be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection*.)

### HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL (SELECT COMMITTEE)

*Ordered,*

That Katherine Fletcher be discharged from the Holocaust Memorial Bill (Select Committee) and Lia Nici be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

*Ordered,*

That Darren Jones be discharged from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy and Liam Byrne be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

### Public Services in Cornwall: Funding

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

8.13 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a great pleasure to bring this debate to the House this evening. It is a particular joy that it has come so early, because it means that I have two hours to talk about my favourite subject—Cornwall. The whole House will be aware that I view Cornwall as a very, very special place—a unique place in many ways. I always count it as an incredible privilege that I was born and raised there, have lived and worked there my whole life, have raised my family there, and now have the joy of seeing my grandchildren grow up there as well.

Clearly, I am not the only one who views Cornwall as a very special and wonderful place. We have seen significant numbers of people choosing to move to Cornwall in recent years, and, of course, around 5 million people every year come on holiday. It is very easy to have that image of Cornwall as a wonderful place to go on holiday—we all have picture postcard images—without understanding that, behind many of those images, individuals, households and indeed businesses face a number of very real challenges.

We are a relatively low-income economy, with higher than average house prices and a number of other factors that make life challenging for many people. It is not just households and businesses that face challenges in Cornwall, but those who seek to deliver our public services as well. I think that we would all agree in this place that funding for public services should be based on two factors: the need or the demand for that service; and the cost of delivering that service locally. I hope to present to the Minister, whom I am pleased to see in his place, some of the issues that are unique to Cornwall. I particularly want to mention the combination of factors that mean that we face a number of very real challenges when it comes to delivering public services in Cornwall. There is a need, I believe, to review and reflect on those challenges when it comes to the allocation of funding for our services in Cornwall.

**Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this important debate. As a fellow south-west MP, I know that what he is referring to is also reflected in Somerset. Somerset Council is struggling to revive discretionary public services, which it wishes to do because of the current unfair funding method. In the last financial year, rural councils could budget only £77 per head on discretionary services, while urban areas spent more than double that. Does the hon. Member agree that more needs to be done to provide our rural constituents with the services they deserve?

**Steve Double:** I wonder whether the hon. Lady actually read the subject of the debate, which is specifically about funding and delivering public services in Cornwall. She can make her points in her own debate about her part of the world; I am here to talk about Cornwall this evening.

There is a need to reflect on these challenges and this combination of factors that we face in Cornwall when it comes to the funding that we receive for our public services.

[*Steve Double*]

My first point is about geography. Cornwall has a unique geography within the British Isles. We are long and narrow peninsula, unlike any other part of the country. We are almost an island. As I have said in this place before, if the River Tamar was 2.5 miles longer, we would actually be an island, and there is many proud a Cornishman who has talked about taking their shovel and finishing the job to create an island. The challenges we face often have more in common with those of an island than with being a part of the mainland.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

**Steve Double:** I see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) wishes to intervene and I will happily give way.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** Order. I trust the hon. Gentleman will adhere to the subject of the debate.

**Jim Shannon:** I hope you will be impressed, Mr Deputy Speaker, by the significance and interest of my comments, and how much they tie in with what the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) has said. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is my Gaelic cousin, which means that his interests are similar to my own. Has he ever considered working with other regions in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to help address the matter of public services funding? We have Gaelic cousins in Wales, Scotland and, of course, in Northern Ireland. We are united by culture, history and language, and we have mutual interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that our Gaelic strength is better within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** Order. Nice try, but this is an intervention not a speech.

**Steve Double:** The hon. Member makes a good point, which I will probably come to later. Cornwall has a great deal in common with what gets called the Celtic fringe of the United Kingdom. To pick up on his point about working together, there is a group of local authorities called Britain's Leading Edge, which represents areas on the coastal fringe of England that work together, because we recognise that the challenges that coastal areas face have some similarities across the country. Clearly there is a lot in common that we can share.

Having said that, our coastline in Cornwall is unique. We are almost an island. I know that we enjoy a bit of banter with Devon from time to time, but they are our only mainland neighbour, which impacts the delivery of services. Counties in the middle of England are surrounded by other local authorities, police forces, fire services and health services that they can share resources with. If there is a particular challenge in one area, it can draw on services from the surrounding counties to help it with that specific incident. We do not have that in Cornwall. In most of Cornwall, we have to provide our own resilience because there is no one else nearby to come and help. I am not sure that that is always understood by Government. It certainly does not seem to get reflected in the funding allocation.

We have the longest coastline in Cornwall: 422 miles. I have not walked all of it yet, but I have walked a great deal of it over the years. We have literally hundreds of small coastal communities. Nowhere in Cornwall is more than 25 miles from the sea, and the vast majority of people live an awful lot closer to it than that. It is just common sense that when delivering a public service in a coastal community, there is not as big a population to deliver that service to, and there is not as much land for people to live on. More sites are therefore needed. By definition, we need more schools, health facilities, police stations and fire stations because we have a smaller area for the station or facility to service. That means that it costs more to deliver services in a coastal area such as Cornwall. I have tried to make that point throughout my time in this place, but I am not sure that the particular challenge that Cornwall faces in delivering services because of our geography and being a narrow peninsula really gets appreciated. It is certainly not reflected in the funding formula.

We are not just a coastal area but a rural one. Cornwall Council is the second biggest by land mass of any local authority in the country—1,375 square miles—yet we have a relatively small population of just over half a million people. We have no towns with a population of more than 25,000. In fact, nearly half of all people who live in Cornwall live in communities of fewer than 3,000. That rurality and sparsity presents real challenges for delivering services because of the additional travelling that has to take place. Our police and fire engines have to travel further to reach those communities.

School travel is a very big challenge in Cornwall. With such large areas to cover, pupils with special educational needs in particular have to travel much further to get to the facilities that we have. We face a huge challenge in adult social care, partly because of the rurality and being a long, narrow peninsular, and the distance that domiciliary care workers have to travel to reach those who need their services.

About 10 years ago, we thought that we had won a big victory on funding for rural services within local government. After a great deal of pressure and arguing from MPs with rural constituencies, the Government introduced the rural services delivery grant. That was really the first time that the emphasis under the Labour Government—when most of the money went into urban and densely populated areas, because they seemed to think that those were the only places in which deprivation took place—had been corrected, with an acknowledgment that rural areas have particular needs and particular costs in delivering those services.

Unfortunately, although we won the argument in principle, when it came to allocating money, it was dampened down and we did not get as much as we should have. In the past 10 years, we have never fully put that right. I suggest to the Government that we really ought to look at that. With the current proposed local government settlement, I know that many rural authorities will face huge challenges. Cornwall is certainly one of them. One way that we could correct that is by increasing the rural services delivery grant to the level it really should be at, rather than the dampened-down level.

We have also been promised a review of police funding in rural areas, but it has not yet happened. Sadly, during that time the gap for Cornwall has actually become bigger. We were 9p per person below the average; we have now

dropped to 10p per person below the average for funding. There is therefore a real need to bring forward the review of police funding and ensure that Cornwall gets the funding that it needs. The two factors of being a coastal community and being a rural community really put pressure on the delivery of our services in Cornwall. That needs to be reflected when it comes to funding.

The other element that I will mention is, again, something that I have talked about numerous times: the impact of tourism on Cornwall. Tourism is really important to the Cornish economy, and we welcome it. Typically, 5 million people a year come to Cornwall on holiday. In the UK, we are second only to London in terms of the number of visitors that we welcome every year. To put the impact of that in perspective, I am privileged to represent the town of Newquay, Cornwall's premier tourist destination, which has a population of about 24,000. In July and August, we have 200,000 people in any given week in Cornwall, so there is eight times the population when tourists come in the peak season.

The pressure that that puts on our infrastructure and services cannot be overestimated. We particularly feel it in the pressure on the NHS. We often say in Cornwall that we have two winters every year in terms of pressure on the NHS. At this time of year, the NHS is under pressure just about everywhere because of seasonal viruses and the impact that cold weather has on people, so there is great pressure on the NHS in Cornwall at this time of year. Then in the summer, when all the tourists come, our NHS is also under huge pressure because of the sheer numbers of people who are there. While most hospitals and NHS services around the country typically have a bit of respite in the summer because all their residents go on holiday, they all come to Cornwall, so we have to pick up the pressure. I do not think that gets reflected particularly in the funding.

The demand on our ambulance services in the summer is also significant. I acknowledge that a lot of work has been done in recent years through the 111 service and Pharmacy First, which we piloted in Cornwall, to get people to think a bit more smartly about where to go to get NHS treatment and advice, rather than turning up at Treliske or trying to see one of our local GPs. That has certainly helped, but there is no way of avoiding the pressure that the NHS in Cornwall faces every summer because of the tourists. Our police face huge pressures in the summer. Crime goes up, and there are more road traffic accidents and cases of antisocial behaviour, all of which the police need to respond to, but that is not reflected in our funding.

Another area, which I recently talked about in a debate, is the impact of tourism on our housing supply and the number of Airbnbs, which push prices up beyond the reach of many people. That means that we struggle to recruit the people we need for our public services because they cannot afford to buy a house to live there. When we talk to NHS managers in Cornwall in particular, they repeatedly say that housing is one of the biggest reasons why they often struggle to recruit the doctors and nurses they need, because they cannot find anywhere to live. The impact that tourism has on our housing market is equally significant.

The final factor I want to mention is our demographics. Cornwall has a rapidly ageing population. Our number of elderly people is 6% higher than the UK average, and the number of over-70s in Cornwall has gone up by

52% in recent years. Some of that is just because everyone is getting older, but it is also because people see Cornwall as a great place to retire to. Again, I do not blame them—I want to retire in Cornwall; it is a great place to retire—but that number of people of retirement age moving to Cornwall puts huge pressure on our health and social care services.

The inverse of that is that we do not have enough people of working age willing to work in the health and social care sector to provide the services they need, so the impact of our demographics is significant. This financial year, Cornwall Council will spend over £250 million on providing adult social care. That is one third of its revenue budget just on social care, and that will only increase as the years go by. We need that to be reflected in the funding settlements we are provided with.

Each of those factors—our geography, the impact of tourism, and the impact of an ageing population—in and of themselves would present significant challenges to Cornwall. The combined effect of those factors is that public services in Cornwall face a unique set of challenges, and nowhere else in the UK faces them to the degree that we do. I want to make the case that, because of that unique combination of pressures and challenges, we need to look again at the funding that Cornwall receives and make a special case for Cornwall.

The Government have already acknowledged that Cornwall is a special place that requires special treatment. We referred earlier to the fact that the Cornish have been recognised as a national minority and receive protected status as a national minority. In 2014, the Council of Europe recognised the Cornish in that way, and the UK Government have acknowledged that. Actually, the UK Government said that they give the Cornish people the same recognition as the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish within the United Kingdom. That is very welcome, but it does not seem to have any impact on Government policy when it comes to funding. If we are going to say that Cornwall is a special place and that the Cornish are a specially recognised and protected people, that should have an impact on the way that Cornwall receives its funding.

Cornwall was the first county to receive a devolution deal back in 2015. Again, the Government at that time recognised the particular uniqueness of Cornwall. That devolution deal was recently upgraded with a new devolution deal. I am personally disappointed that we did not manage to get a level 3 deal, which would have given Cornwall a great deal more and certainly would have shifted the focus much more on to Cornwall. I am disappointed that we did not secure that, but we have had a new level 2 deal. That, again, is the recognition that the Government have given to Cornwall.

The other way the Government have recognised the challenges that Cornwall faces, particularly with regard to our economy, is through the shared prosperity fund, which replaced the European regional development fund. Cornwall received £137 million—far more than any other part of the UK—through the shared prosperity fund. That shows that the Government recognise the particular challenges we face in Cornwall, especially in growing our economy and upskilling our people, and it has been hugely welcome.

We are in the middle of the current round and projects in my constituency have received significant funding, such as essential infrastructure work at the

[Steve Double]

harbour at Charlestown, one of our historical sites. Newquay has also received funding to support its tourism industry and extend the season, which will really help the economy there. We have found that the shared prosperity scheme is much easier to allocate and to access than the old ERDF programmes, which were hugely bureaucratic and always required matched funding. The shared prosperity fund money that has been provided to Cornwall has been very welcome and is doing a lot of good.

However, I want to raise with the Minister the fact that the current round runs out in 2025. That will come around very quickly, so we need to start the conversation and understand what the process will be for the allocation of the next round of shared prosperity funding. I hope the Minister will be able to confirm that, in the allocation of that funding in the next round, the Government will continue to recognise the specific challenges that Cornwall faces and continue to support the Cornish economy as they have done over the last few years.

The unique combination of challenges we face in Cornwall, and the fact that the Government already recognise Cornwall in a number of ways as being special and having particular challenges, now need to be reflected in the way our public services are funded—particularly our health service, education, local government and the police. We need the true cost of delivering those services in Cornwall to be reflected in the amount of money we receive. I hope the Minister has got the message that we have particular challenges in Cornwall and that the Government will reflect on those points, continue the conversations with MPs from Cornwall and look again to ensure that Cornwall gets the funding it needs, so that the people of Cornwall can get the public services they deserve.

8.36 pm

**Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this debate, which is so important to my constituents and people across Cornwall. I do not want to speak for long, but I want to add a bit of localised meat to the bones. I must also disagree with my hon. Friend on one point. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and I were at a presentation on Friday on the value of seafood to the Cornish economy, where one of the points made was that an economist had looked at the furthest point from the sea, with particular precision, and had found that nobody in Cornwall is further than 12 miles away from the sea. It is even more coastal than we originally thought—[*Interruption.*] Yes, on a high tide.

I want to add a little meat to the bones of what my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay said. He set out the position on NHS funding very well. Treliske Hospital, the main hospital in my Truro constituency, is the hub for all acute needs for Cornwall. Something the NHS is doing particularly well is to try to spread those services out across the county so that we do not have to have everything happening in Truro.

However, there are particular challenges in places in my constituency, such as Holywell bay on the north coast, or the Roseland peninsula on the south coast. If people on the Roseland peninsula need an ambulance,

it has to go across on a ferry before it can get to them. That is how remote it is. Even though it is very close as the bird flies to Falmouth or Truro, the logistics of getting emergency services there are a real challenge for people who live on the peninsula.

I want to make one final point, on special educational needs funding. Based on provisional funding data for 2024-25, Cornwall will receive annual needs funding per child of £724.14. That ranks us 142nd among local authorities. Our statistical neighbours—local authorities with similar characteristics—are due to receive an average of £78.49 per child per year more than Cornwall. In comparison, parents in London boroughs such as Camden, Lewisham, Islington or Westminster can expect their high-needs child to receive something in the region of £2,500 to £3,000.

If Cornwall were to receive the median of everyone else's funding, it would be worth approximately another £5.4 million to the Cornish local authority, which would therefore be able to provide a much better service for our children. Primarily, as my hon. Friend pointed out, that is down to two things. The first is school transport, because it is very tricky to get a child from those remote places I just mentioned to the school they need to get to, and the second is being able to attract relevant teachers, given the housing challenges that we have talked about in this debate.

I will leave it there for colleagues to reflect on. I join my hon. Friend in his pleas to the Treasury, which he articulated so well, that Cornwall is a special case. We do not like being called a special case for the wrong reasons, but when we have water on three sides—almost four sides—the challenges are real. We have a very competent Conservative-run council in Cornwall, and if it is finding them to be challenges, then we can guarantee that they are very real indeed.

8.39 pm

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to include in this discussion the Council of the Isles of Scilly, which faces exactly the same kind of challenges. I am in the unique position, among my Cornish colleagues, in that I have two unitary authorities seeking to deliver services to my constituents. I will not speak for too long.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. He was right to mention the shared prosperity fund and other funds that recognise the particular challenges that Cornwall faces, but those funds do not pay to deliver rural services, so although it is good and absolutely right that we have that money, we must also consider the money that councils get to deliver services.

My hon. Friend talked about the sheer cost of delivering adult social care. In an area where low incomes are often the norm, people do not have huge amounts of money, and they certainly do not have money sitting in the bank, so when they get to an age when they need social care, it is right that the council steps in. For an older population with a lot of deprivation, it is obvious that the council will have to step in, perhaps in more ways than elsewhere.

Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly have been underfunded for years. We know that urban councils will receive 37% more in Government-funded spending power per head compared with Cornwall



Council. As a result of years of underfunding, rural councils such as those of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have had to increase council tax to balance the books, resulting in rural residents now paying on average 20% more than people in urban areas. That is particularly challenging for an area where, as I said, our wages are about a third less than the UK average.

As my hon. Friend said, Cornwall Council services cost more to deliver because of our rurality and coastal stretch. I agree with everything that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) said. The Government have not applied the fair funding formula, and that is the crux of what we are talking about here. As we have heard, in 2016, the Government accepted the challenge, accepted that it costs more to deliver rural services, and accepted that fair funding should be delivered across all local authorities, but they have not applied that in full because of damping and concerns about taking money from urban areas, so will the Minister encourage the Minister with responsibility for local government, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), to use the rural service delivery grant to make up the shortfall?

After not delivering the fair funding formula, the Government introduced the rural service delivery grant to address the short-changing that Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly and others have faced. If the Minister takes away one thing from the debate and the brilliant points that have been made, it should be to use the rural service delivery grant to address the shortfall until we can deliver the fair funding formula in full. I say that because predominantly urban constituencies will receive £312 per head from central Government, while Cornwall receives £244 per head. That is a real difference for everyone living in Cornwall and seeking to raise a family and make the most of their lives in Cornwall and on Scilly.

As I have said, in 2016, the Government accepted the challenge and recognised that it costs more to deliver rural services. However, as they have not applied the fair funding formula in full, Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly have been underfunded for years. In reality, Cornwall Council now has £77 less per head than an urban authority to deliver services that are vital for every person in our constituencies. Will the Minister take all that has been said back to the Treasury, as well as to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and deliver what is only fair for the people of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly? That is all we are asking.

8.43 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. He is undoubtedly a strong advocate for his corner of the country and for his constituents. I can think of few greater champions for Cornwall, or for the funding of public services there, than him and my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory). I very much value my hon. Friends' contributions, knowledge, and insights on the local issues they have outlined tonight, and I will do my best to address some of their specific concerns.

Dealing first with local government finance, I certainly recognise that inflation is higher than when budgets were set at the last spending review in 2021. This is true on a global scale, and it presents challenges throughout the world and, of course, throughout our constituencies and communities. Reliable, high-quality public services always matter, but they mean even more to us in challenging times such as these, and in dispersed populations and rural and coastal areas where one's nearest neighbour might be half a mile away, they can be a real lifeline. The Government are working to ensure that those services are well funded: the provisional 2024-25 local government finance settlement makes up to £64.1 billion available to local governments, an increase of up to almost £4 billion in core spending power on last year. In Cornwall, that has resulted in an almost 7% increase in core spending power. My hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay and for St Ives have pointed to the rural services delivery grant, which is now £95 million, the highest it has ever been. That fund is distributed to the top quartile of authorities, ranked by super-sparsity, but I take my hon. Friends' point about its scale, and I will be very happy to take that away to my colleagues at DLUHC.

Our coastal communities are vital to the UK's economic and environmental wellbeing, as well as being home to hundreds of thousands of people, but as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay has pointed out, they face particular challenges. That is why we have supported so many places along our coast, from the beaches of Cornwall to the bays of Stornoway. Eleven of the 12 freeports across the UK are based in coastal areas, with each receiving up to £26 million in Government funding over the next few years, as well as potentially hundreds of millions of pounds in locally retained business rates to upgrade local infrastructure and stimulate regeneration across coastal communities.

My hon. Friends have mentioned the UK shared prosperity fund. I recognise and commend my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay for his advocacy for that fund, which has supported many of our coastal communities and provides—as he says—a significant £132 million to Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, reflecting their share of previous European structural funds. Local leaders are already using that money to deliver ambitious plans for what they call good growth, while the Government have allocated almost £100 million to the towns fund and the future high streets fund to support Cornwall Council's ambitions to encourage more economic regeneration and strengthen pride in place. I know that my hon. Friend would like more certainty on the future of the UK shared prosperity fund, which he has asked for tonight. While I hope he can understand that I cannot give him that certainty right now, I recognise his council's enthusiasm to build on the strong start it has made, and I know he will continue to be a very strong advocate on behalf of his council in this place.

Recognising the importance of transportation in rural areas such as Cornwall to help boost productivity, we have also committed some £32.5 million to local highways maintenance and funding potholes. We went further in the spring Budget last year, with an extra £5 million for that endeavour. Through Network North, further funding totalling £3.6 million has been committed to Cornwall in both 2023 and 2024, with later allocations still to be

[Gareth Davies]

determined. It is not just Cornwall's roads that we are funding: last year, we awarded Cornwall Council £50 million from the levelling-up fund for the Mid Cornwall Metro. That transport project will provide new hourly direct train services to improve the current links between four of Cornwall's largest urban areas, so as well as enjoying some of the best views one can get from a train anywhere in the country, residents will be better connected to employment, education and key services. Local leaders have pushed for that metro service, and this Government are very happy to support it, because we are committed to giving more power to local leaders—who, after all, know the needs of their areas almost as well as the local MPs do.

To that end, the recent level 2 devolution deal for Cornwall, announced at the autumn statement of 2023, provides Cornwall with new funding and powers to support local services. This will help Cornwall to maintain the skills that local people need and help bring clean energy to the region's shores. There were initially discussions, as my hon. Friend pointed out, about a level 3 deal, which would have seen a directly elected Mayor introduced with further powers and an investment fund. However, as he pointed out, Cornwall Council decided that a level 2 deal was preferable at this point in time, and I of course completely respect that decision. After all, it is up to local people to decide and for us to support them, and that is what we have done on this deal and on other local matters of importance.

My hon. Friend mentioned policing. Because of decisions taken by this central and local government, funding for the policing system will rise nationally by some £842 million in 2024-25, distributed according to population sparsity. Devon and Cornwall police will receive up to £230 million in core settlement grants, but I appreciate what he said about the police funding formula. He will know that a review commenced in 2021, which is continuing to carry out engagement. He may wish it to speed up, and I know he will make representations to my colleagues at the Home Office accordingly.

My hon. Friend was completely right to point out the great many people who in recent times have wanted not just to visit Cornwall but to set up a home and raise a family there. Demand for housing is therefore increasing from permanent and part-time residents who want to buy. However, a lack of affordable housing is causing acute concern—house prices are high relative to incomes when compared nationally—and we understand that. The temporary and emergency accommodation budget

has also become increasingly strained in recent years. To address that concern, the Government are committed to building more affordable homes. As recommended at the 2021 spending review, we are investing £11.5 billion between 2021 and 2026 through the affordable homes programme, which is the largest cash investment we have seen in a decade. I also note that Cornwall Council has been supportive of Government plans to enable local authorities to increase the council tax premium on second homes by up to 100%. It is believed that this could provide £20 million of additional revenue. There is always more to do of course, so it is critical that we continue to have open conversations as we are doing tonight.

Finally, let me address the comments on SEND from my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth. Nationally, the Government are committed, and have committed, to addressing this. At the last spending review, we committed £2.6 billion to create 30,000 new school places for young people with SEND. It is our hope that this will lead to fewer people having to be transported long distances, as she described, to access the right educational settings. Again, there is more to do, and I know that the Department for Education, which leads on this policy area, is progressing more wholesale reforms of the SEND system. I would be happy to have the relevant Minister from the Department for Education write to her on Cornwall specifically.

I have spoken at length about what we are doing for Cornwall, but let me finish by recognising Cornwall's contribution to our country. I would not be the first MP from Grantham to recognise its virtues. Were I to walk on the sandy shores of Constantine bay, I would be following in the very large footsteps of a certain greengrocer's daughter, although I am reliably informed that Watergate bay in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay is also worth a visit. Cornwall is not just home to incredible natural beauty, delicious pasties, irresistible ice cream and thrilling surfing. More importantly, it is home to some of the finest people our country has ever known. While I have listed the many facts and figures set out by this Government, we should never forget that behind them are thousands of wonderful Cornish people. They could not be better represented than by my hon. Friend, whom I look forward to continuing to work with long into the future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

8.54 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Monday 15 January 2024

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

## Foster Carers: Allowances and Tax Arrangements

4.30 pm

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

That this House has considered e-petition 625515 relating to allowances and tax arrangements for foster carers.

This e-petition asks the UK Government to review and increase both the allowances paid to foster carers and foster carers' tax exemption levels, so that they can reflect the true cost of caring for a child. I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Sir Graham. I appreciate that we are a little light on numbers attending, because of the seriousness of events in the main Chamber, but I hope that I can do justice to this case.

I am also delighted to be leading this most important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, because the work of foster carers, and the full costs of caring for a child in foster care so that they can thrive—not just survive—have for too long been given neither enough attention nor the deserved recognition. I must admit that this is the kind of profession that I personally would be terrified to even begin to enter into, and my gratitude goes out to the people who take it on.

The issues raised in the petition have several complex aspects that I will come on to, but let us start at the beginning. The petition came about because of the results of the 2022 cost of living survey carried out by FosterTalk, which is

“the Centre of Excellence UK for the Martin James Foundation” and has for two decades been supporting those who care. The response to the survey was the largest for all surveys launched by FosterTalk to date, and its findings were stark.

The headline figures were that because of financial pressures, 43% of carers may leave fostering in the next two years; 56% of carers had not received an uplift in allowances over the previous six to 12 months; 90% of those who had felt that it did not cover the cost of caring for a child under the rising cost of living; 38% of carers had experienced mental health issues due to the cost of living crisis; and 92% of carers felt financially worse off compared with the previous year. Those are stark findings.

Of course, behind the headline figures are people—dedicated, compassionate and vulnerable people who care and are cared for—and their individual stories. The headline figures do not demonstrate the main consequential impacts, which are that more foster carers are leaving the role than joining and that the numbers are declining against a backdrop of record numbers of children who need foster carers. That is borne out by statistics published in November last year by Ofsted in relation to fostering in England, which revealed that significantly more foster carers had chosen to leave the role in 2023 compared with the number joining.

Sarah Thomas, chief executive of the Fostering Network, the leading organisation for foster care, has said that “the Ofsted data shows the immense pressure the fostering system is under—and there simply aren't enough foster carers to meet the rising number of children coming into care.

For the second year in a row we are seeing a net decrease in the number of foster carers available... Recruitment of foster carers is the most crucial issue facing fostering services across”

the UK. The Fostering Network is

“calling for a UK-wide strategy to address... the urgent need to” both

“recruit and retain foster carers”, because the indication is that

“these annual losses will continue unless urgent action of a much greater scale is taken.”

The Fostering Network is not alone in that opinion. The vice-chair of the Martin James Foundation, Daniel Croft, who was recently awarded an MBE for his services to fostering, has said that

“current financial pressures on our foster carers have never been greater and if we do not act, we are at risk of losing the largest dedicated workforce for children in the U.K.”

We simply cannot allow that to happen, so let us examine the hurdles that must be overcome—and how they can be overcome—to prevent a worsening of the existential crisis in fostering by effecting urgent action on a much greater scale.

As a lay person to the foster care debate, ahead of this debate I met experts from FosterTalk, the Fostering Network and CoramBAAF, the UK's leading membership organisation for professionals working across adoption, fostering and kinship care. Those experts repeatedly highlighted similar complex aspects, and I want to raise the allowances paid to foster carers—foremost, the inconsistency of how national minimum allowances are applied.

The national minimum allowances for foster carers are set by each of the UK Governments. They vary depending on where the foster carer lives and the age of the child they care for. Notably, Scotland was late to the table and introduced national minimum allowances only in August last year—I will say more about that shortly. I can understand that the different age bands of children is relevant. Babies, for example, have different needs from teenagers. Historically, social security allowances for children recognised that and the Fostering Network continues to broadly follow that model. However, varying amounts according to where someone lives is something that I cannot understand. It is a classic example of an extremely unfair postcode lottery.

According to the most recent weekly fostering allowances report for the financial year 2023-24 that the Fostering Network published last September, children's experiences of the application of allowances, even within the same nation and for the same age bracket, is far from consistent. For example, allowances paid in respect of children four years and under in Wales varies between local authorities by up to £43.96 per week; and in England, it varies by up to £92.34 per week, equating to an astonishing maximum difference of £4,801.68 each year.

In Scotland, the same allowance varied by up to £89.24 a week. However, as I have mentioned, I am pleased that the Scottish Government recognised this inequality and introduced, for the first time, a set rate that all local authorities must pay for foster and kinship carers. I hope

[Martyn Day]

that that move will reduce the future level of variance in Scotland. The new Scottish-recommended allowance was backdated to 1 April 2023 and has benefited more than 9,000 children. If local authorities in Scotland happened to be paying above the recommended allowance, the higher amount stayed in payment so that no one was worse off because of that commitment.

The Fostering Network welcomed that positive move. None the less, it has calculated that the allowance levels across all four nations still fall short of the true cost of caring for a child in foster care. The example I gave of allowances paid in respect of children who are four years and under is by no means the worst. The difference in allowances paid in respect of children between the ages of 11 and 15 in England amounts to a whopping £8,470.80 over the 2023-24 financial year. Additionally, in England, there are different minimum weekly allowances set, depending on whether someone lives in London, the south-east or the rest of England.

Notably, Northern Ireland is the only nation where all trust foster carers, including kinship carers, receive the same rate of allowances to cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care. I commend Northern Ireland for its consistent approach, which is administered by a central service, not local authorities. Unfortunately, however, Northern Ireland's national minimum allowance is the lowest paid across all the UK nations.

On top of the inconsistency of how national minimum allowances are applied, there is also the disparity of whether additional allowances are paid to foster carers. These can be provided for things such as holidays, religious festivals, birthdays, school uniforms, an initial stock of clothing and mileage to fuel mum or dad's taxi. We all know that those things can have an added pressure on household finances at the best of times, let alone during a cost of living crisis. Indeed, one carer who voiced concerns in FosterTalk's cost of living survey said:

"I worry that energy, fuel and food prices will keep going up and we get more strike action, more disruption and it all impacts negatively on our foster children who already have had too much worry and negativity in their lives."

That strikes at the heart of the problem. The inequality created by the current system for children in foster care means that some are not being given the opportunities to recover from the upheavals that they have experienced, to enable them to go on to achieve their aspirations.

A significant number of the local authorities that completed freedom of information requests that informed the Fostering Network's most recent report on weekly fostering allowances stated that everything is included in the national minimum allowance. How can it be fair that a child can benefit from an additional allowance in one local authority when another child in exactly the same circumstances in a neighbouring local authority cannot? I have even heard anecdotal evidence of foster carers moving between local authorities so that children in their care can benefit from more generous allowances.

Additionally, different local authorities offer different discounts on rates of council tax to foster carers, ranging from zero to 100%. It is utterly unjust. On what level is it acceptable that 3% of those who responded to FosterTalk's cost of living survey had used a food bank to support their family? Now, 3% might not seem like a lot, but

that amounts to 130 families who took the survey and who have taken on the responsibilities that lie with their local authority to care for and nurture those children. Remember, too, that the 3% is from the 4,349 foster carer respondents, which does not account for the wider expanse of fostering households, of which there are 43,405 in England alone, as at the end of March 2023. A reasonable appraisal is therefore that the number of families having to use a food bank could be increased, perhaps tenfold. No wonder the number of foster carers is declining.

The Fostering Network has proposed a fairer funding framework for foster carers that is simplified as well as consistent. Taking account of Loughborough University's minimum income standard for the UK and of Nina Oldfield's "The Adequacy of Foster Carer Allowances", which identifies the additional costs of caring for a child in foster care, the Fostering Network collaborated with Pro Bono Economics to calculate suggested rates of foster care allowances that

"include funds to enable foster families to save for birthdays, holidays and cultural or religious festival payments with the intention that foster carers can control and spend these additional funds as they see fit."

That is a sensible proposal to eradicate the inequality that the system creates.

Another inequality in the system is that there is no national minimum allowance for young people aged 18 years and over to remain living in their foster family environment until they are ready to live independently. According to the most recent fostering allowances report, the difference in allowances paid to the 18-plus group across the UK nations is the most extreme, amounting to a staggering sum of £12,044 annually. That deficiency must be addressed, as young people's needs do not stop because they turn 18.

The Fostering Network's suggested rates of foster care allowances were underpinned by the principles of being child-centred, efficient—as well as sufficient—trusting, aspirational and, last but not least, consistent. Those seem to me to be quality principles. Will the Minister consider the Fostering Network's recommended rates so that the full cost of caring for a child is covered? Will he look at addressing the needs of young people who turn 18 so that the best outcomes for care leavers are enabled? Will he also advise if the routine uplift to the national minimum allowances is ringfenced?

I must make one final and important point: the disparities that have been highlighted today would not have come to light without the monitoring that is carried out by the Fostering Network every year, and I thank it and FosterTalk for making today's debate possible. I also thank both organisations for taking time away from their important work to meet me.

The Fostering Network, however, can only obtain information through freedom of information requests to local authorities because they are public bodies. Information from independent fostering agencies, which are not obliged to respond to freedom of information requests, is missing. Will the Minister therefore examine the possibility of the monitoring of all foster care providers being undertaken by a Department? Such a move could also address further disparities in the rules and regulations that exist in the foster care system, such as carers receiving payments between placements or how carers can receive support when an allegation has

been made against them—statistics show that a majority of people against whom allegations have been made are completely exonerated.

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the situation that he has set out with the handling of complaints is a symptom of the fact that, because they are not employees, foster carers cannot be members of trade unions and, as a result, cannot seek support by a route that would be available to most typical employees?

**Martyn Day:** The hon. Member makes a very good point. Foster carers are all self-employed and have to deal with all the complexities of that, including tax returns, as well as with the vital role of caring.

At the very least, a review of how allowances are applied to foster carers is urgently needed. Foster carers must receive a payment that takes account of the full cost of caring for a child, now and into future years. Foster carers need to be recognised for the work they do, and children deserve better.

4.45 pm

**Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on securing this debate, and I pay tribute to everybody who took the time to sign the petition, including 48 residents in my constituency of Stretford and Urmston. Like those people, I care passionately about ensuring that foster carers are recognised and supported.

In preparing for the debate, I was fortunate that a member of my office staff, Emma Hirst, had been a foster carer for over 20 years, up until very recently. In that time, Emma provided a loving and supportive home to countless children, including refugee children, many of whom had been through immense hardship. I place on record my thanks to Emma, and to all the foster carers in Stretford and Urmston and more widely, for the life-changing impact that they have had on some of the most vulnerable people in my community and across the country. My comments will be shaped by Emma's experience.

Emma told me that, during her 20-year spell as a foster carer, the role became increasingly challenging. When she started, the children who came into her care were often traumatised, but back then they were able to access mental health support, pastoral care at school and youth services, all of which were vital for their education and wellbeing. A decade of Conservative austerity has eroded those services, and the children who came into her care in later years faced increasingly lengthy waits for any kind of support.

The focus of today's debate is financial support for foster carers, but inadequate financial support must be seen in the broader context of the decline of the public services that foster carers once relied on to make their jobs easier, which is a key reason for the recruitment and retention crisis in fostering.

Despite the pressure she was under, Emma, like foster carers across the country, was registered as self-employed and was therefore unable to access sick pay, payment for time off or any real employment rights. As I mentioned, like other foster carers, she also was not able to be

represented by a trade union. Ultimately, it all became too much; Emma was burned out, and she recently took the decision to stop fostering. Like any true foster carer, however, she made time over Christmas to take a baby on an emergency basis, because foster carers are always there to look after children in desperate need.

Although Emma's decision is understandable, it is a huge loss to fostering services in my community. Her example shows the importance of putting the right support in place for foster carers. Naturally, there is a financial element to that. The altruistic nature of fostering means that conversations about money are often shied away from, and our admiration for foster carers does not pay the bills, so it is right to discuss these allowances, tax arrangements and fees. That is not least because, as the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk mentioned, the fostering allowance does not cover the full cost of providing foster care to a child.

I will give credit where it is due: in December, the Government announced a 6.88% uplift to the foster care national minimum allowance. I also welcome the changes made last year that mean that most foster carers will no longer pay tax on that income. But I wish to focus the majority of my comments on those fostering allowances, because I note that the increases to the minimum allowance still fall short of the recommendations made by the Fostering Network.

I would be grateful if the Minister could set out what assessment his Department has made of the affordability of the national allowances called for by the Fostering Network. Moreover, I would be grateful if he would clarify where the funding for the 6.88% uplift will come from. I am unclear whether local authorities will have to find that money from existing budgets. Given the perilous state of local government finance, that may prove unmanageable for councils across the country. I am sure the Minister intends to fund the uplift from an alternative source, but I would be grateful for his reassurance on that point.

Another crucial point is that the fostering allowances are a postcode lottery for many people. In England, only 26% of local authorities pay the national minimum allowance at all the age bands. That results in discrepancies: for example, the maximum difference in allowance rates payable for 11 to 15-year-olds in England is as great as more than £8,000 per year. When we all agree that all children's lives are of equal importance, that cannot be acceptable. Will the Department consider monitoring compliance with the national minimum allowance and look into reviewing fee payments so that there is more consistent compensation for the time, skills and experience of foster carers?

If we needed a reminder of the importance of getting this right, it came with Ofsted's data on foster care for 2023, which showed a 6% fall to 35,000 over the past two years in the number of mainstream households in England who are fostering. The data also showed that the number of applications to become foster carers fell by over 3,000 between 2021 and 2023. This recruitment and retention crisis comes at a time when the care population continues to grow; it now stands at over 83,000.

The value of foster carers is in allowing children to be placed in environments that feel more like a real home, rather than in the less natural environment of a care home. It is also in the financial savings to local authorities, because many placements in care homes and other

[Andrew Western]

settings can be incredibly expensive. These trends are simply unsustainable; for the good of vulnerable children and the foster carers who are so dedicated to them, we must address them. I look forward to hearing more about how the Government intend to do that when the Minister responds.

4.52 pm

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Graham, to debate this important petition on foster care allowances and support for foster families. I am standing in for my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is travelling back from a memorial service abroad and is very sorry to miss the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for opening the debate so powerfully on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and the more than 13,000 people, including those from my constituency, Feltham and Heston, who signed the petition. I also thank all our foster carers across the country, including in my borough of Hounslow.

Foster families provide a loving home for 68% of looked-after children in England. Foster caring can be challenging but also very rewarding, and it can be absolutely transformative for vulnerable children. Fostering relationships can last long beyond the duration of a placement, giving some of our country's most vulnerable children lifelong, stable and loving relationships too. I am grateful to FosterTalk and the Fostering Network for their tireless support and campaigning on the impacts of the cost of living on foster families and the children they care for.

We have heard today about the enormous challenges facing foster carers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for his speech, in which we heard the story of Emma from his office and the change in support that she has experienced over the last decade. He also referred to the ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, which I will comment on further.

Fourteen years of Conservative government has stripped away vital family support, shifting the focus of children's services to providing an emergency service rather than early intervention to help families stay together. The cost of living crisis has pushed so many families into hardship, but foster families, who have been undervalued for many years, have been impacted particularly hard. FosterTalk's 2022 survey, which the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk referred to extensively, found that 92% of foster carers feel financially worse off, and 18% have been pushed into debt in recent years. Reference was also made to the use of food banks. Some 66% of carers have been forced to cut down on their heating to cope with soaring energy costs, and 38% feel that their mental health has been affected due to the increase in the cost of living.

The Government set the national minimum allowance for foster carers annually in April. The increases in April 2023 and the planned above-inflation increases from April 2024 are very welcome, but it is essential that the funding actually reaches foster families. Across the country there is a postcode lottery, with some fostering

services paying families significantly below the national minimum allowance. The Fostering Network has found that some services significantly underfund the allowance for an 11 to 15-year-old, for example, by as much as £2,333 per year. I hope that the Minister can update us on what he is doing to ensure that all services offer at least the national minimum allowance, and to ensure proper monitoring of that allowance across the country.

It is important that support for foster families reflects the impact of the last two years on family finances. Although the headline rate of inflation may have fallen, let us remember that food inflation remains high, at more than 9%, while the Government's mismanagement of the economy has hammered households with rising mortgage and rent costs. The Labour party will always put children and families first. We have already set out plans to help address the cost of living for families. Just some of the costed measures we have announced include acting now to ensure that every family caring for a primary-aged pupil has access to a free breakfast club, and limiting the number of costly branded school uniform items to save families hundreds of pounds through a child's time at school. What assessment has the Department made of the specific impacts of rising costs on foster families?

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk talked powerfully about the urgent crisis in recruitment and retention of foster families. Worryingly, more than four in 10 foster carers are thinking of leaving fostering. At the same time, fewer and fewer households are registering to become foster carers, and the conversion rate of people who express interest in fostering to actual foster carers is vanishingly small.

We also need diversity in our foster carer network so that families have options for closer matches to their cultures, foods or faiths, which helps a child to feel settled at an anxious time. The Department's own figures show a 26% decrease in newly registered households since 2019. The same figures show more households leaving fostering during the year than joining, at a time when the number of children in care continues to increase. Without the right placements, more children will end up being placed in homes that do not meet their needs. In 2021, all but six local fostering services reported a shortage in the number of carers they need for their local population.

There is an urgent need for more foster carers who can look after teenagers, large sibling groups, children with complex needs, and children with special educational needs and disabilities. Foster caring is more than simply opening a home to an additional child; it requires skill and dedication. Looked-after children are more likely than other children to have experienced a severe trauma in their lives, such as bereavement, abuse or neglect, and foster carers need to have a good understanding of a wide range of needs.

In response to the independent review of children's social care led by Josh MacAlister, the Government committed to a nationwide recruitment and retention programme for foster carers. When does the Minister expect to be able to update the House on the progress of pathfinder areas and plans for any wider roll-out across the country?

The challenges facing foster carers and the children they look after must be placed in the context of the wider crisis in children's social care. The number of children entering the care system continues to rise, but

the Government have eroded the support that they need. More than 1,300 Sure Start centres have closed since 2010, while the funding offer to local councils for children's services has fallen by an estimated 24% since 2010.

Perhaps the Minister will point towards his Department's family hub programme, but he cannot escape the fact that that programme is funded in only half of all local authority areas. The high turnover in children's social workers and the loss of experienced staff are creating uncertainty for foster families and those applying to foster. At the same time, the 10 biggest providers of children's homes and private foster care placements are raking in huge profits from public money, more of which should be spent on the wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Foster carers are a vital part of our children's social care system. They provide a loving and safe home to tens of thousands of children across the country, but they urgently need better support and recognition for their wider role. I hope that the Minister will set out how the Government will act quickly to ensure that all foster carers are better supported, so that more people who are able to offer a stable and loving home to vulnerable children can be urgently encouraged to take up the very important role of being a foster carer.

5.1 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston):** It is a pleasure, Sir Graham, to serve under your chairmanship.

I start by thanking all those who have signed the petition on this important issue; I also thank the Petitions Committee for scheduling this debate; and I specifically thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for leading it. I also pay tribute to Fostertalk and the Fostering Network; I think that every Member who has spoken in the debate has cited at least some of their work and we in the Department very much value it too.

Foster carers provide transformational support for children in care. They build relationships, even in a very short period of time, that are loving, long-standing and deeply valued by the children they look after. Without foster carers opening up their homes and lives, we would not have a care system.

Although fostering can be hugely rewarding, it takes hard work, skill and dedication. Anyone who is familiar with the care system deeply values and respects what foster families do every day for our most vulnerable children. That was set out very clearly by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who talked about Emma and the fantastic work that she has done for children in her care.

The petition underpinning this debate called on the Government to review and increase the allowances paid to foster carers and to consider tax exemption levels. I should note that at this point that children's social care is a devolved issue, meaning that the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments are responsible for their own policies.

Financial support for foster carers continues to be a particularly important issue as household expenses are still much higher than we would like them to be; indeed, those expenses were especially high when the petition was created in October 2022. Help with the cost of

living was cited in helpful research from the Fostering Network, Fostertalk and FosterWiki. Although inflation is now down to 3.9% from 11.1% in October 2022, we are committed to supporting foster carers to deal with rising costs.

In March, we set out our response to the petition. We have increased the minimum fostering allowance by 12.43% and raised qualifying care relief for foster carers, with the latter change representing an average tax cut of £450 per year. Fostertalk, which launched the petition, described our announcement as "fantastic news" and said it was a

"positive development for the foster care community".

As has been touched on, in order to support foster carers further, from April 2024 we will raise allowances by a further 6.88%, marking two consecutive years of above-inflation increases to foster carer allowances. That means a foster carer in the tax year 2024-25 will earn between £28 and £49 more per week, per child, than they did in the 2022-23 tax year. Over a full year, this will equate to between £1,456 and £2,548 more in allowances. We have also committed to ensuring that qualifying care relief will rise with inflation each year, so foster carers will have more left in their pocket to support the children in their care.

More broadly, there are three key categories of financial support for foster carers. First, there is the national minimum allowance to cover the additional cost of the child, which, as I have mentioned, we have increased at an above-inflation rate for two years running. Secondly, there are fee payments, set locally by councils and fostering agencies to recognise and compensate foster carers for their expertise, skills and development. Thirdly, there are any expenses that have been agreed by the foster service provider.

The national minimum allowance was introduced in 2007 to try and ensure that foster carers are not financially disadvantaged by looking after a child or young person. It is meant to cover the cost of raising an extra child in the home. It should pay for the child's food, clothing, transport and additional costs, and support children to take up hobbies and have pocket money, as other children would. The rates are set centrally by Government, and we expect all fostering service providers to pay at least the national minimum. Indeed, many local authorities or agencies choose to pay more. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk touched on, a similar allowance was introduced in Scotland earlier this year.

Every year, the Department for Education works with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to review the allowance and consider any changes in inflation and affordability for local government. The allowance operates on a sliding scale, with levels rising as children become older, and with higher rates in parts of the country where costs are typically higher. On the discussion about variation, most of the variation cited by the Fostering Network is the result of councils choosing to pay significantly above the national minimum, as well as the flexibility we give to local authorities to set rates. I will return in a moment to the monitoring that we might do on whether they are paying that.

The 12.43% increase was a record uplift, which represented an increase of between £17 and £30 in allowances per child, per week. The further allowance from April will be an additional £11 to £19 in allowance

[David Johnston]

per child, per week. Beyond the allowance, councils and fostering agencies have the flexibility to provide fee payments for foster carers that reflect their experience, skills and development, as was touched on, or to provide extra support for children with more complex needs. Many fostering service providers supplement that with local offers, including council tax deductions, and discounts for local child-friendly attractions and services. Fostering service providers often provide extra money for taking children on holiday, or to celebrate a birthday or religious festival. Finally, fostering service providers also agree expenses with their foster carers. For example, foster carers may receive travel expenses or be reimbursed for the cost of a school trip.

Moving on to tax arrangements in the second part of the petition, we review tax arrangements for foster carers, ensuring that tax relief is appropriate over time, supporting carers now and in future. Foster carers benefit from qualifying care relief, which means that they do not pay tax on any income below an earnings threshold. In March, we raised that household earnings threshold, as well as the weekly threshold for each looked-after child. For each household, the first £18,140 of income is now tax-free, up from the previous level of £10,000. Additionally, foster carers pay no tax on £375 of income each week for each child under the age of 11, and no tax on £450 of income each week for each child over the age of 11. This means that the vast majority of fostering households will now pay no tax on their fostering income, and it simplifies the tax return process that foster carers have to complete. For a fostering household with one fostered child, the first £37,640 of fostering income is tax-free for a child under 11, with the tax-free amount rising to £41,540 for a child over 11. Our recent increase represents a tax cut of £450 a year for fostering households, and we have committed to raising qualifying care relief by the consumer price index measure of inflation every year.

Foster carers can access a range of benefits, and the money that carers receive from fostering is disregarded when calculating means-tested benefits. Fees and allowances are not taken into account as earnings or income, so do not affect the amount of universal credit to which a foster carer may be entitled. Child benefit, or the child element of universal credit, is included in the allowance paid to foster carers from the local authority, but foster carers can claim child benefit for their own birth children. Birth children of foster parents are entitled to the additional 15 hours of funded childcare, as well as being entitled to an extra bedroom for the purposes of housing benefit and universal credit, meaning that they do not lose out following the removal of the spare bedroom subsidy. Foster carers who combine fostering with other employment can get extra funded childcare hours for their foster children, as long as that childcare is consistent with the child's care plan and agreed with their social worker.

I will briefly touch on the questions raised; if I miss any, I am happy to write to Members with the answers. The allowance is not ringfenced. In December, I wrote to local authorities to remind them of the duty and our

expectation that they pay at least the minimum allowance. I share Members' frustrations where local authorities are not doing that, since we are giving them the money to be able to do so. We will certainly consider collecting more data to ensure that the minimum is being paid. As I say, I wrote to all local authorities in December to reiterate our expectations in this matter.

The 6.88% increase is additional money through the local government finance settlement and the increase in core spending. We are investing £36 million—again, a record amount—to improve recruitment and retention, which a number of hon. Members touched on, and to improve approvals and help more people to undertake this vital role. We are working with more than 60% of local authorities in order to do that.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), asked for an update on fostering. It will shortly be the anniversary of the publication of "Stable Homes, Built on Love", our strategy for transforming social care as a whole, and we will provide an update on what has been happening with our fostering work, the north-east pathfinder, Mockingbird and so on, alongside everything else.

In conclusion, I once again thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, and the Petitions Committee generally, for tabling this debate. I am committed to our programme of reform and proud of the Government's record levels of investment and support for foster carers. I know that all Members present, as well as those not present—as the hon. Gentleman touched on, there is an important statement in the Chamber; otherwise, I feel sure more Members would be present—admire the work that foster carers do for their communities and, most importantly, for the children in their care. It is important we give them all the support we can.

**Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair):** With time for a brief wind-up, I call Mr Day.

5.13 pm

**Martyn Day:** Thank you very much, Sir Graham. On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) for coming along today, and to the Minister and shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), for their comments. I think we speak as one when we send our gratitude to foster carers for their hard work and determination to give all our young people a loving and supported environment in which they can be respected. Equally, I do not think there can be any doubt that cost of living pressures are putting a much greater burden on those foster carers, and I hope that we can look again in the future at doing more to support them.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 625515 relating to allowances and tax arrangements for foster carers.

5.14 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Petitions

Monday 15 January 2024

## OBSERVATIONS

### LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

#### Opposition to parking charges in Audlem, Cheshire

*The petition of the residents of Audlem, Cheshire in the Eddisbury County constituency,*

Declares their opposition to the introduction of parking charges to public car parks in the village, and the coterminous reduction in its on-street parking capacity, pursuant to a change.org petition of 1,808 signatures opposing the same; further that the petitioners believe that such measures would threaten the vibrancy of Audlem as a countryside business, tourism, events and infrastructure hub for residents and visitors, and reduce access for vulnerable service users in a rural area which is readily accessible only by private car and one regular bus service.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to ensure that such proposals are only developed and deliberated on following rigorous and renewed local public and economic consultation, having due regard to Government policies supporting rural high streets, services, businesses, communities, and healthcare, amongst others.—[Presented by Edward Timpson, *Official Report*, 13 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 961.]

[P002889]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young):*

In line with the Government's position on localism, parking is the responsibility of local authorities, and it is for them to determine what is appropriate in their own area.

However, in 2015, the then Department for Communities and Local Government published statutory guidance describing how local residents can petition to initiate a formal review of parking policies in their area by their council, with councillors then voting on the action to be taken. In the plan for drivers published in October, the Government set out plans to increase awareness of the guidance and expand its scope to other traffic contraventions. The right to challenge parking policies will remain.

### SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

#### Planning permission for telecommunication telegraph pole installation

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that telegraph poles being erected by designated communications network operators for the expansion of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) broadband do not need

planning permission under the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) 2003 and the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015; that the only requirement on the operator is 28 days notice to the Local Planning Authority (LPA) that there is no requirement to consider alternatives such as under-street cabling; that the LPA can only make suggestions on siting which the telecoms company is under no obligation to follow; that there is no requirement to inform residents of the installation and so no opportunity for them to inform the process; that the first knowledge residents will have of a telegraph pole being installed is when it appears in their street or outside their residence.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make statutory requirements for designated communications network operators to apply for permission to the LPA on any proposed installation of telegraph poles and for the LPA to consult with affected residents before issuing any permissions.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Hardy, *Official Report*, 14 November 2023; Vol. 740, c. 619.]

[P002872]

*Observations from the Minister for Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez):*

As I previously stated to the House, access to digital services is becoming increasingly important to businesses and consumers throughout the UK. The intention behind the legislative framework currently in place was to strike the right balance between ensuring not only that network deployment can happen at pace, but also that installations are carried out in a proportionate way, with regard to the impacts on communities.

The electronic communications code is the framework that underpins agreements between operators and occupiers with regard to the deployment of digital infrastructure on, under or over land. It is true that operators have statutory rights under the electronic communications code to carry out street works and install apparatus in, on, under or over a street or road, and that some types of apparatus can be installed using permitted development rights under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, as amended, which do not require an application to be made to the local planning authority—LPA—for planning permission.

However, when exercising their statutory rights to install apparatus, operators must adhere to duties and obligations contained in both the electronic communications code itself and its accompanying regulations, the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) Regulations 2003, as well as the relevant conditions and requirements in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 and related legislation.

The 2003 regulations include requirements for operators to share apparatus where practicable; to use underground, rather than overground, lines where reasonably practicable, with certain exceptions; and, when installing apparatus, to minimise the impact on the visual amenity of properties, potential hazards and interference with traffic as far as reasonably practicable.

The 2003 regulations set out circumstances in which the operator must notify the LPA, or other relevant bodies, of its intention to deploy certain apparatus,

including poles. For fixed-line broadband poles, the requirement is 28 days' notice to be given to the LPA in most cases. Installations in certain other areas in England, such as a national nature reserve, site of special scientific interest, area of special scientific interest or marine nature reserve, require prior notification to be given to the relevant conservation body.

In all cases, the relevant body which has been notified by the operator under the 2003 regulations may, within 28 days of the receipt of the notice, give the code operator written notice of conditions which the planning authority wishes the operator to comply with. Operators are not required to comply with these conditions to the extent that they are unreasonable in all the circumstances. The 2003 regulations also require operators to minimise the visual impact of the apparatus on the visual amenity of properties as far as reasonably practicable.

As the independent regulator for telecommunications, Ofcom is able to take enforcement action in respect of breaches of the restrictions and conditions contained in the 2003 regulations if it has reasonable grounds to believe that operators are failing to comply with those requirements when deploying apparatus. It is crucial for LPAs to inform Ofcom of any situations where they believe operators are not complying with their statutory duties. Ofcom will, in turn, consider the specifics of each case.

There is also a code of practice—the cabinet siting and pole siting code of practice 2016—in place relating to the siting of cabinet and pole installations. The code of practice was developed in 2016 by the Government, in collaboration with two major fixed-line operators

and other interested parties. The code of practice provides guidance on ways operators can ensure that installations are placed appropriately, and that LPAs and communities are engaged with regarding the proposals. For example, the code of practice sets out that where new poles are to be installed, the operator should place a site notice to indicate to nearby residents the intention to install a pole, and the proposed location.

This Government also believe that apparatus sharing can significantly reduce the need for new installations and have recently introduced measures, contained in the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022, which will support and facilitate this. The relevant measures came into force on 7 February 2023 and 17 April 2023.

This Government believe the rights, duties and obligations contained in the existing legal framework promote efficient deployment, while taking into account impacts on communities. However, we note the concerns that have been raised regarding recent installations and recognise the need to ensure that deployment happens in accordance with that framework. We are in discussions with Ofcom regarding this, and are considering whether there are any steps we can take to ensure these important duties are adhered to, and to promote collaborative engagement between operators and communities.

The Minister for Digital has met with Ofcom on ensuring that suspected breaches are investigated where reported, and Departmental officials continue to consider this matter as a priority.

We thank the petitioners for bringing these concerns to our attention.

# Ministerial Correction

*Monday 15 January 2024*

## SCOTLAND

### Cost of Living in Scotland

*The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the Cost of Living in Scotland on 9 January 2024.*

**John Lamont:** We are also supporting pensioners by maintaining the triple lock. The basic state pension, new state pension and pension credit standard minimum

guarantee will be uprated in April 2024 by 8.5%, in line with the average earnings growth between May and June 2023.

*[Official Report, 9 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 65WH.]*

*Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont):*

An error has been identified in my closing speech. The correct response should have been:

**John Lamont:** We are also supporting pensioners by maintaining the triple lock. The basic state pension, new state pension and pension credit standard minimum guarantee will be uprated in April 2024 by 8.5%, in line with **earnings growth in the year to May-July 2023.**



# ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 15 January 2024

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## MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 15 January 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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**not later than  
Monday 22 January 2024**

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**Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill [Col. 614]**

*Instruction motion—(Sammy Wilson)—withdrawn*

**Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill [Col. 622]**

*Considered in Committee; not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed*

**Immigration and Asylum [Col. 649]**

*Motion—(Suzanne Webb)—on a Division, agreed to*

**Immigration [Col. 652]**

*Motion—(Suzanne Webb)—on a Division, agreed to*

**Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament [Col. 656]**

*Motion—(Penny Mordaunt)—agreed to*

**Public Services in Cornwall: Funding [Col. 658]**

*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**

**Foster Carers: Allowances and Tax Arrangements [Col. 199WH]**

*E-petition Debate*

**Petitions [Col. 9P]**

*Observations*

**Ministerial Correction [Col. 7MC]**

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