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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 1 February 2024**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 1 February 2024*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### **Animal Welfare Standards: Imports and Exports**

1. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Whether he is taking steps to improve animal welfare standards applicable to food imports and exports. [901268]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay):** We are committed to maintaining high animal welfare and food standards. Since leaving the EU, we have put in place strong controls on imports, and we are using Brexit freedoms to strengthen animal welfare standards even further by banning the export of live animals for slaughter. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can I say to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) that we are in the middle of a question, and he has just walked right in front of the Member asking it?

**Neale Hanvey:** Yesterday, the UK Government implemented a border target operating model in which a veterinarian must provide a health certificate for meat imports from the EU. Meanwhile, the UK-Australia free trade agreement, which came into effect six months ago, is likely to lead to increased imports of low-cost products produced in Australia using pesticides that are not permitted in the UK and in the absence of veterinary checks. According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Australia has lower welfare standards in many sectors, such as eggs, pigmeat production and chicken. Does the Secretary of State accept that this asymmetry on standards of animal welfare is incoherent and poses a significant risk of contaminating the food chain with banned pesticides?

**Steve Barclay:** The hon. Gentleman is mixing up two issues. He mentioned Australia, and specifically eggs. If he actually looked at the agreement with Australia, he would see that eggs are excluded, as are pork and poultry. He is mixing that up with the issue of food standards for imports from Europe. Of course, if we did what his party would advocate and were still in the EU, there would be no checks at all.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): This week, Ian Perks, a constituent of mine, had his entire shipment seized in France by over-zealous French officials because he missed out a single word on the export health certificate. Can the Secretary of State please reassure me that we will find arbitration methods to speed up the process of challenging these completely ridiculous situations?

**Steve Barclay:** I know my hon. Friend champions very strongly the farming and food sector in his constituency, and that he has raised this issue with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, who is actively engaged on it. Of course, a proportionate approach should always be taken on these issues.

#### **Food Sector: Profits**

2. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Whether his Department is taking steps to help ensure profits in the food sector are fairly distributed. [901269]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** Powers in the Agriculture Act 2020 allow us to introduce statutory codes of practice to improve market transparency and ensure fairness in the supply chain. We will use these powers whenever we find clear evidence of unfair practices, so that all farmers get a fair price for their products.

**Mr Sheerman:** When will the Minister wake up to the fact that, since Brexit, food prices have rocketed? My constituents cannot afford to buy staple foods. Is it not the truth that farmers are struggling? They are getting almost nothing for their milk, their potatoes and the ordinary things that men and women buy in this country. Where is the money from these higher prices going, because it is not to the farmers?

**Mark Spencer:** I can tell the hon. Gentleman where the higher prices are: they are in France and Germany. If we look at the value of a basket of goods, we see that in the UK they are lower than they are in the European Union. If we had followed his model or his advice, we would still be in the EU. Our retailers, our farmers and our processors are working together, and we want to see fairness in the supply chain. We want fairness for the consumer, and also for the farmer, the retailer and the processor.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Ynys Môn farmers and the farming community are important to food production, and their profits are vital to our Anglesey island economy. Does the Minister agree with Aled Jones, the president of National Farmers Union Cymru, that Welsh Government sustainable farming schemes will have “damaging consequences”, including the potential loss of 5,500 jobs in the sector?

**Mark Spencer:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for how she campaigns on behalf of her constituents. I know that Welsh farmers are very concerned about the Welsh Government’s approach to Welsh agriculture. Here in England, we are trying to support farmers in producing top-quality food and looking after the environment, and I think the Welsh Government need to reflect on how they should influence their farmers to do exactly the same.

### Fly-tipping

3. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he taking is to support local authorities to reduce litter and fly-tipping in cities. [901270]

5. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [901272]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore):** I know what a blight litter and fly-tipping can be on local communities, which is why we have provided nearly £1 million to help councils purchase new bins and almost £1.2 million to combat fly-tipping, while a further £1 million will be awarded in the spring. We have more than doubled the maximum fines that councils can issue, with all income from fly-tipping fines to be reinvested in enforcement and cleaning up our streets from April, to ensure that councils can invest in cracking down on crime.

**Mr Speaker:** Bring the Wombles back!

**Chi Onwurah:** My constituents' anger and frustration with litter and fly-tipping has grown as £390 million-worth of Government cuts to Newcastle City Council's budget has impacted on services. Children in particular complain to me about having to play in rubbish. My 15-point plan for rubbish sets out some of the additional powers councils need to address the scourge. Will the Minister meet me to discuss it, and will he back Labour's plan for fixed penalty notices for fly-tippers?

**Robbie Moore:** This Government are taking tough action on fly-tipping, which is why we have specifically allowed councils to collect those fines and ringfence them for prosecution and cleaning up the streets. It is important to note that it is Conservative councils that are going above and beyond in dealing with the issue; Labour councils are three times worse than Conservative councils at dealing with fly-tipping crime.

**Nicola Richards:** Residents living in Cobham Road, Friar Park, in my constituency have recently experienced fly-tipping in the alleyway behind their properties. Despite this being reported by councillors four months ago, Sandwell Council has still not removed that rubbish. Apart from telling my constituents to vote Conservative in May, what further steps can the Minister take to ensure that councils fulfil their duty to remove rubbish quickly? My constituents in West Bromwich East deserve better.

**Robbie Moore:** I am disappointed to hear once again about the fly-tipping that my hon. Friend's constituents are experiencing for the first time in Friar Park. We are giving councils extra powers to crack down on fly-tipping, but of course it is up to councils to use the powers we are giving them, and it is important to note that the Labour administration at Sandwell Council is once again the worst performing council in the country, with zero prosecutions for fly-tipping last year. That is despite this Conservative Government raising fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping from £400 to £1,000, and the Government enabling those councils—

**Mr Speaker:** I call Ruth Cadbury.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Hounslow Borough is plagued by fly-tipping. Despite the council using all the powers it can to address the problem, spending large amounts of money to do so, and having a good rate of recycling, fly-tipping continues. What is the Government's timetable for responding to the Public Accounts Committee report on the Government's programme for waste reforms?

**Robbie Moore:** We are giving councils more powers than ever before to deal with fly-tipping. We have raised the minimum penalty fine from £400 to £1,000, and are allowing councils to ringfence that money for prosecutions and cleaning up their streets. It is disappointing to see from the stats that Labour councils are not using the powers we are giving them as much as they should.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The penalties are insufficient. If offenders were garrotted with their own intestines, there would be fewer of them.

**Robbie Moore:** It is important to note that councils can use the power that we are giving them to apply increased penalty fines of £1,000. The Government want those penalties to be used, so that we can drive down fly-tipping in all council areas.

### Horticultural Peat

4. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): When his Department plans to bring forward legislative proposals to ban the sale of horticultural peat. [901271]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** This Government are absolutely clear about the need to end the use of peat products in horticulture in England. The use of peat has halved since we signalled that in 2020, and in August 2022 we announced that we would ban the sale of peat for use in amateur gardening. We remain committed to legislating for that when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, we are continuing to work with the industry to explore ways to help it transition completely to peat-free working.

**Tim Loughton:** UK peatlands store over 3 billion tonnes of carbon, which is more than all the forests in the UK, France and Germany combined. The Government were right to bring in proposals for a ban, but that was back in 2022 and we have had no primary legislation yet. The Royal Horticultural Society, which is committed to being 100% peat-free, says that 40% of the industry is waiting for the legislation, so it can get on with a ban across the whole sector. The industry wants to do it, but it needs the legislation urgently.

**Rebecca Pow:** I too have met the RHS, and went to see its wonderful experiments on peat-free products very recently, some of which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs put money into. This Government are committed to ending the use of peat in horticulture in England, and we will legislate as soon as parliamentary time allows. I can assure my hon. Friend that in the meantime we are working closely with those who want peat-free mediums, as well as the businesses

supplying those growing mediums. A wide variety of work is going on, including research and experiments. As I have said, peat use has halved, and my hon. Friend might be interested to know that the Forestry Commission promises to go peat free—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I call Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that very long response. Peatlands in Northern Ireland are extremely important. They absorb water and moisture and improve the habitat. This question is as important in this House as it is to us in Northern Ireland. Given that the Northern Ireland Assembly will hopefully be up and running again, will the Minister have discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister, to ensure that we can work together for the betterment of all?

**Rebecca Pow:** Peatlands are such an important habitat, so it is important that we work together. That is why we are putting huge amounts of money into restoring peatlands in the uplands and the lowlands, and we have just increased our sustainable farming incentive payments for that. Farmers can get more than £900 a hectare to start to re-wet peat.

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

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I agree entirely with what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said. We welcome the Government's intentions on peatland, but the idea that this Government, after 14 years, is so fizzing with new ideas that they do not quite have the parliamentary time to get on with acting on those intentions is, candidly, laughable. Will the Minister tell us what is actually happening? We were expecting legislation in this year's King's Speech, but it is not there. There is an urgent need for it, and it is supported by industry. Will the Government just get on with implementing one of the few popular policies they have left?

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Gentleman should look at what we are doing on peatland; I have just mentioned it. There is all the work to restore peatlands, both upland and lowland, and all the work on pilot projects so that farmers can transition to new crops to grow on peatland. We have committed to banning the use of peat when parliamentary time allows.

### Dog Attacks

6. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure public safety from dog attacks. [901273]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay):** We have taken quick and decisive action following the concerning rise in fatalities; there have been nine recent fatalities. We have now seen 30,000 dog owners registered as part of the balanced approach we are taking.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Following the ban on XL bully dogs, owners will have applied for a certificate of exemption, so that they can

keep their dog, and as part of that, the dog has to be neutered. The British Veterinary Association has put forward a prudent neutering suggestion: given the evidence that neutering large-breed dogs before they are 18 months old can increase the risk of developmental orthopaedic disorders and other medical conditions, will the Government take the reasonable, small step of extending the neutering deadline to the end of June 2025 for those dogs under seven months of age at 31 January 2024?

**Steve Barclay:** Given my hon. Friend's expertise on this issue as Parliament's only vet, I listen closely to what he proposes. As he knows, neutering is a necessary population control, and we have already responded to the greater risks to dogs of a young age by taking action to extend the deadline. I am happy to take away the proposal that he raises and look at the issue again.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): The deadline for registering XL bullies was 12 o'clock yesterday. I have been contacted by a constituent who missed the deadline for financial and personal health reasons. Many people up and down the country will genuinely have not been able to meet the deadline. According to the legislation, they could face up to 14 years in prison, an unlimited fine and the destruction of that XL bully pet. Can the Secretary of State advise me what steps people in that position—people who genuinely wanted to register—might take to remedy this awful position?

**Steve Barclay:** Across the House, we all want to ensure that a proportionate approach is taken, and that people register as quickly as possible. We all see the risks, in terms of the harm and the attacks that the House has been united in addressing. I am happy to look at any specific constituency case that the hon. Gentleman raises, but the clear message is that people need to register as quickly as possible.

### Environmental Land Management Schemes

7. **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): What steps he is taking to support farmers through the environmental land management schemes. [901274]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** This year, we are increasing payment rates under environmental land management schemes, through a 10% average uplift, and we are adding about 50 new actions, so that farmers can access the most comprehensive offer yet. The sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship mid-tier application process will be streamlined, making it easier for schemes to slot into farm businesses.

**Trudy Harrison:** I thank my right hon. Friend the Farming Minister for meeting my farmers in Wasdale last year. I am sure that sure the journey through the English Lake district was inspiration to provide those payments for stone walls.

I have continued that conversation in a succession of farming policy information suppers. There is a keen desire among farmers to take advantage of ELMs; what they are overwhelmingly asking for, though, is clarity about what to go for and when to go for it to achieve the most successful, sustainable and profitable farm business.



**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend is truly privileged to represent such a beautiful part of England. We are collaborating with stakeholders to ensure that our schemes work for them. We regularly communicate with them through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs farming blog, by meeting them at trade shows, through ministerial visits, and through stakeholder organisations such as the National Farmers Union, the Country Land and Business Association and the Tenant Farmers Association. We are also providing free business support to farmers and land managers in England through the future farming resilience fund. Grants and schemes for farmers are published through our single funding page.

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

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** Last week's report from the Government's environmental watchdog, the Office for Environmental Protection, was a damning indictment of the Government's record. It said they were "largely off track", with just four of the 40 targets being achieved. When it comes to the environmental land management schemes, can the Minister tell the House just how much environmental improvement they have helped farmers to deliver so far?

**Mark Spencer:** I think that two months into a 25-year plan is probably too soon to judge that plan. We are making huge strides with our stakeholders and farmers, who are working up and down the country to improve the environment. They have spent generations creating that environment. We should celebrate what they have achieved, and we should encourage them to do more. That is what the sustainable farming incentive is designed to do, and what the scheme is delivering.

**Daniel Zeichner:** The Minister doesn't know, does he? The Government are spending large amounts of public money, but they did not set up a system to measure it. The new Secretary of State is generally on the money, so I am sure he has asked this question: what we are getting for the money? Let me try a simpler version of the question. With ELMs so far, has there been environmental improvement or environmental degradation, or is it simply "Don't know"?

**Mark Spencer:** These things are actually quite easy to see and to measure. If we look at the hedgerows planted in England in the last decade, we see that thousands of kilometres of hedgerow have been planted. Large areas are being dedicated to biodiversity and creating food for wild bird populations. That is what the SFI is delivering; it is there to see. All the hon. Member needs to do is get out of Cambridgeshire and look at some of those farms.

#### Windsor Framework: Horticulture

8. **Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** Whether he has had recent discussions with horticultural businesses on the operation of the Windsor framework. [901275]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** DEFRA officials met Kings Seeds on 19 January. The Department regularly meets a range of businesses,

including through the working group established with the Horticultural Trades Association, which met most recently on 18 January.

**Priti Patel:** The Minister will know that Kings Seeds is what is known as a well established local business, having been based in Kelvedon since 1888. It trades in horticultural seeds and is known for its sweet peas, but as he will be aware, it cannot send its products to Northern Ireland, which it says is because of barriers related to the Windsor framework. Will he clarify whether the announcements made earlier this week—we will discuss the statutory instruments relating to them later today—will resolve the issue? If not, will he work with me and teams across Government to ensure that we deal with the issue? Perhaps he would like to come to Kelvedon to meet the company.

**Mark Spencer:** As I said, DEFRA officials met Kings Seeds on 19 January. I am more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend and the company to discuss its concerns and see how we can support it in all its excellent work in her constituency.

We appreciate the concerns of Kings Seeds. We are inviting it to the new horticulture working group announced in yesterday's Command Paper, along with industry representatives. The Government will ask the group to address the movement of seeds to consumers in Northern Ireland as a priority. I look forward to hearing its recommendations.

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):** I apologise for my earlier misdemeanour, Mr Speaker.

Now that we have significant progress towards the restoration of devolution, will the Minister agree to work with DUP Members and his ministerial colleagues to ensure that issues such as the horticultural one continue to be resolved, so that we have maximum efficiency across the North channel?

**Mark Spencer:** I am delighted to work with the hon. Gentleman. We have a track record of working with our DUP friends to solve the challenges that we face. That conversation can continue, and I look forward to working with him to continue to solve those challenges.

#### Biodiversity Loss

9. **David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to help reverse biodiversity loss. [901276]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):** This Government have created a whole framework for restoring nature through our legally binding Environment Act 2021 targets, which include our world-leading commitment to halt the decline of species by 2030. We are accelerating action towards that through our environmental improvement plan. It is a shame I was not asked about this by the shadow Minister, but we have restored an area of wildlife habitats the size of Dorset, we have a network of marine protected areas, 5 million trees were planted last year, we have 55-plus landscape—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. It was the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) who asked the question. Let's not have a personal battle across the Chamber.

**David Simmonds:** Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner is home to many incredibly important sites for biodiversity, as are many of our London suburbs. Does my hon. Friend agree that the new Riverside park delivered by Harrow council in partnership with the Hatch End Association is a good example of projects that support biodiversity in our suburbs?

**Rebecca Pow:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for his local area. He is absolutely right; we are working with a range of local partners and people to put nature at the heart of what we do. I cannot commend Harrow council and the Hatch End Association enough for their work—they are putting in an apple orchard, wetlands and wildflower meadows, which are a superb addition to his already beautiful constituency.

**Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): Environmentalists such as those at Chester zoo were shocked to see that the Government have ignored the advice of their own experts and authorised the use of neonicotinoid pesticides for the fourth year in a row. Will the Minister tell me how that is line with our national and international obligations to reduce the overall risk from pesticides, and how it reduces our biodiversity loss?

**Rebecca Pow:** The hon. Lady will know from reading the details of the derogation that those pesticides will be used only if they hit the criterion; in many cases, they never do.

### Environment Agency Funding

10. **Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of Environment Agency funding levels in the context of recent storms. [901277]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (**Steve Barclay**): The Environment Agency's budget this year is £1.96 billion, so around £2 billion, which is an increase of more than £700 million since 2015. We closely monitor the quantum and how we ensure we get value for money.

**Sarah Dyke:** Following the 2014 flooding, the current Foreign Secretary—the then Prime Minister—stated that money was no object as he agreed a £100 million plan to protect the Somerset levels. Ten years on, we are experiencing devastating floods with increased regularity. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to protect homes in Somerset from flooding and to ensure that floodwater is efficiently and effectively pumped away from farmland?

**Steve Barclay:** The hon. Lady raises an extremely important point. Flooding is devastating to homeowners, businesses and farmers. That is why in her part of the country we set up the Somerset Rivers Authority partnership and secured an extra £80 million of targeted

funding for Somerset. That targeted action is enabling the area to be more resilient, but there is further work to do.

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): Severe winter storms drive many seabirds inland, and most leave after a few days, but not cormorants. The number of cormorants roosting permanently inland has risen from 4,000 30 years ago to about 65,000 now. They are having a huge impact on freshwater silver fish. Will the Secretary of State meet me and representatives of the Angling Trust, an organisation I used to chair, and other interested parties to discuss this issue?

**Steve Barclay:** It is always a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend. He mentioned the important issue of seabirds. He will have noticed yesterday's announcement of two major positive steps. The No. 1 issue of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for the last 25 years has been tightening up the overfishing of sand eels. We are closing English waters to sand eel fishing, which is hugely important to seabirds, particularly the puffin. Secondly, we announced 13 marine designated areas—to put that into context, that is an area equivalent to the size of Suffolk. It is a huge step forward in protecting seabirds, on which the UK has a leading position globally.

**Mr Speaker:** Hopefully Emma Hardy will get us back on track. I call the shadow Minister.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I recently met with farmer Henry Ward, who showed me the extensive and damaging flooding right across his farmland caused by two breaches in the river after a storm. The Environment Agency is unable to tell him when it will have the resources to repair those breaches. This means that Henry not only lost all the crop that was flooded, but will be unable to plant a new crop in spring. He is not the only farmer to be impacted. When will the Government realise that their failure to be decisive and get ahead of the problem of weak defences is costing farmers their livelihoods and—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We only get until 10 o'clock—to take advantage is just not fair. We must have briefer questions from the Front Bench.

**Steve Barclay:** Not only has the water Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), been decisive; he has met the individual farmer the hon. Lady mentions on his farm. We are taking action to look at how we can better empower the internal drainage boards—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady chunters from a sedentary position. I actually represent, in the fens, one of the areas where internal drainage boards are most important. I have worked with them for 14 years, and the ministerial team is working actively with them now.

### Veterinary Medicines: Northern Ireland

11. **Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Whether he has had recent discussions with his EU counterparts on access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland. [901278]

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** Arrangements are in place through to the end of 2025 to support the continuity of the supply of veterinary medicines into Northern Ireland. We are clear that we must also ensure a long-term solution to safeguard those supplies on an ongoing basis, and we will continue to engage with the EU on all aspects of the operation of the Windsor framework.

**Carla Lockhart:** Continued restrictions to veterinary medicines remain a very real threat to local agriculture. The British Veterinary Association Northern Ireland Branch president has said that a serious risk is posed to public health and animal welfare if a permanent solution for access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland is not found. While the Command Paper signals a welcome focus on this issue, with a working group to deal with it, can the Minister confirm that the Government will act unilaterally by spring if it is not resolved?

**Mark Spencer:** We will continue to work with the EU to try to find a long-term solution. Of course, we have to find that solution. Those negotiations are ongoing, and I do not want to pre-empt any of those discussions from the Dispatch Box, but we do recognise that we need a long-term solution to solve this challenge.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901286] **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay):** Since I last updated the House, the Government have been delivering on their plan to back British farmers. We are now seeing an average increase of 10% in our environmental farming payments so that farmers can protect our environment and continue to grow the food that we need. Recent storms have threatened the livelihoods of many farmers, which is why, alongside the wider flood recovery framework, I announced financial support of up to £25,000 for farmers who have suffered uninsurable damage to their land.

Yesterday was the one-year anniversary of our environmental improvement plan; I will not repeat the announcements we touched on earlier, Mr Speaker, given your steer on brevity. Finally, it is worth reminding the House that we have passed Second Reading of the Pet Abduction Bill, which introduces stricter sentences for those who steal dogs and cats. Pet abduction causes huge trauma to families and to pets, and we are taking decisive action to address those crimes.

**Mark Menzies:** Flooding has caused repeated damage to homes across rural Fylde. Last week, I held a multi-agency meeting with Fylde's flood authorities, which updated me on the work carried out since our initial meeting last July. From blocked culverts to overflows from highways and apparently insufficient drainage on newly built estates, the causes are wide-ranging. At the meeting's conclusion, I asked the agencies to provide a written breakdown of their action plan. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the plan and how his Department can assist?

**Steve Barclay:** As my hon. Friend knows, I am familiar with the Fylde and the issues there. I am always happy to meet him to discuss the issues he mentions. I am in contact with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about new developments and some of the wider issues that my hon. Friend has been raising.

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

**Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP):** The UK ended the year as the only rich nation with food price inflation of more than 10%, and families buying food still face persistent price increases. New Brexit red tape affecting European food imports poses a further risk of rising inflation in the prices of items such as bread, milk and even baby formula. May I again ask the Secretary of State to commit himself to implementing food price controls if further Brexit red tape leads to the food price hikes that are being anticipated?

**Steve Barclay:** Such is the obsession with Brexit in the SNP that we hear no mention of the impact of the war in Ukraine, no mention of the farmers who are striking across the EU, and no recognition of the huge amount of work on supply chains that is being done by my right hon. Friend the Farming Minister. Moreover, the hon. Gentleman seems not to have noticed the rapid review of labelling that we are conducting, which is about empowering consumers and ensuring that the high animal welfare standards that we have in England are better reflected.

T3. [901290] **Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con):** I am sure the Secretary of State has seen reports in *Farmers Weekly* that about a third of the UK wheat crop has either rotted in the ground because of the wet conditions, or was not drilled at all. Supplies of spring seed are very tight, with many varieties already sold out, and while it is possible for some farmers to use farm-saved seed, it is illegal for it to be traded between farms. Many farmers did not grow spring crops this year or, indeed, sell their crops at harvest. Is there a solution to the problem?

**Steve Barclay:** I am very alive to this matter, both because of the very good work that *Farmers Weekly* has done to highlight it and because my right hon. Friend, as Chair of the Select Committee, has discussed it with me and my right hon. Friend the Farming Minister, who is also discussing it with plant breeders. We need to look at what we can do constructively, working with them, to deal with what is an entirely legitimate issue.

T2. [901288] **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** According to the recent report from the Office for Environmental Protection, the Government are off track when it comes to hitting environmental targets, which include restoring our waterways to health. What will the Government do to get back on track?

**Steve Barclay:** As was mentioned earlier, that report was based on two months of data within a 25-year plan, and was therefore somewhat premature in its judgment. This is the first Government in the world to put legally binding targets to reverse nature decline into law. Yesterday, we marked the first anniversary of those targets at Kew,



and set out further proposals which have already been touched on. We have also provided international leadership by putting nature at the heart of tackling climate change at COP26, which was strongly reflected at COP28.

T4. [901291] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): The Select Committee has been consistently holding water companies and regulators to account for the inexcusable levels of sewage being illegally dumped in our precious waterways, but more can be done. Does my right hon. Friend agree that given our plan for water, our record levels of investment in monitoring and improving water quality, and the unlimited fines imposed on water companies, while the Opposition parties have no affordable plan and just throw muck from the sidelines, it is this Government who are actually getting on with and dealing with the issue?

**Steve Barclay:** My hon. Friend is right in saying that we have a plan and that a great deal has been done. He is also right that more can be done, and I reassure the House that I am entirely committed to doing it. We will hold the water companies to account—that is my absolute intention.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Springwater park in my constituency suffers from regular flooding during storms, which causes landslip and movement approaching the highway. Unfortunately, it falls outside established funding pots from schemes such as Bellwin, so we keep being bounced between the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and DEFRA. Will the Minister meet me, along with representatives of Bury Council, to see what we can do to address the problem?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore):** The Government are investing in ongoing projects in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, including the Radcliffe and Redvales flood risk management scheme, and we are doubling our investment in flood alleviation schemes from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion over the next six-year funding round. However, I am of course happy to meet him.

T5. [901293] **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): My constituency is home to many international food and drink manufacturers, including General Mills and Coca-Cola, both of which are seeking to expand their operations here in the UK. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the work being done to help such manufacturers to expand and grow for the benefit of our local and national economies?

**The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer):** We have regular meetings with the food and drink sector to ensure that we are in tune with its concerns and aspirations. Those discussions will continue, and we will continue to support great businesses such as Coca-Cola in my hon. Friend's constituency, support British jobs and generate benefit for the UK economy.

**Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Towns and villages such as Maulden and Shefford in my constituency have seen their flood risk profile change dramatically over the years, partly owing to housing

growth. How will the Minister ensure that funding for the Environment Agency and internal drainage boards adequately reflects the way in which that risk has evolved?

**Robbie Moore:** Improving our flood alleviation schemes and our flood resilience is incredibly important, which is why the Government are recognising the amount of investment we need to put into it. We are doubling that investment from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion over the next six-year period. The sorts of schemes we are helping will assist projects across the country to deal with those problems.

**Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that drift net fishing for bass is more sustainable, targeted and efficient than fishing with set nets? Will he reconsider the ban, which was introduced as a temporary measure, in order to allow those with an existing bass entitlement to undertake drift net fishing?

**Mark Spencer:** Bass stocks are still recovering from poor spawning periods and overfishing. The bass fisheries management plan commits to review existing commercial access, including gear types such as drift nets, which pose a higher risk to sensitive species and bass fishes. A careful balance must be struck between increasing fishing opportunities and protecting vulnerable bass stocks, but I assure my right hon. Friend that these matters will remain open.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Since April last year, thousands of homes in my constituency have suffered from a fly infestation assumed to originate from a recycling plant. Will the Minister meet me and the Environment Agency to get this resolved?

**Robbie Moore:** I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to try to deal with these issues, because for this Government dealing with waste and recycling is incredibly important. If the challenges are having an impact on householders, we need to get on top of this, and I am to meet him to discuss it.

**Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Walleys Quarry, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), is stinking again, with monitoring stations showing high levels of hydrogen sulphide and with complaints soaring. The site is blighting my constituents too, and the Environment Agency now says the owner is no longer working towards compliance. It is long past time that the permit was revoked and the company prosecuted. Will the Minister come to Staffordshire to witness the stink and see the sorry sight for himself?

**Mr Speaker:** When he does, can he take the licence away from the one at Cuerden, in Chorley?

**Steve Barclay:** I always listen closely to your steer, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend raises an extremely important issue, which I know is very troubling to those affected. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) is going there in the coming days, and I can assure her that this is being discussed and actively followed up.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Food price inflation remains twice as high as general inflation in the UK, and the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit warns that it could rise even higher next year. What assessment has the Secretary of State made, with his colleagues, of the impact of soaring food prices on those we represent?

**Mark Spencer:** Of course, we continue to monitor food price inflation and work with the sector to reduce it as much as possible. We co-operate with not only farmers, processors and retailers, but all those involved in the sector to try to make sure that we provide a reasonably priced food basket for our constituents. The good news is that the cost of our food basket in the UK is lower than that found in many parts of the European Union.

**Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to Question 1, the Secretary of State attributed another party's position on Europe to my party. The Alba party's position on Europe is to opt for the European Free Trade Association, thus maintaining sovereignty over fisheries and farming. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State would correct the record.

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

**Steve Barclay:** Such is the confusion within the Scottish National party that I hope the House forgives me for the mistake. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has changed his party and now is an Alba Member. I am happy to correct the record.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like your advice on the scheduling of business today. A number of people—

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry, but that is not relevant to the questions we have just had. The only way the hon. Gentleman can raise that as a point of order is by doing it after we have done all the questions. We now have questions to the Attorney General.

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*

### Fraud and Economic Crime: Prosecution

1. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [901309]

4. **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [901312]

9. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent steps her Department has taken to increase prosecution rates for fraud and economic crime. [901320]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Courts):** The Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office play a crucial role in bringing economic criminals to justice. Indeed, this month the SFO charged two company directors with fraud in relation to a car lease scheme into which hundreds of British savers paid about £88 million.

**Chi Onwurah:** The Horizon Post Office scandal has appalled the nation. Hundreds of sub-postmasters were wrongly prosecuted and convicted, and many were jailed, although they were entirely innocent of any fraud. On the other hand, covid-19 fraud is known and real. Estimates put it as high £16 billion, yet we have not clawed back a fraction of what has been stolen. Why were the innocent left to rot for so long, while the guilty go free to enjoy the fruits of their covid crime?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the appalling miscarriage of justice; I agree entirely with everything she said about Horizon and the Post Office. As she knows, steps are being taken to address that and work is ongoing. On covid crime, the Attorney General and I meet regularly with the Serious Fraud Office and the Crown Prosecution Service to press for action on whatever is the pressing issue of the day. The CPS has charged a number of individuals in relation to precisely the fraud activities she refers to.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Is the Solicitor General aware that the Home Affairs Committee is currently looking at the whole issue of fraud and finding a huge problem with everything from romance fraud to fraud financing terrorism? Clearly, there is an urgent need for much better joined-up working between agencies and information sharing in this country, as well as on the international front. What discussions and experience has he had on which nations prosecute fraud more effectively than we do in this country?

**The Solicitor General:** My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. I commend him for his work on the Home Affairs Committee and look forward to the results of that work, which we will consider carefully. The Attorney General and I meet regularly with the SFO and the CPS to assess best practice and to see where lessons may be learned, both internally and from abroad. Intelligence sharing goes on between the respective agencies in any event, and we will look at what lessons can be learned from best practice here and abroad to take forward the points he raises.

**Andy Slaughter:** In the past five years, law enforcement agencies, including the CPS proceeds of crime unit, have confiscated £568 million from criminals. Those agencies get to keep a tiny percentage of recovered assets and virtually no fines to help them continue their work. Why are the Government enfeebling the very organisation it relies on to win the fight against economic crime? Why will they not adopt Labour's invest-to-save model of enforcement?

**The Solicitor General:** I commend the work of the enforcement agencies, which have rightly cracked down on the fraudulent activity the hon. Gentleman refers to. He is right that the Government have tirelessly pursued

criminals with a view to recouping money, to prevent those criminals from benefiting from their ill-gotten gains. Among a number of positive outcomes has been £105 million being returned to victims.

**Christine Jardine:** I thank the Solicitor General for providing detail about what is happening, but, since the pandemic, fraud has cost the public purse more than £21 billion, much of that related to the Government's own schemes. Public resentment is understandable, because, at the same time, prosecution for fraud and money laundering has gone down by more than 50% since 2010. Does the Solicitor General agree that the time has come for more action and that we should seriously consider an economic crime fighting fund to reinvest seized assets and profits into improving law enforcement against fraud?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Lady is right that this is matter of huge public concern, and understandably so. The Government worked very hard during the pandemic to ensure that support was provided, but clearly where people have taken advantage of a system, that must be pursued. That is why we are looking at the fraud strategy, for example, and the economic crime plan part 2. We will continue to drive forward to see what further action can be taken.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Every day, older and vulnerable people are preyed upon by fraudsters and scammers, be it online, by phone or on the doorstep. Will my hon. Friend reassure my constituents and the country that the Conservative Government, the police and the criminal justice system will do all they can to bring those immoral criminals to justice?

**The Solicitor General:** Yes, I can. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to this, as people being taken advantage of is one of the great issues of our age. It happens to members of society of all kinds, but particularly to those who are elderly and vulnerable. Work continues on a number of sector charters, which have been successful in bringing forward positive outcomes. For example, 870 million scam texts have been blocked. We have taken forward work on the Online Safety Act 2023, as well as the charters I referred to, but I assure my hon. Friend we will continue to see what more can be done.

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

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is two years since the former anti-fraud Minister, Lord Agnew, resigned in embarrassment over the Government's oversight of covid business loan schemes, describing it as "nothing less than woeful". Can the Solicitor General tell us, in the past two years, how much of the missing billions, seemingly written off by the Prime Minister as Chancellor, has been recovered and what the Government are doing now to chase down the covid crooks?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to this. The public quite rightly expect the money that the Government advanced in good faith to help those who were challenged during the pandemic not to be the victim of fraudulent activity. Intelligence sharing goes on between the Serious Fraud Office, which, as he knows, prosecutes the most serious cases,

and the Crown Prosecution Service, which has already charged a number of individuals. We will continue to do that both from our perspective and with the law enforcement agencies to make sure that the crooks to whom he refers are pursued.

### **Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill: ECHR**

2. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the compatibility of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill with the European convention on human rights.  
[901310]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** I would like to assure the House that the Government respect their international obligations. The Law Officers convention prevents me from disclosing outside Government whether I have given advice or even what the context of any such advice might be. The Bill to which the hon. Gentleman refers is currently in the other place, and will, I am sure, be discussed very fully there.

**Chris Stephens:** Just this week, we heard media reports that four Rwandans had been granted refugee status in the UK in the past four months, citing well-founded fears of persecution. At the same time, the Government would like us to accept that Rwanda is a safe country, despite the Home Office accepting that those individuals face a real threat of persecution. Can the Attorney General tell us how we can send asylum seekers to Rwanda under those circumstances?

**The Attorney General:** We are asking Parliament to look at the matter afresh—not just to look at the facts as they were before the Supreme Court, but to look at new circumstances. Evidence was published on 11 January to assist Parliament in those deliberations. We have assurances from the Government of Rwanda that the implementation of all measures within the treaty will be expedited, and we will ratify the treaty when we are ready to do so.

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

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Journalists and bloggers who criticise the Government are arrested, threatened and put on trial, with allegations of torture, disappearances and suspicious deaths. Those are just some of the issues that Human Rights Watch and Amnesty have reported on in Rwanda. When asking Parliament to disregard established legal principles such as the burden of proof and the need for evidence, is the Attorney General genuinely comfortable in passing the Rwanda Bill?

**The Attorney General:** It is constitutionally proper for Parliament to legislate in response to a decision of the Supreme Court. We do it all the time in the finance and tax space. Lord Reed was careful to point out to the Constitution Committee in the other House that we did it following the *Burmah oil* case in the War Damage Act 1965. In this case, I urge the hon. Lady to look hard at the evidence that the Government put before the House on 11 January. If the Bill passes, everyone must treat Rwanda as generally safe for the transfer of individuals under the treaty.



### Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecution

3. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases relating to violence against women and girls. [901311]

8. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases relating to violence against women and girls. [901319]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** We are steadily increasing the number of rape cases sent to the Crown court. We are preparing to launch a joint justice plan, which will transform how the police and the Crown Prosecution Service investigate and prosecute domestic abuse cases.

I will welcome my friend Andriy Kostin, the Ukrainian Prosecutor General, who is not quite here yet because his plane has not arrived, in my office after questions. The relevance of that is that a team of UK experts is supporting his office to investigate and prosecute cases of conflict-related sexual violence in Ukraine.

**Dr Huq:** Last July, the then Solicitor General, the hon. and learned Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), told the House, in a written answer to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon):

“A new VAWG strategy for 2023-2025 is being developed for publication later this year.”

That year has come and gone, as has that Solicitor General, so can the Attorney General tell us the status of the strategy and its content, who the Government are consulting, and when it will be published?

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Lady takes a long-term interest in these affairs, and she I have discussed them for many years. I reassure her that a great deal of work has been done. The work in the rape sphere, which I referenced earlier, is very commendable. After having a really difficult time in prosecuting rapes for many years, we are back up to 2016 levels, and indeed are exceeding them. The joint justice plan, which will build on the rape work in the domestic abuse sphere, will be ready very shortly—we are saying “in the spring”, but I think she will have to wait only a few weeks.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The Home Affairs Committee carried out an inquiry into the investigation and prosecution of rape. One of our very clear recommendations was that police forces need to have specialist units to investigate rape for cases to proceed to the CPS, and hopefully to court. We know that we get better decision making and communication with victims and the CPS if we have those specialist officers. Is the Attorney General as surprised as I am that not all police forces have those specialist units to deal with rape and sexual assaults?

**The Attorney General:** The right hon. Lady, who does sterling work on the Home Affairs Committee, knows that the police are not directly under my supervision, but I am proud to talk about the very close co-operation between the police and CPS specialists in this field,

which has really helped, together with some great granularity and pushing on the statistics to drive up rape prosecutions. She will be glad to know that in her area of Yorkshire and Humberside the number of suspects charged with rape has increased significantly over the last year.

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): My Newton Aycliffe constituent Zoey McGill suffered from appalling knife crime when her son Jack Woodley was killed in 2021. She is now suffering again, as one of the perpetrators is using social media from custody to glorify himself. Does the Attorney General agree that such actions should be prosecuted, and that the consequences should be publicised to ensure that they become a deterrent against others glorifying themselves from our prisons?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend highlights a horrific case. That is why it is so important that we crack down on mobile phone use, and indeed mobile phone existence, within prisons. The Government have put in £100 million to ensure that prisons have airport-style security, to ensure that it is much more difficult for phones to get in. Incidents such as he raises are very serious, and I commend him for doing so, as well as his constituent Zoey and *The Northern Echo*, which I understand has been campaigning on the issue.

### Prosecution of Fraud: Covid-19

5. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): How many prosecutions have been brought by the Serious Fraud Office for cases of fraud connected with covid-19 (a) contracts and (b) financial support schemes. [901315]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Courts):** The Serious Fraud Office has brought no prosecutions for cases of fraud connected with covid-19. The SFO deals only with the most complex and serious economic crime, so the vast majority of such cases would not fall within its remit. The SFO works closely with other law enforcement agencies to ensure that intelligence is shared and the investigations are handled by the most appropriate agency.

**Neale Hanvey:** It is staggering to hear the Solicitor General refer to this as not serious, or imply that it is not serious. In 2023, the level of fraud reported by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in two covid-19 financial support schemes sat between £3.3 billion and £7.3 billion, with less than £1 billion being recovered. Considering that the UK Government have already written off an alarming £8.7 billion that they spent on protective equipment bought during the pandemic, will he commit to routinely publishing accounts including the number of prosecutions and the cost of recovery for covid-19 contracts and support schemes?

**The Solicitor General:** The hon. Gentleman misunderstands my point: the SFO deals with the most complex schemes. Not for a second would I have suggested that any such fraud is not serious—of course it is—but the vast majority of the crimes to which he alludes would be dealt with by the CPS. Indeed, the CPS has charged a number of individuals with precisely those sorts of crimes.



### Director of Public Prosecutions: Priorities

6. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on his priorities for the Crown Prosecution Service. [901316]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** I have regular meetings with the Director of Public Prosecutions. His priorities align closely with those of the Government—namely, tackling delays, combating violence against women and girls, enhancing our work with victims and driving improvement across the system.

**Bob Blackman:** It appears that almost every week on our streets we see hate-filled demonstrations with antisemitism rife, yet no action seems to be taken. The end result is that my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) has announced his decision to leave this place because of antisemitism and the threats against his person. Will my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General take up the matter with the CPS, to ensure that that is the last such case and that antisemitism is prosecuted properly in the way it should be?

**The Attorney General:** My hon. Friend raises an important and serious matter. I reassure him that I have been working closely with the CPS, which in turn is extremely close to the police, to deal with these very significant issues. The CPS has been embedded in the control rooms during the most serious of the marches that have taken place.

I also reassure my hon. Friend that a large number of prosecutions have already started. Most of the ones that have come to conclusion are necessarily guilty pleas, because prosecutions take time, but we all saw, sadly, a large uptick in that horrible crime after 7 October last year, and we are just starting to get to the phase when trials are beginning where people have not pleaded guilty. I hope he will take some reassurance from my answer and that he will come and see me so that I can talk him through some of the work we are doing.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Does the Attorney General agree that a key priority for the CPS must be fixing the flawed way that joint enterprise laws are used, and does she agree that no one should ever be convicted of a crime that they made no significant contribution to?

**The Attorney General:** I know the hon. Lady is a long-time campaigner on joint enterprise, and I also know that the Lord Chancellor, my dear friend in this place, has also considered such matters very carefully.

### Government: Rule of Law

7. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to ensure the rule of law is upheld within Government. [901317]

**The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis):** I have always been clear that the rule of law is fundamental to our constitution, and it is the duty of the Law Officers to

uphold it. As I emphasised in my speech at the Institute for Government last summer and in my appearance before the House of Lords Constitution Committee, I take that duty very seriously indeed. I engage not only with colleagues across Government but with students and other young people, to ensure that the rule of law is protected not just now but for generations to come.

**Mary Glendon:** The Horizon scandal has raised many important legal questions, ranging from the reliance on flawed evidence to the slow pace of the justice system in correcting miscarriages of justice. Will the Attorney General now address the implications for the power of organisations such as the Post Office to pursue private prosecutions, and in particular what oversight the Crown Prosecution Service can or should have over the use of those powers?

**The Attorney General:** I thank the hon. Lady for her serious question and would like her to rest assured that these matters are being considered very carefully within Government. The immediate priority is to take bold and novel action to right, in so far as we can, the wrongs that have come about through the Horizon scandal, but a slower-timed but nevertheless urgent piece of work is to make sure that private prosecutions are sufficiently scrutinised and inspected in future.

**Sir Michael Ellis** (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the leaking of Law Officer advice for political or any other purposes is not only a breach of the very important Law Officers' convention respecting the confidentiality of legal advice, but damaging to the public interest and contrary to the rule of law?

**The Attorney General:** My right hon. and learned Friend makes a characteristically significant intervention. Having served as both Solicitor General and Attorney General, he will know very well the importance of the Law Officers' convention to the working of Government. Legal professional privilege generally is a very important construct and something on which the client relationship relies. In Government it is, if anything, even more significant, and when Law Officers' advice is leaked it has a chilling effect on our ability to provide free, frank and honest advice to the rest of Government. That is something I wholeheartedly deplore, and I agree with everything my right hon. and learned Friend said.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Attorney General.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We have all read with deep concern last week's interim ruling from the International Court of Justice regarding the situation in Gaza, and Labour is absolutely clear that Hamas must release all remaining hostages immediately, that Israel must comply with the ICJ's orders in full, that the judgment of the Court must be treated with respect, and that all parties must comply with international law as part of an immediate humanitarian truce and a sustainable ceasefire. I ask the Attorney General, very simply: does she agree with me on all those points; and is it the official position of the Government to accept the authority of the Court in this matter and, even more importantly, to urge Israel also to accept the authority of the Court and to implement its orders in full as a matter of urgency?

**The Attorney General:** The right hon. Lady is right to call for international humanitarian law to be respected and civilians to be protected in Gaza, and I join her in that call. We are deeply concerned about the impact of what is happening on the civilian population in Gaza;

too many have been killed, and we want to see Israel take greater care to limit its operations to military targets. We regularly review Israel's commitment to IHL, and I believe that we in this House all call for an immediate pause that will allow aid to get in and hostages to come out.

## Afghan Relocations: Special Forces

10.36 am

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Afghan relocation and assistance policy eligibility for Afghan special forces.

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey)**: I am grateful for the opportunity to update the House on developments relating to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy scheme, and to answer the specific question raised by the hon. Gentleman in relation to former members of commando force 333 and Afghan territorial force 444.

Many colleagues across the House are passionate advocates for applicants to the ARAP scheme—whether they served shoulder to shoulder with them in Afghanistan, or represent applicants and their family members who are residents in their constituencies. We owe a debt of gratitude to those brave individuals who served for, with, or alongside our armed forces in support of the UK mission in Afghanistan. Defence is determined to honour the commitments we made under the ARAP scheme, which is why we have robust checks in place and regularly review processes and procedures.

Although many former members of the Afghan specialist units have been found eligible under ARAP and safely relocated to the UK with their families, a recent review of processes around eligibility decisions demonstrated instances of inconsistent application of the ARAP criteria in certain cases. The issue relates to a tranche of applications from former members of Afghan specialist units, including members of CF 333 and ATF 444—known as the Triples. Having identified this issue through internal processes, we must now take necessary steps to ensure that the criteria are applied appropriately to all those individuals.

As such, I can confirm that the Ministry of Defence will undertake a reassessment of all eligibility decisions made for applications with credible claims of links to the Afghan specialist units. The reassessment will be done by a team independent of the one that made the initial eligibility decisions on the applications. The team will review each case thoroughly and individually. A written ministerial statement to that effect was tabled this morning, and I commend it to colleagues. A further “Dear colleague” letter will follow by close of business tomorrow.

It is the case, however, that ARAP applications from this cohort present a unique set of challenges for eligibility decision making. Some served in their units more than two decades ago, and some while the Afghan state apparatus was still in its infancy or yet to come into existence all together. It is also the case that they reported directly into the Government of Afghanistan, meaning that we do not hold comprehensive employment or payment records in the same way as we do for other applicants.

I fully understand the depth of feeling that ARAP evokes across this place and beyond. I thank Members from across the House for their ongoing advocacy and support for ARAP. We have that same depth of feeling in the MOD and in Government, and we will now work quickly to make sure that the decisions are reviewed, and changed if that is necessary.

**Luke Pollard**: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

The Triples Afghan special forces, trained and funded by the UK, are some of the top targets for Taliban reprisals. Around 200 Triples face imminent deportation from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and at least six members of the Triples are reported to have been murdered by the Taliban since the withdrawal from Kabul. Ministers have allowed media speculation to build for almost a week before setting out to Parliament today the Government’s plan to U-turn and look again at the applications.

The Minister highlighted inconsistencies in processing the applications—failures, flaws. How was that allowed to happen on his watch? How long will the reviews take, and what new information will be factored in? Tragically, today’s decision could be too late for many. Does the Minister know how many of the Triples who were wrongly denied support have already been deported to Afghanistan, tortured or killed? What conversations has he had with Pakistan to halt deportations of those who could now be granted sanctuary? There is no time to waste.

The least the Triples deserve is clarity over ARAP policy, but for months a public spat has played out between the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and the Minister for Armed Forces. We should all remember that the people who matter here are those Afghans who have been left in limbo, fearing for their lives and their futures. That is why clarity matters. Britain’s moral duty to assist Afghans is felt most fiercely by those in the UK forces who served alongside them, many of whom sit on both sides of the House. British personnel who have offered references to former Triples say that they were never even contacted by the Ministry of Defence. Many of their ARAP applications were denied. Will such basic errors happen again, or will that be reviewed properly?

The British public do not understand why Afghan special forces personnel who served and fought alongside our troops and who are eligible for safety have not yet received sanctuary here. Will the Minister now sort this out?

**James Heapey**: I know that the hon. Gentleman, who has been advocating for some cases and is as passionate about the matter as anybody, will feel aggrieved, as will many colleagues around the House. The responsibility of any Minister is to own any failure of process that happens in their Department, and I accept that responsibility.

The reality is that these are very difficult decisions to make. The hon. Gentleman said that the Triples were funded by the UK Government. That is not entirely accurate; they were funded as a donor alongside many other donors, into the Government of Afghanistan, who funded the units. As he will well know from colleagues on his own Benches who commanded units that worked closely with the Triples, top-up payments were made in order to generate loyalty and, frankly, to avoid the Triples being poached by other coalition partners, which had similar forces of their own.

The records of those top-up payments were very ad hoc. I take my responsibilities for accuracy to the House seriously, and I can tell the hon. Gentleman in all seriousness that we have looked for employment records and none of those ad hoc records of additional payments is available to us. We have spoken to colleagues who have experience of these matters in the House and

[James Heapey]

beyond, to ask for any records that they have, but even then a lot of the records produced are those that are put together by charities advocating for the Triples, rather than contemporary records of those top-up payments.

The reality is that whatever the challenges have been, some decisions were made in an inconsistent way. That is why they must be reviewed. We will aim to get the review done as quickly as possible—we anticipate that it will take around 12 weeks. Before that, we need to put in place the people who will do the review, who will be independent of everything that has gone before. In the first instance, it will be a review of the robustness of the decisions themselves, and where it finds that decisions were not robust, we will, of course, seek new information both from the applicant and from colleagues in the House who have advocated for them.

The shadow Minister makes some good points about what this means for people who are in Pakistan. It is impossible to say who, of those who were not already in the pipeline as approved applicants, has been deported. We do not track that, so I cannot answer his specific question but, of course, we will alert the Government of Pakistan to those who are included within the review, so that they can enjoy the same protection from deportation as those who have already been approved and are awaiting their onward move to the UK.

The shadow Minister necessarily points to the politics and the alleged disagreement among Conservative Members—that is the nature of his role—but I am simply not motivated by such things. The reality is that we are trying our best to bring as many people to the UK from Afghanistan as possible. Some decisions are relatively straightforward, because we hold the employment records, but others are far more complicated. Although there have undoubtedly been some decisions that are not robust and need to be reviewed, I put on record that the people involved in making those decisions, across the MOD, have been working their hardest and doing their best. I stand up for their service and for what they have done, and I take responsibility for their shortcomings.

**Sir David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I have been approached by people who were involved in training these soldiers—333, 444 and BOST 170—and they tell me that they are the most loyal, bravest and most effective soldiers who were operating in Afghanistan. As a result, they are the soldiers the Taliban feared the most, which I guess is why the Taliban have been executing them in front of their families whenever they catch them.

The Minister rightly says that we owe them a debt of gratitude, but this is more than that. It is a debt of honour. Can we ensure that, both in our administration and in our relationship with Pakistan, we do everything to deliver on that debt of honour as quickly as possible?

**James Heapey**: We certainly will. It is important to mention that the Government of Pakistan have often been the subject of questions in relation to ARAP over the past year or so. In my experience, they have been incredibly co-operative. We are hugely grateful to them for that.

The limit on the speed of flow is not any problem with the Government of Pakistan, but the challenge of getting people out of Afghanistan. The reality is that,

no matter how many decisions we review and no matter how many additional people we add as eligible for the scheme, there is a limit to how fast we can move people over the border into Pakistan. That will take time.

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

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for securing this urgent question.

The Department's latest numbers show that 11,684 people have been granted entry to the UK, and that 6,377 have been given indefinite leave. What has happened to the remaining individuals? Are they still waiting for a decision? Have any been ejected? As others have said, those who are targeted by the Taliban cannot wait. The Minister indicated to the shadow Minister that we are about to have discussions with Pakistan, but what discussions have already taken place? We are all concerned that Pakistan is ejecting people.

Finally, the fear of persecution due to religion or political beliefs is a qualifying factor under the refugee conventions. What consideration has the MOD given to the compatibility of that qualifying factor with the ARAP scheme?

**James Heapey**: To take the hon. Gentleman's last point first, the MOD is not considering asylum claims, which are a separate matter for the Home Office. The MOD is considering the cases of people who claim to have served alongside UK armed forces. Although I do not doubt the seriousness of the right to asylum, the MOD makes no decisions in that regard. We have no responsibility for that part of immigration policy.

Turning to indefinite leave to remain, I will need to write to the hon. Gentleman with the detail, because my understanding of the immigration status of those approved to come to the UK under ARAP is that they have it immediately: they are effectively citizens, in that they have the right to immediately come here, live and work. There is no further immigration phase required after their arrival, because the approval of their visa to come affords them all the rights that indefinite leave affords them in the first place. However, I will write to the hon. Gentleman to confirm that my understanding is correct and that he has not picked up something that I was not aware of.

On Pakistan, I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer. I genuinely could not wish for better engagement from the Pakistan Government with our high commissioner in Islamabad, and I am grateful to the Pakistani high commissioner to London, who has similarly made himself available to me whenever I have needed to speak to him. The issue with people in Pakistan is challenging: Pakistan has a very large cohort of people whom the Pakistan Government regard as illegal migrants and whom they are seeking to deal with. That is their sovereign choice as a nation, and it is not for us to tell them that they must not. However, where we have been able to tell them that people are part of our scheme, those people have been protected from deportation. For that, we are very grateful indeed.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis), we clearly



owe these individuals a debt of honour. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of people who are affected and how many families there are? What is the Ministry of Defence doing to reach out to the families of these brave men and women to ensure they can come here, as they should have the right to do?

**James Heapey:** We think that about 2,000 decisions need to be looked at again. Some of those will be entirely the right decision—they just were not written up and documented particularly well—so it is difficult to say at this moment how many of the cases that we will review will require further scrutiny. What I can say to my hon. Friend is that once we have carried out that initial review of the robustness of the decisions that were taken, we will notify people if their case is up for review and additional information might be required. While I will set out the detail of that process in the “Dear colleague” letter that will follow, my expectation is that we will also reach out at that point to any colleague in the House who has advocated for that case, so that they are aware that it is up for review and can similarly put forward whatever evidence they have.

**Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** I am grateful to the Minister for meeting with me recently to discuss this matter, but given the unique nature of the relationship between UK forces and the Triples, and given the commitments that have been made previously, it is beyond bewildering that we have not got to this point sooner. The Minister spoke about instances of inconsistent application of ARAP criteria in certain cases, and has said that he takes responsibility for that, but can he give an assurance today that he will work at pace to put it right, and what does he think it will mean for our international reputation? Will people trust us in the future?

**James Heapey:** I am grateful for the constructive engagement that the hon. Gentleman has had with the Department ever since the evacuation from Kabul. Our meeting the other day was most instructive, and much of what he said caused us to reflect in the way that we have done. He should take much credit for that.

We are working at pace—the hon. Gentleman has my assurance that we will continue to do so, but we have been doing so all along. This is an incredibly difficult process that is consuming ever larger amounts of horsepower within the Department, and rightly so, because we owe these people a debt. However, as has come up previously at Defence questions, we must be careful not to set the expectation among our partner forces that everywhere that the UK armed forces operate, now and in the future, there will be an immigration angle to such partnering. I accept that there is reputational damage to the MOD and that has an effect on my reputation, too—that is right; that is ministerial accountability—but I push back gently against the idea that it will have an impact on the willingness of partner forces to work with us. I do not think it is helpful if partner forces think the reward for working with us is a visa: that does not work at all.

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** I appreciate the Minister’s comments and his commitments today, but it is more than two years since the chaos of the collapse of the operation in Afghanistan and this surely has come much too late. There are still many people—not just the Triples, but interpreters and people who worked

alongside the forces—trapped in countries that are hostile and threatening them with transportation back to Afghanistan. Can he commit today to ensuring, with some urgency, that all cases are looked at quickly and speedily, and that we get as many people to safety as possible?

**James Heapey:** The cases are being looked at urgently. In the wider ARAP cohort that the hon. Member described, that process has been much easier. Some time ago, I directed the excellent officials who work on this, instead of working through the pile of applications, to go to the employment records we hold for interpreters and other locally employed civilians, and to focus on finding them in the pile of applications rather than going through all the applications that may be spurious or less credible. We will do so as quickly as we can, but it takes time, and even once eligibility decisions have been taken, if people are undocumented, and many of the ARAP cohort are, it is incredibly challenging to get them out of Afghanistan and into a safe country, and that limits our rate of flow enormously.

On those in other third countries, we do all that we can through the excellent staff in our embassies and high commissions to facilitate their movement out of those countries. However, there are some countries with whom we have quite challenging diplomatic relationships, particularly at the moment, and that makes it particularly difficult. That does not mean that we do not keep trying, and I am very grateful to our ambassadors and high commissioners for their efforts, but, fundamentally, we cannot tell sovereign countries what to do.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Back in September, the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs told this House that about 1,000 Afghans were accessing homelessness support, and that was after the Government had evicted 8,000 Afghans, including ARAP personnel, from UK hotels. Could the Minister confirm that there are still 1,000 Afghans accessing homelessness support?

**James Heapey:** I will need to write to the hon. Member on that.

**Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP):** Due to the high number of former Afghani soldiers whose lives are at risk as long as they remain in Afghanistan, what conversations has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues on the possibility of additional safe routes to the United Kingdom?

**James Heapey:** These things are discussed regularly, as the hon. Gentleman would imagine. There is an additional route to the United Kingdom in the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Indeed, our ARAP and ACRS offer covers all Afghan citizens who served alongside our armed forces or worked alongside our diplomatic missions—or who were simply prominent in Afghan Government and society, and for whom we therefore feel that relocation is necessary for their protection—up to a point. ARAP and ACRS are matched, not quite in their generosity but in their scope, by schemes in many other countries that were a part of the NATO force in Afghanistan and/or the wider donor community for Afghanistan, so the opportunities for people to leave Afghanistan and resettle elsewhere are enormous. We should be proud of the UK schemes, which, today’s announcement

[James Heapey]

notwithstanding, are incredibly generous. We are moving at the best pace we can to move people out of a country where that is very difficult.

**Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): I think the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Sir David Davis) could not have put it better when he talked about the debt of honour we owe all those who served with our armed forces in Afghanistan. I am sure that Members on all sides of the House will be appalled at the fact that, years later, the situation is still not completely resolved. The Minister rightly highlighted the challenges posed by lack of documentation in some cases, but given that, for those individuals, obtaining documentation will often mean applying to a Taliban-controlled passport office, will the Minister say how the Government are ensuring that those affected have a route to get the necessary documentation in a safe and efficient manner?

**James Heapey**: No, I am not going to share that detail with the House, because it is in absolutely nobody's interests for the Taliban to know how we are doing that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: I call Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I think happy birthday is in order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If you are like me, you do not count the years, you just make the years count.

I thank the Minister for his very positive answers. I ask this question simply because I met a gentleman in Pakistan about 12 months ago on this issue. He worked for the British Army alongside those in the special forces, so it is wonderful news that special forces in Afghanistan will have their applications reviewed. I wholly welcome that but want yet again to highlight the need to do the right thing by others as well as those who put their lives on the line in Afghanistan as part of the rebuilding effort and who have found themselves hiding away, out of sight—in Pakistan, for example—because they are not yet safe. I ask the Minister for consideration to be given to reviews of applications for interpreters and those who provided sustained assistance to our forces and who live life in darkness and in fear.

**James Heapey**: As I said in response to earlier questions, the interpreters and those who worked alongside us in a supporting function are much easier to find within the pilot applications, because we have the employment records and are therefore able to confirm their service easily. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me about the specific cases raised with him, I will endeavour to get him answers as quickly as I can.

## Business of the House

11.1 am

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the Leader of the House if she will give us the forthcoming business.

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt)**: The business for the week commencing 5 February will include:

**MONDAY 5 FEBRUARY**—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

**TUESDAY 6 FEBRUARY**—Opposition day (4th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

**WEDNESDAY 7 FEBRUARY**—Motions related to the police grant and local government finance reports.

**THURSDAY 8 FEBRUARY**—General debate on National HIV Testing Week, followed by a general debate on the management culture of the Post Office. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The House will rise for the February recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 8 February and return on Monday 19 February.

**Lucy Powell**: May I wish you a very happy birthday as well, Madam Deputy Speaker?

I start by expressing our profound regret that the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) has decided to step down due to fears for his safety and that of his family. The recent attack on his office was horrific. That any Member is forced from office due to intimidation, threats and fear is an attack on all of us and what we represent. It is unacceptable and we must do more to protect our freedoms and democracy. We stand together.

Yesterday, Alison Phillips was “banged out” of the newsroom in her last day as editor of the *Daily Mirror*. Alison broke the mould for female journalists, and she led a number of campaigns that had a direct effect on this place. She leaves a proud legacy.

Last week I asked the Leader of the House about the Procedure Committee report on scrutiny of Lords Secretaries of State. Has she now digested it, and when will she bring forward a motion to make it happen? I will chalk it up as a victory that, after many weeks of asking, Foreign Office Ministers finally came forward with a statement this week on the ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel. Will the Leader of the House ensure that that happens more often, with the Foreign Secretary himself taking questions? The situation demands it.

The International Court of Justice interim ruling was deeply significant and makes for difficult reading. We are clear that Israel must comply with the orders in the ruling in full, and that Hamas must release all the hostages immediately. International law must be upheld and the independence of international courts respected, with all sides held accountable for their actions. Twenty-five thousand innocent people are dead, including thousands of women and children, and 85% of the population of Gaza have been displaced and millions face the risk of famine. We cannot let innocent Palestinians pay the price. We must redouble our efforts for a sustainable ceasefire and a political process for a two-state solution.

On that, I welcome the Foreign Secretary's willingness to recognise the state of Palestine, which is a policy we have long supported. We hear this morning that Secretary of State Blinken is moving the US in that direction, too. As the Leader of the Opposition said, it is an "inalienable right of the Palestinian people".

Can the Leader of the House clarify, as there is some confusion, the Government's policy on the recognition of Palestine?

Talking of Secretaries of State being accountable, perhaps the Leader of the House can clear up some of the creative use of language by the Home Secretary in his appearance before the Home Affairs Committee yesterday. Apparently, we no longer have a backlog of asylum claims; it is just "a queue" of 94,000 applicants—some queue, but definitely not a backlog. The 33,000 asylum seekers who have gone missing apparently are not missing, but have simply "disengaged". Does the Leader of the House recognise that the Government have lost control of the asylum system and that smoke and mirrors cannot hide the truth?

The Business Secretary was not exactly forthcoming with the truth this week either. On Monday, she told this House that negotiations with Canada to save British car imports were "ongoing", but now we learn that she walked out of those discussions and the entire issue is on pause. Does the Leader of the House want to take this opportunity to correct the record?

Finally, I cannot let business questions go by without referring to the Leader of the House's rather bizarre, unprompted, over the top, glowing tribute to the Prime Minister in last week's business questions. I feel the lady does protest too much. It was as if she was at "The Traitors" roundtable, desperately wanting everyone to believe she really is a faithful. It seems that the traitors sit among them still, secretly planning their next kill. The evil plotters are trying to avoid banishment so they can win the prize. Can she reveal herself today, because we all want to know? Perhaps some of her colleagues can, too, or perhaps they should do us all a favour, cut straight to the endgame and let the public decide. Quite honestly, much as I love "The Traitors", this is not a TV show, and their antics have real-life consequences. As much as we are all sick of watching it, unfortunately, there is no off-switch.

**Penny Mordaunt:** From the Government Benches, I say happy birthday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This week I met Ashley, the cousin of 19-year-old hostage Agam Berger. She is the girl that many Members will have seen in video footage, playing her violin in happier times. She volunteered with special educational needs children, and was actively involved in working towards a peaceful solution in her region. I thank the shadow Leader of the House for her remarks about the hostages and all Members who are working hard to keep the spotlight on these people and their families. I hope that they will all be home soon.

I also thank the hon. Lady for her remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who has said that he is going to stand down because of his safety and the wellbeing of his family. Such attacks on elected Members are attacks on democracy itself. I know that many hon. and right hon. Members and their families are enduring such

threats. We condemn such actions and those who encourage, incite and excuse them. I thank the hon. Lady for her cross-party support on that matter.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to Alison, who was "banged out" of the newsroom. I also thank her colleagues who posted that on social media. I think it sends a very positive message for women in particular who want to work in that sector.

The hon. Lady asks about the Procedure Committee, and I again thank the Committee for its report on holding to account the Foreign Secretary on a range of issues. She will know that the recommendations in part rely on the consent of their noble Lords, and I am keen to hear the views of their Procedure Committee on some of the recommendations that our Procedure Committee has made. Since the Foreign Secretary was appointed, there have been 41 sitting days, and in that time Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, have made 71 appearances in Parliament, responding to parliamentary questions and in Select Committees.

On Gaza, the hon. Lady raised some serious issues. She will know—the Minister for Armed Forces was just at the Dispatch Box—that the Government take compliance with international humanitarian law extremely seriously. We monitor that with our partners. She will know that, as we can see from previous conflicts, the Israel Defence Forces also produces reports after the event. All of that is subject to a great deal of scrutiny, but I will certainly ensure that the Foreign Secretary has heard her concerns.

The hon. Lady talked about the Home Secretary. She will know—indeed, many Opposition Members have acknowledged—that the plan for ending small boat crossings and ensuring that we are speeding up processing in the Home Office is working. I think the latest figures show that the Home Secretary has sped up processing in his Department by 250%. She will know that crossings are down by substantial amounts—I think now just shy of 40%—and returns are up, which is all to be welcomed. That has been helped in great part by the new legislation that the Government have introduced. I am sorry that right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have not been able to support that.

That brings me to the final topic that the hon. Lady raised. I will make the case that we are faithful on the Government side. We have been faithful in our obligations to the British public in strengthening our borders. We have brought forward legislation which the Opposition have voted against—over 70 times on one recent Bill.

We have been faithful to the British public in our promises. We have been faithful to them in delivering on their decision to leave the EU, for which we had a landmark anniversary this week. Whatever way people voted in that referendum, we stuck with that democratic result—we did not try to reverse it or campaign for a second referendum—and what the British people want to know is that we are on the right trajectory now. Since we left the EU, we have grown faster than many nations, including Germany, Italy and Japan. Our export services are up at a record high. For goods and services, we are rising through the global rankings—we are up a place since last year. We have overtaken France on manufacturing, and we have simplified tariffs on thousands of goods and removed hundreds of trade barriers.



[Penny Mordaunt]

We have been through tough times, but whether it is our plans to level up communities such as Teesside, which Labour Members seem to be objecting to, or maximising our new-found freedoms to control our destiny and our borders, or opening up more opportunities for the wealth of talent and creativity of our citizens, our plan for Britain is working. Britain is on the right course. We have been faithful to our promises to the British people. Labour has not, and it would turn us back on the EU, union reform, tax hikes and much more.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call Wendy Morton.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** Best wishes on your birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Last week was Neighbourhood Policing Week. I was able to join the local Aldridge and Brownhills neighbourhood teams out in the community. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking our local teams for all they do? Does she agree that central to neighbourhood policing is neighbourhood policing hubs? That is why I continue to campaign against the proposed closure of Aldridge police station—and with only a few months left of the west midlands police and crime commissioner role, there should be a moratorium on any closure.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting her concerns on the record. Since 2010, our communities have become safer on roughly the same resources. Taking out online fraud, we have, in effect, halved crime: violent crime is down 51%; neighbourhood crime, including robbery and theft, is down 48%. I shall ensure that the Home Secretary has heard what she has said.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

**Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** Meal do naidheachd, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We saw a softer side to the Leader of the House last week. “The Prime Minister is a great dad”, she loyally read out from No. 10’s script. “He gives a lot to charity”, she whispered. Then, right on cue, normal service resumed and she was thundering fury at the Scots for not voting Tory. She asked me a question that got quite a response in Scotland: “Why do you think us Tory ‘rotters’”—her word, not mine—“are so desperate to keep Scotland in the Union?” Why, indeed? It is generally thought that Conservatives act in their own self-interest. Anyway, Scots have been totting up all the great things about being in the UK: the gift of Brexit making us poorer faster than even the worst forecasts predicted; 14 years of grinding, endless austerity; and a crippling debt burden of more than 100% of GDP, just for starters.

However, the Leader of the House is not alone in her desperation to keep Scotland lashed tight to Westminster. She will remember seeing a secret document presented to the Cabinet in July 2020 by her colleague the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The existence of that document was revealed at the covid inquiry this week. Finalised at the height of the

pandemic, it was entitled “The State of the Union” and was a blatant attempt by her Government to politicise the pandemic and undermine the Scottish Government when trust in Government messaging was crucial. It asked the Cabinet to endorse some sort of strategy, most details of which sadly are missing from the inquiry’s version. It required polling, research and data analysis, all at a time when Scotland’s First Minister and Government were focused on and doing their damndest to protect the people of Scotland.

No. 10 was slithering from one scandal to another. We know that a Union strategy committee and a Union operations committee were set up to mimic the strategy and operations committees that helped create the monster of Brexit. The right hon. Lady will agree that considerable resources were required, diverting cash and personnel from fighting the pandemic. It must be made clear to the public who funded that. Will she ask her colleagues to give a statement on the project, laying out why it was an appropriate use of governmental resources, what it did and what it is felt to have achieved—its key performance indicators, let us say—particularly given the times in which it was conceived? Finally, the Leader of the House will recall that the state of the Union report found, among many things, that 82% of young voters in Scotland want independence. Is she surprised?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady talks about normal service, and we have had normal service from the SNP this morning: the full bingo card of textbook, standard nationalist operating procedure. Failure to take responsibility for the things that it is responsible for: tick. Blame others: tick. Demonise opponents: tick. Distract from the indefensible things that we have found about this week: tick. A complete lack of self-awareness: tick.

Only the hon. Lady could come to this House and raise the issue of the covid inquiry this week. Perhaps she should have spent a little more time watching the evidence delivered by her own First Minister. We are having a covid inquiry and we did a lessons learned exercise because we want to ensure that this nation can be resilient in future and we want to learn the lessons. The hon. Lady’s party has been less than forthcoming on a similar ambition for its performance in Scotland. I would ask her to reflect on that. The only thing missing from the hon. Lady’s question is that she has somehow failed to accuse the UK Government of being responsible for an escaped macaque from the Highland zoo.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** I also wish you a happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last week Ram Mandir was consecrated in Ayodhya—the birthplace of Lord Ram—in Uttar Pradesh in India. That caused great joy to Hindus across the world. Sadly, the BBC reported that it was the site of the destruction of a mosque, forgetting that it had been a temple for more than 2,000 years before that, and that the Muslims had been allocated a five-acre site adjacent to the town on which to erect a mosque. Will my right hon. Friend allow a debate in Government time on the impartiality of the BBC and its failure to provide a decent record of what is going on all over the world?

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend will know that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport recently reported on the BBC review, which raised very important



issues. My hon. Friend knows how to apply for a debate, and he will know that the next questions to the Secretary of State are on 22 February. However, he has, I think, achieved his objective today, which was to get his concerns on the record.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): Can I too wish you a very happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker?

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business and the Backbench Business debates next Thursday. If we are allocated time on the first Thursday back following the February recess, we will have two debates: on the civil nuclear road map, and on premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases.

The Committee is very much open for applications, particularly for Westminster Hall debates. Every week, many Members are unsuccessful in ballots for Westminster Hall debates. Some of those who are unsuccessful might think about coming along and applying to the Backbench Business Committee; it is another route. More time is available in Westminster Hall than in the Chamber, which is heavily subscribed to, but we still very much welcome applications for Chamber debates.

I also note the change of business at short notice today. I fundamentally understand the reasons for that, but hope that the Leader of the House will be kind to the Backbench Business Committee in allocating time in future weeks.

I will raise one last matter, speaking for myself. The former Kwik Save supermarket building in Felling, Gateshead, has been lying empty and in disrepair for more than a decade. The owner is resisting all legal attempts by the council to facilitate its demolition. Unfortunately, it has now become a magnet for antisocial behaviour, and local residents are regularly pelted with debris from the site. The owner has used the courts and legal processes to frustrate the council in expediting this much-needed demolition. Can the Leader of the House guide me on how to get this problem sorted out? The owner is causing a blight on many people's lives in that locality.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his usual helpful advert for the Backbench Business Committee. He mentioned the opportunities that it affords Members, and the topics that I hope we can debate in the week back after recess. That is much appreciated.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is focused on precisely the type of situation that the hon. Gentleman describes, and on similar situations in which the landlord, although not an obstacle to development, does not have the capacity to make repairs to the building, and other third-party developers do not wish to buy a building in that condition. He is looking at what bridging finance could be made available to facilitate matters, and has also brought forward the notion of community auctions. I will write to the Secretary of State to ensure that he has heard of the hon. Gentleman's interest in the issue, and will ask his officials to afford the hon. Gentleman some advice.

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Cedars roundabout on the edge of Barnstaple is subject to 20 weeks of roadworks, which are supposed to help with congestion. The first week saw up to two

hours of delays for students and teachers getting to school and businesses losing huge amounts of trade, with staff also arriving late. The scheme has gone ahead with local councillors' support, but without adequate traffic management or modelling, either on the site or across the rest of Barnstaple, which has been blighted by road delays for decades. While this is clearly a local issue, can the Leader of the House guide me towards any Government assistance or national schemes that could enable someone to come and help with the road traffic modelling? The fear is that given how bad the traffic management has been to date, even when the scheme is completed, it will barely help the congestion in the way that it should.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am very sorry to hear about what is happening in my hon. Friend's constituency. I know that elsewhere in the country such schemes have caused massive disruption, particularly to local businesses, and local authorities have compensated those businesses. My hon. Friend can obtain examples of good practice from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. In my patch, we have taxi drivers who model traffic flow and tell us where there are problems with, for instance, traffic light sequencing. There are many innovative ideas out there, and I would encourage my hon. Friend's local authority to look at them, but I shall also ensure that the Secretary of State has heard about the situation in her constituency.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): On 13 June last year, Nottingham was shaken by the horrific stabbings that took the lives of three precious members of our community, Barnaby Webber, Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Ian Coates. The person responsible had numerous interactions with mental health services and police forces in the months and years preceding the attacks, and the families of his victims rightly want answers about missed opportunities to prevent his crimes. Will a Minister make a statement to the House on the various investigations that are taking place, and tell us whether the Government will convene an independent inquiry?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I am sure I speak for the whole House in saying how appalled we were by this terrible tragedy, involving not just the three individuals who lost their lives, but others who were very seriously injured. The nation has been rocked by it, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. She will know that the Government Law Officers have commissioned work on the matter, and I am sure that they will want to keep the House up to date. While that work is ongoing, there is probably not much more that can be said at this Dispatch Box, but I will ensure that both the Secretary of State for Justice and the Attorney General hear what the hon. Lady has said, and I shall ask them to keep her informed of progress.

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am proud that under this Conservative Government, the reading ability of children in the United Kingdom continues to improve. The UK is now 14th in the internationally respected test under the programme for international student assessment, run by the OECD. That is up from 25th under the last Labour Government. Given that this is National Storytelling Week and 7 March is World Book Day, would my right hon. Friend consider a

[*Nickie Aiken*]

debate in Government time highlighting the importance of reading for pleasure, and celebrating British and Irish literature?

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

**Penny Mordaunt:** My hon. Friend will have heard the support expressed throughout the House for what she has said. Being able to read is a wonderful gift. It is not just about getting an education; it is about an individual's whole self, and families should be encouraged to read together. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to our nation's success in climbing the international literacy tables. We should be very proud of that, and place on record our thanks to everyone who has enabled it to happen, including our incredible teachers.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On 12 January last year, I asked the Leader of the House how I could pursue my search for a way of putting bereaved children in touch with charities that want to help them, so that the charities know where the children are and can offer them support. It seemed to me a simple matter to come up with a protocol, but since then we have had two debates, I have met two Ministers, and a petition has been presented to 10 Downing Street by bereaved children who want something to be done for others, so that others do not suffer in the way that they did. Many of us who have been through that kind of grief want to see progress. Both the Ministers with whom I discussed the issue were schools Ministers; they talked about the work being done in schools, which is very supportive, and no one has any criticism of it. At the end of both meetings, however, the Ministers said, "Actually, we think that you need to speak to the Home Office", which is where everything grinds to a halt. We do not seem to be able to make progress and obtain clarity, although what we want is quite simple. It is not a new law, but merely a change in practice. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how we can get clarity and move forward, and perhaps secure that meeting with the Home Office?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for her continued work in this area. I know that many Members from across the House have been in the situation she described of losing a parent at a young age, and it is so important that people are properly supported. I will write to all relevant Departments. I know from my own experience of dealing with health and work issues that getting the right people from the right Departments in the right room together, and then locking the door until they arrive at a solution that we can take forward, is sometimes the only way of doing things. I thank her for her diligence, and I will talk to all Ministers in the relevant Departments to ask them to put a plan together and to come and talk to her.

**Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): A very happy birthday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have been in regular communication with the relevant authorities about the Meriden estate in Watford, and I brought many of them together just last year to look

at the issues that residents have raised with me. One pressing issue is the dangerous and illegal parking that is happening outside the new parade of shops. Although work is being done, I am sharing the residents' concerns, which I also have, that this dangerous parking remains a serious accident waiting to happen. Will my right hon. Friend guide me on how I can press the various authorities for more urgency in finding a solution and remind those parking illegally that they are putting people's lives at risk on York Way?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for his campaign. As he knows, illegal parking is classified as antisocial behaviour and it can have devastating consequences, particularly if emergency vehicles are not able to access roads that they need to access. He will know that the next Home Office questions are on 26 February and the next Department for Transport questions are on 8 February, but I will make sure that both Secretaries of State have heard his concerns.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Birthday greetings, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will the Leader of the House endeavour to find Government time for a debate to celebrate sporting excellence in Northern Ireland, given that last night young Conor Bradley scored his first goal for Liverpool football club and that, at the other end of the playing spectrum, we had the announcement by Steven Davis of his retirement from professional football, which I have alluded to in my early-day motion 333?

[*That this House notes the announcement of Steven Davis to retire from playing professional football; acknowledges the outstanding achievements of Steven, who at 39 years old holds the UK men's international caps record with 140 appearances for Northern Ireland as well as 742 club appearances for top flight clubs in England and Scotland, having played for his beloved Glasgow Rangers in two separate spells using the term, it's such a special football club, in his retirement statement; and wishes him and his family every blessing and good wish as he decides on his post playing career.*]

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is an excellent suggestion for a debate, and the hon. Gentleman will know how to apply for one in the usual way. I am sure that the whole House would want to join him in his congratulations to both Conor and Steven on all that they have done to make us all very proud.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): A very happy Essex birthday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Leigh Heath Court is a low-rise block of 42 flats in my constituency that had cladding installed as part of the Government's green deal policy. However, following the tragic events at Grenfell, the insurance premiums there have gone from £20,000 to more than £100,000. Sadly, because Leigh Heath Court is under 11 metres tall it does not qualify for Government support to remove the cladding, and the Association of British Insurers has repeatedly failed to deliver a long-promised alternative scheme. I have been raising this matter with Ministers for nearly two years now. Please may we have a statement on what the Government are doing to press the ABI to launch this long-promised scheme?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear about the situation in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I congratulate her on her diligence in trying to find a solution. If she will furnish my office with the correspondence she has had with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on this matter—I imagine it would be with that Department—I will raise it with the Department to see whether there is any more advice and support it can give to help get the situation resolved.

**Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op):** Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Yesterday, the Post Office confirmed that the Clapham Common branch in my constituency will be closed permanently next month, despite the serious impact that that will have on elderly and vulnerable residents. Not only did the public consultation receive more than 1,000 responses, but there has also been a high-profile campaign against the closure and a petition was handed into Downing Street just yesterday. The Post Office promised to take that feedback seriously, but, despite community opposition, it has not made a single change to its plans after the consultation. Does the Leader of the House agree that public consultation should never be a meaningless tick-box exercise? May we have a debate in Government time to ensure that communities can influence these really important decisions?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is an obligation to consult the public. We want the Post Office to provide services in the way they should be provided, so those consultations should be listened to. As she will know from my business statement, there will be a Backbench Business debate on Thursday 8 February about the management culture of the Post Office. I suggest that that will be her next available opportunity to get some serious time on the Floor of the House to air her concerns. I hope the relevant people in the Post Office will have heard what she has said today and take it into account.

**Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have the great honour to represent a large number of fishermen who operate under-10 metre fishing vessels out of the harbours of Mevagissey, Newquay and Fowey. Those vessels play an important role in providing high-quality fish for the UK and for export in the most sustainable way. They are an important part of the local economy and of the social and cultural fabric of their coastal communities. Those fishermen often feel overlooked when the Government are setting fisheries policy, and they are adversely impacted at the moment by the decision to remove quota for pollock. Can we have a ministerial statement on the Government's policy on the under-10 metre fishing fleet and the steps they are taking to support that fleet to ensure that it has a viable and sustainable future?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I agree with my hon. Friend that we should be supporting our wonderful fishermen. He will know that the under-10 metre fishing fleet plays a vital role and that vessels received around 12,000 tonnes of quota last year—double what the same vessels would have received if we were still a member of the EU. Those vessels have worked hard to seize those opportunities.

I know that a port not far from my hon. Friend's constituency has increased its annual sales from £40 million when it was in the EU to £70 million now. That achievement is huge testament to the hard work at that port, and we will do everything we can to support the UK fleet.

**Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab):** Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Families on Campton Fields estate in my constituency, like so many others across the country, have been left exposed to fleecehold by the Government's failure to act to end the ongoing limbo on estate adoption. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill contains many good measures, but it does not act on the Competition and Markets Authority's recommendation to tackle the issue of estate adoption at source. With cross-party representations now being made on the issue, will the Housing Minister make a statement on when the Government will tackle it once and for all?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and his support for the legislation that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is bringing forward. Given that the next questions to the Secretary of State are not until 4 March, I will make sure that the Department and the Housing Minister have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Members will be familiar with the various drop-in sessions held in the House, particularly those organised by campaign groups and charities connected with the health sector. A common theme is early diagnosis, but, disturbingly, statistics sometimes show that treatment is not common across the country and perhaps there may not be the best outcomes in one's own constituency. May we have a debate in Government time to look at how we can improve treatments across the country?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. Early diagnosis is critical in getting the best patient outcomes, but it is also critical to ensure that people are accessing the healthcare they need in a timely way and not waiting longer than they need to. That is why we have invested so heavily in new diagnostic testing centres across the country—off the top of my head, some 160 have been stood up—and they are helping to bring down waiting lists. It is an excellent topic for a debate. We should be looking across the whole UK, so that the four NHS systems can learn from each other and ensure patients are getting the best care, wherever they are.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Everyone has wished you a happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was nervously thinking of saying, "Pinch, punch, first day of the month," but, knowing your character, I don't think I will try it out. I would not try it on the Leader of the House either.

I have a very serious question for the Leader of the House. It is extremely worrying that a Member of Parliament is standing down because of the pressure that is being put on him. There is increasing pressure on Members of Parliament. I raised worries and concerns about my own case recently. It will be a terrible thing if



[Mr Barry Sheerman]

people are afraid to offer themselves for public office and to stand for Parliament. We need not just to have a debate, but to do something in the House about how we give better support. We want people to get up in the morning and be keen to come to work. When I raised my problems, I did not get much help or support from the House, or even from my own party. We need to do better if we are to keep this a healthy parliamentary democracy.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the honourable and wise Member for his question. It is an absolute tragedy that people who come to this place in good faith to represent their constituencies and do a job that they love are hounded out of office, or have to leave office, because of the wellbeing of their family. I know that the children of hon. Members, including very young children, have in some cases been targeted. That should not happen.

Last year, I initiated the largest ever survey of Members to make sure that this House is responding to the concerns that they have for the world as it is now, not as it was 20 years ago. We must continue to do that. I hope that the House authorities will meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his experiences and how we can support hon. Members to ensure that they are able to do their job. We can all help with this, and the public can help with it too. We know that what often encourages people is when they feel that they are given permission by others to demonise and dehumanise Members of Parliament, and quite often that permission to do serious physical harm and the motivation for it start on social media. Whatever we think about a particular person's political persuasion, their views or their voting record, they are in this place at the service of the people who sent them here. That deserves respect and it deserves our protection, too.

**Jo Gideon** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): A very happy birthday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Food waste is bad for the environment and bad for the economy, which is why the work of food redistribution charities, such as FareShare, is essential. At a time when people are struggling with the cost of living, the redistribution network is vital. We should look at how we can improve it and invest in it. Although the Government are making good progress in reducing food waste along the supply chain, there is still much more that can be done. Even in this House, I am always concerned about how much food we throw away. Will my right hon. Friend make parliamentary time available to discuss the issue of food waste in the UK?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that very important matter. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members from across the House are involved in pantry and larder schemes, which not only help people with the cost of living but ensure that food does not go to waste. These national networks are quite often tied in with local provision as well—with local allotments and community groups. I think that is an excellent topic for a debate, and I know that the Backbench Business Committee Chairman will be interested in an application.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

A very experienced MP once said to me that the letters “MP” stand for “must persist”, so I will persist and ask the Leader of the House whether she will help me to get a statement from the Paymaster General about the infected blood inquiry, in relation to the statement by Sir Brian last month about the delay in the publication of his final report. I know that work has been going on, so will the Paymaster General update the House, and will the Leader of the House reassure me that the House will hear from the Government on 20 May, the day of the publication of Sir Brian's final report, and not within the 25 sitting days that have been talked about? That would mean that the Government could take until 3 July to respond, which is not acceptable.

**Penny Mordaunt:** On behalf of everyone in this House, I thank the right hon. Lady for her persistence on this incredibly important matter. She is right to be persistent: often MPs, particularly Back-Bench MPs, do not have authority over particular areas. All we are able to do sometimes is nag and persist, but that is what we need to do, and she does it very effectively. I have had some recent updates from the Paymaster General, who is working through this; I know that she is aware of that. I hope that he will update the House before 20 May on the progress that he is making, and when that landmark report is finally concluded, I think the Government will be able to make themselves available to the House on the matter.

**Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): A very happy birthday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Tens of thousands of pounds—that is the bill that has landed at the door of a number of my constituents, and according to a BBC report the constituents of right hon. and hon. Members across the north of England. The bills relate to cavity wall insulation that residents had installed using a Government grant. That cavity wall insulation was defective, and caused damp, mould and damage to property. When no win, no fee lawyers got in touch, residents took up the offer. That proceeded through the courts. They were told that they would not have to pay, but a law firm based in Sheffield, SSB Law, has now collapsed. There was no insurance policy for residents, and they have now been hit with legal costs because of its collapse. I understand that the Solicitors Regulation Authority did a forensic investigation last year and is now investigating again, but can I enlist the help of the Leader of the House to get justice for residents who have no means to pay the tens of thousands of pounds that they are being asked for, when they thought that they were doing the right thing in getting cavity wall insulation, and putting it right after it went wrong?

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is an appalling situation, and I am very sorry to hear about it. I understand that the issue has been reported to the Solicitors Regulation Authority and that there is an investigation into the matters that my hon. Friend raises. I am sure that he will support his constituents with any complaints that they wish to make to the legal ombudsman and the Solicitors Regulation Authority. He will know that Justice oral questions are scheduled to take place on 20 February, but the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities might also be able to assist, perhaps with some of the schemes that it has in place to help to

regenerate communities and tackle some of these issues. I will write to the Department and ask whether it can assist him.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): Many happy returns, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that you will not be the only person celebrating today: my constituent Catherine Humphrey was at the Palace yesterday for an investiture. I know that her family are immensely proud of her.

The Leader of the House will be aware of the wonderful gospel singer Harmonie London, who regularly performs on the streets of London, principally on Oxford Street. During a recent performance there, Community Support Officer AW5152 accosted the performer, and said, “You’re not allowed to perform church songs outside of church grounds unless you have a special letter.” The Leader of the House will know that under article 9 our rights to freedom of religious worship are enshrined in law and protected. That officer was simply wrong, but when that was pointed out to her, her response was to stick her tongue out at the performer. That was just wrong. This performer, unfortunately, has been accosted more than once by police officers about her performance. She is entitled to sing gospel songs on the streets of our nation, as many buskers do, and those freedoms should be protected. I hope the police, after apologising, will train their officers to be aware of the rights of all the citizens of this United Kingdom.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. He will know that the Metropolitan police have said that they got it wrong. I think there were some other issues relating to busking licences and all that, but in terms of what he has described the officer saying and her justification for acting, the Met have said they got that wrong and my understanding is that they have apologised for doing so. He is right to raise that, and I hope it will have reassured the public about their particular rights to do one thing or another. However, we also need to place on record our support for the police. We have policing by consent; sometimes they make poor decisions, but they are held to account for them and, where they have got it wrong, they apologise. I think that is the hallmark of a good police service.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): In 2019, I was successful in my campaign to have Mill Hill Broadway train station included in the Department for Transport’s Access for All programme, but I was subsequently advised that the installation would be delayed. Given the importance of this project to local people, can we have a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to provide an update on the progress of the last round of funding applications?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear that there has been delay to this very important project, which I know my hon. Friend worked incredibly hard to secure. He will know that the next Transport questions is on 8 February. I understand that there is an issue about engaging a particular contractor to be able to start the project in March this year, but the question is best directed to the Secretary of State, and I will make sure that he has heard what my hon. Friend has said.

**Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Over the last few weeks, this House has seen a rise in absenteeism among senior Ministers. There has been a debate on steel with no Secretary of State and nothing from the Education Secretary on the childcare crisis. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is an unacceptable way for her colleagues to treat this House?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will certainly make sure that the relevant Departments have heard what the hon. Lady has said, but I disagree with her: whether it is a statement, attendance at questions or making Ministers available for urgent questions, I am not aware of any incident where the relevant Minister has not been present.

**Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): Penblwydd hapus, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Ynys Môn is represented by five Members of the Senedd, soon to increase to six, and is merging with another constituency. That could result in not one MS living on Ynys Môn. Conversely, the UK Government have recognised Ynys Môn’s unique island character by granting the island special protected status. Does the Leader of the House agree that the Welsh Labour Government, propped up by Plaid, should prioritise increasing the number of GP and dentist appointments, not increasing the number of MSs by a staggering 60%, from 60 to 96?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am shocked to hear about this plan to massively increase the number of MSs. The answer to questions of how to get better healthcare and so on is seldom more politicians. It is usually more GPs or more teachers—and we, of course, have a good track record delivering on both those things. To put the plan in context, if the same constituent-to-politician ratio as in the plan being outlined in Wales were transferred to the House of Commons, this Chamber would have to accommodate 2,058 Members of Parliament. That is Labour’s blueprint for governing Britain, I think.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): May I suggest a glass of the Talisker to mark your special day, Madam Deputy Speaker? I know it is one of your favourites.

Earlier this week we saw the publication of the long-delayed Teesworks report, which made no fewer than 28 recommendations to address poor practice by the Tees Tory Mayor in everything from governance and transparency to failure to provide his own board with the necessary information to make decisions, to the lack of scrutiny over value for public money. Does the Leader of the House agree that that was sufficient reason to call in the National Audit Office, even before the latest *Private Eye* revelations that £20 million was paid by the Mayor’s development corporation to the organisation controlled by two local businessmen to move rubble from one part of the site to another, without any contract?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was simply making a suggestion to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or whether he was offering to purchase you a glass of whisky—I hope the latter.

[Penny Mordaunt]

Labour is focused on Teesside—the last few months have been the first time for that, really. For many, many years, when Labour had the opportunity to directly help that part of the country, they ignored it, so the people of Teesside—fed up with Labour inaction—put their trust in Mayor Houchen. He has a plan and he is delivering: he saved the airport; he secured the first and largest freeport, which has already secured billions of pounds of inward investment; the Teesworks site has already been made ready for redevelopment and investment, ahead of schedule and ahead of budget; £650 million of investment is securing thousands of green jobs; the SeAH factory is being built using British steel, which makes me very proud; and the world's first carbon capture, utilisation and storage facility has secured billions of additional funding into the area.

Mayor Houchen has managed to secure £200 million to invest in local rail, and he has a new bypass on the way; he has increased the employment rate by 3% above the national average; and he has future business rates revenues, which are projected to be about £1.4 billion to date. He gets on and delivers. Labour ought to be taking notes, rather than smearing him and the hard-working people of Teesside who are making this plan happen. That tells me that Labour has learned absolutely nothing; it has not changed and shows every sign of taking the people of Teesside for granted.

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): Happy birthday, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Taxi drivers are essential key workers who get youngsters to school and the elderly to health services and support our night-time economy. But I have spoken to taxi drivers in Stockton South, and they say that they are increasingly victims of assault and fare dodgers, and they feel that no one has their back. Will my right hon. Friend grant me a debate on how we can better protect taxi drivers and ensure that those responsible feel the full force of the law?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing our attention to the issue. Given the statistics that I cited earlier, he will know that crime is falling. In particular, violent crime against individuals is down substantially—by 52%—and, of course, we have more police officers than ever before. I am sure that the Home Secretary will want to hear about my hon. Friend's particular concerns; I will certainly make sure that he has heard them, but my hon. Friend can also raise them with him directly in questions on 26 February. I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for the taxi drivers in his part of the world.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): Many happy returns, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is nice to share a moment of lightness in what are otherwise quite dark times.

Last week, the International Court of Justice ruled that claims of genocide in Gaza are plausible. Two days later, during a settler conference in Jerusalem alongside 10 other Government Ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir, the Israeli Minister of National Security, stated that encouraging emigration from Gaza is a necessity. I am sure that many colleagues across the House would agree that that sounds dangerously like an advocacy of ethnic cleansing

of Palestinians from Gaza, so will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time so that this House may express its views on whether it is now appropriate to issue targeted sanctions against any individual, organisation or state that is found to have incited or committed war crimes, or incited ethnic cleansing or genocide?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I understand why the hon. Gentleman raises concerns about that issue. All Members of the House are concerned about what is happening in the middle east. We want to see civilians protected and an end to hostilities. Key to that is ensuring that Israel is safe and secure, and that its citizens who have been kidnapped and are being held hostage are returned. The hon. Gentleman will have heard what the Foreign Secretary has said on those matters. He has been doing a huge amount of work, particularly over the last week, talking to nations in the region, which can particularly help to secure all those aims.

I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to think about what they say on the Floor of the House and whether it helps or hinders that situation. This Chamber is not an international court; accusations about genocide or ethnic cleansing should not be made. It is about ensuring that the right bodies are overseeing matters. I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman asked for a briefing on how the Government are doing that, whether through our partnerships in the Ministry of Defence or at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, he would be very reassured by the oversight that is being provided.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Trust in politics matters. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out the importance of every single Member ensuring that any information they present to the House as fact is accurate, and that, when mistakes are made, as they sometimes will be, Members have a duty to correct the record in early course out of respect for other Members and those we represent? Does she agree that correcting inaccurate information provided in error is a sign not of weakness but of strength and honour—values to which we should all aspire?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I hope that my past actions on that matter speak volumes and do that job. Where I have given the House incorrect information, I have corrected the record. The hon. Lady is quite right: sometimes mistakes happen and they should be corrected. With regard to the motivation for her question, I refer her to what I said yesterday further to a point of order: the figures that she is working off, from a House of Commons Library paper, are from the SNP's budget in 2022. They are out of date.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 16 October to ask whether the Department would consider reopening the state-of-the-art Rutherford cancer centre in Bomarsund in my constituency, given the lengthy—and lengthening—cancer waiting lists in my area of the north-east. I received a letter from the Department only this week—three months later—suggesting that:

“To operate as NHS cancer centres, the Rutherford sites need to meet NHS specifications and we are advised by NHS England that they do not.”



The reality is that other Rutherford cancer units, in Taunton and in Clatterbridge in Liverpool, have joint partnerships with the NHS. The Rutherford centre in Bomarsund has had referrals from the NHS, so this is absolute humbug. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate in Government time on fairness and equity in the frequency of diagnostics, cancer treatment and so on across the country, not forgetting the north-east of England?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale):** Order. Before I call the Leader of the House, I should say that a significant number of Members wish to participate, and there is some very serious business to follow, so I would be grateful if Members on both sides of the House asked questions and did not make speeches.

**Penny Mordaunt:** As the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) knows, the Department of Health and Social Care oversees the national cancer plan. Although I do not know the background to his constituency issue, I suspect it will be a matter for local commissioners. I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has heard what he has said today, but he may need to direct the issue to local commissioners.

**Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab):** The Office for Budget Responsibility is responsible for giving clear advice to the Government on their fiscal and budgetary strategy. Has the Leader of the House noted that the other day a senior representative of the OBR said that the Government's figures are a "work of fiction", because the projections for cuts after the election have never been printed? Will she comment on that? Is it a work of fiction? Can we have a debate on the OBR and its role?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should raise that directly with the Treasury. He will not have long to wait, as the next Treasury questions will be on 6 February. I remind him that we established and continue to support the OBR, which has done a great deal of work to ensure that the kind of mismanagement that happened before 2010 does not happen again.

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** Recent court documents appear to show that, following an internal Foreign Office review of their legality in the light of what is happening in Gaza, the Foreign Secretary himself recommended that arms sale licences to Israel should be allowed to continue. There are concerns that at a recent Foreign Affairs Committee hearing the Foreign Secretary gave the impression that he had not taken a formal decision. It is important that this is cleared up, so will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate on the legality of our current arms exports to Israel and the FCDO's decision to continue those exports? Will she write to the Foreign Secretary to ask him to place the legal advice he has received on this in the Library?

**Penny Mordaunt:** This may be news to the hon. Gentleman, but there is a Select Committee of this House that scrutinises arms export controls. It is entitled to look at anything, and all the policy will be cited there. Much of the material is available for hon. Members to look at. There are very clear criteria for decision takers, and the process has oversight and a legal framework around it. As he knows, we do not grant arms export

licences to countries where we think the arms will be misused or might irresponsibly fall into the hands of a third party. I can only conclude that the fact that those criteria have not been met means that we are right to continue our defence partnerships with Israel.

**Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind):** I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am currently a major shareholder, and in a few weeks' time will be the 100% shareholder, in a significant food processing business in North West Leicestershire.

Food is not a luxury: it is essential for human existence. Food price inflation is running at 10%, which is putting pressure on household budgets. Across Europe, farmers are leading protests that have been barely reported in our media. The phrase "No farmers, no food" has been translated and is understood in many languages. Can we have an urgent debate in Government time on UK farming, UK food production and UK food security, before our farmers start taking direct action?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman will know how to apply for a debate, and I am sure that a debate on that topic would be very well attended. He will know that many Conservative Members would have to make a similar declaration of interest if they were to speak in such a debate, so we absolutely understand the issues facing our farmers. We value what farmers do as a tremendous service to this nation, and we rely on them for our resilience.

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** In July 2020, Baroness Cumberlege produced a report called "First Do No Harm", which looked at the damage being done to women by sodium valproate, Primodos and vaginal mesh. Members from across the House have supported that report, and have especially supported listening to the women who have been harmed and debilitated so badly by the use of that mesh. Can we please have a debate in Government time to update us on the Government's progress in adhering to some of those important recommendations?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Lady for keeping this issue in the public eye. It has received cross-party support and this is long overdue—we have not put enough focus on the particular issues that affect women, and on some of the legacy treatments and devices that have caused so much damage. I thank all Members who have worked towards that goal, most notably my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Dame Jackie Doyle-Price), who did a huge amount of work on the issue when she was at the Department of Health and Social Care. The hon. Lady will know that the Secretary of State has just published an updated report on our strategy for women's health, and I will make sure that she has heard what the hon. Lady has said about this particular issue.

**Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab):** Petrol prices in Merthyr Tydfil continue to be approximately 10p per litre higher than in some surrounding areas—even the same retailers are charging more locally than at nearby stores. I have written to petrol retailers that have forecourts locally, and those that have replied have been unable to justify why residents in my constituency are

[Gerald Jones]

being ripped off. Can we have a debate on what action the Government can take to address this scandalous situation at what continues to be a very difficult time for families?

**Penny Mordaunt:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: households and businesses need to know that they are getting competition at the pump and the best price, and that any savings that are made—due to changes in oil prices, for example—are being passed on to the customer. He will know that we have brought forward work with the Competition and Markets Authority to stand up PumpWatch, and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero gave an update to Members of Parliament on this issue a couple of weeks ago. That work will ensure competition, but it will also enable consumers to see what different retailers are doing, which will be a big step forward. If the hon. Gentleman wants to give me the details of the retailers that are not treating his constituents fairly, I will make sure that the Secretary of State sees them.

**Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** Today is Time to Talk Day, the nation's biggest mental health conversation. Good-quality youth services can have a positive impact on young people's mental health: places such as the young persons hub and Tokko Youth Space in Luton, and people such as our outreach workers from Luton Council and Central Bedfordshire Council, are all really important in enabling young people to open up and feel listened to. Will the Leader of the House consider allowing Government time for a debate on the important role of youth organisations and services for young people's mental wellbeing and personal development?

**Penny Mordaunt:** On behalf of all right hon. and hon. Members, I thank the hon. Lady for raising Time to Talk Day—I know that many colleagues will be involved in raising awareness and making full use of the opportunities to do so. She is right that mental health is a particular issue affecting young people. It always has been, but particularly after the dreadful pandemic years we really need to ensure that our young people have everything they need to thrive and have good mental health. The hon. Lady will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** The Leader of the House will know that since early last year, if not before, many Opposition Members—particularly the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—have been raising the issue of Teesworks. The report released on Monday was scathing in its assessment of the company, stating that Teesworks offered insufficient transparency to provide evidence of value for money. Clearly, we need greater transparency in such projects, so will the Leader of the House please remind the Prime Minister to finally release details of his conversations surrounding Teesworks—as he was asked to do twice last year—and will she agree to a debate on the need for the National Audit Office to investigate Teesworks, given the scale of the project and the public concern?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I should clarify that my remarks were not that the Labour party had neglected to scrutinise the work

of the Teesside Mayor: they were that Labour had neglected that area of the country when it was in power and had so long to help it to regenerate and bring in investment. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to what I said earlier about the achievements of the Mayor and what local people have been able to do when bureaucracy is pushed out of the way and good people can get together and get on, helping the area that they love to develop.

In his question, the hon. Gentleman has highlighted the fact that there is an enormous amount of scrutiny—of contracts, of value for money and of everything that has gone on. That is what the report and the other investigations and oversight have achieved. I say to the Labour party that it should stop knocking success, stop knocking this plan that is working, and start taking some notes.

**Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab):** Just before Christmas, the Scottish Government published their budget, which included confirmation that Clyde Gateway—a community urban regeneration company that has invested hugely in my constituency and in nearby Glasgow—would continue to receive £5 million of capital funding. A few days later, the Scottish Government realised that that was a typo: they were actually cutting the entirety of the capital budget to that organisation, although they did not make that public until several weeks later. I am tempted to ask the Leader of the House whether we can have a debate on the basic competence of the Scottish Government, but instead, I ask her whether there is any mechanism for a further statement on levelling-up funding, or on any other means that we can use to get funding to an essential community regeneration company such as Clyde Gateway.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am very sorry to hear about that situation: I can tell how disappointing it is to the hon. Gentleman, but it will also be very disappointing to his constituents. I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Scotland has heard his concerns and worries. There are not enough hours in Government time, or hours that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee could give this House, to fully examine and debate the level of incompetency that the Scottish Government are so renowned for. I am very sorry to hear about this particular incident, which the hon. Gentleman has now put on the record.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is always a pleasure to ask the Leader of the House a question. This week, as is mostly the case, my question is focused on the persecution of religious groups across the world. Every week, I bring to her attention the state of freedom of religion or belief; this week, I raise the persecution of Christians in Iraq, a country that I visited some years ago. Chaldean Catholics in Iraq are presently living under impossible oppression and confiscation of ecclesiastical property after the country's President revoked the state's recognition that Cardinal Sako is head of their church and sole administrator of its goods. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging that religious expression and property in Iraq be protected, not just for the Chaldean Catholics but for all the ethnic minorities in that country?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing the House's attention to a very important matter that deserves our focus and scrutiny. Again, he

has done us a service by raising this question, as he does every single week. Given that Foreign Office questions is not for some time, I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns about this particular group, and will ask the relevant Minister to update the hon. Gentleman's office about what we are doing to raise awareness of the matter and hold people to account.

## Points of Order

12.18 pm

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for my misunderstanding earlier, but I seek your advice on how Back Benchers who have successfully applied for a Backbench Business debate can have ample and adequate opportunities to take part in debates that are given adequate time.

Last week, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) put forward an alteration to the business of the House, which was fine. This week's business has also been altered, again understandably, given the importance of the Northern Ireland motion for approval and the United Kingdom internal market motion for approval. Perhaps they could have taken a whole day; I am sure that would have been welcomed by Northern Ireland Members. However, the reality is that we might have only an hour for two debates: the general debate on miners and mining communities, and the motion for freedom and democracy in Iran. Frankly, that is not acceptable. Can you advise the House, Mr Speaker, on how Back Benchers can have their voice heard in this place?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman, and I understand his disappointment. I hope there will be a good amount of time for Backbench Business debates. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is sitting next to the hon. Gentleman, will know that I am keen to accommodate and give time for these important debates and to support the innovation that is the Backbench Business Committee.

It will be for the House to decide the length of time it takes on these two statutory instruments. Yesterday, there was considerable representation for more time to be given, and for the House to have a mechanism to allow the SIs to be taken individually. The Government listened, and on this important matter we think it is important that the House has that time.

**Mr Speaker:** The only thing I can add is that the hon. Gentleman is sitting next the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who I am sure will offer a very sympathetic ear and, I hope, could schedule more time for that very important issue.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raise the infected blood scandal and inaccuracies in what Ministers are saying to Parliament, which is causing me a great deal of concern. On 18 January, the Paymaster General said to the House during Cabinet Office questions, in relation to Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations in his report:

"The psychological support is now in place".—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 1015.]

I then submitted a question to the Department of Health and Social Care asking it to publish details of that support. The answer came back:

"A bespoke psychological support service for infected blood victims, commissioned by NHS England, is currently being developed, and planned to go live in early summer 2024."



[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

It seems, therefore, that the Minister misspoke. During those questions, he also said to the House:

“I have recognised the need to ensure that we get the clinical, legal and care experts in place. They are in place, and they are working on some of the complex issues the hon. Lady alludes to.”—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 1015.]

Again, I tabled a question asking for further details. The answer came back on 29 January:

“The Government is in the process of appointing clinical, legal and social care experts to advise the Cabinet Office on detailed technical considerations of the Government’s response to the Infected Blood Inquiry and will update Parliament in due course.”

It is totally unacceptable for Ministers to give information on the Floor of the House that is then contradicted in written answers to Members. Will you comment, Mr Speaker, on what steps I can take to ensure that accurate information in this really difficult scandal, where people are dying, is relayed correctly to the House, Members and the wider general public?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Lady for giving notice of her point of order, which is a very important one. As she well knows, I am not responsible for the accuracy of statements that Ministers make in this House or in written answers, nor have I been given the power to police their accuracy. However—and I think this is important—I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her remarks, and the Table Office will be able to advise her on how to pursue this matter. One thing I do know is that the right hon. Member will not stop here today, but will take all avenues open to her to ensure that she gets a response to the remarks she has made. Again, I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have taken that on board.

## Northern Ireland

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to motion 1, on the draft Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations. If the House gives leave, this can be debated with motion 2, on the draft Windsor Framework (UK Internal Market and Unfettered Access) Regulations. Is there an objection?

**Hon. Members:** Object.

**Mr Speaker:** Since there has been an objection to the two motions being debated together, we will take them separately.

12.24 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris):** I beg to move,

That the draft Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

Getting devolution back up and running has been the principal focus of Government policy in Northern Ireland since February 2022, when the then First Minister resigned. The agreement that I set out to the House yesterday is designed to secure the widest possible support among the community in Northern Ireland for participating in the political process. These regulations should be seen and considered in the context of forming part of a package. This package will safeguard and durably strengthen Northern Ireland’s integral place in the Union and the UK’s internal market, and it will do so by placing commitments in that package into law.

The Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024 affirm, strengthen and future-proof Northern Ireland’s place within the Union, underpinned by the Acts of Union and the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

**John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):** If the Chancellor of the Exchequer wishes to lower the VAT rate or to take something out of VAT altogether, will that be a good law for Northern Ireland as well as for the rest of the UK, and can we now set taxes for the whole country?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** On the example my right hon. Friend has given of VAT, that has just been done for a number of different things. I believe the latest one was solar panels, but I will check with those in the Box. There are various other products, and I will get an answer for my right hon. Friend. But, yes, is the answer for VAT, and also for tax.

The regulations address the concerns that have been expressed in parts of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland that its status has been diminished. Let me say from the outset of our discussions that what the Government wanted and the Democratic Unionist party wanted, and which we had, was our shared determination to strengthen our Union.

**Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind):** May I sincerely recognise the efforts of the right hon. Gentleman, his team and his colleagues in achieving what they have achieved over the last week? One of the most encouraging things in the last week is that leaders within nationalism

and Unionism have all emphatically said they want to make Northern Ireland work. We all have different views on the constitutional future, and that discussion and debate is ongoing, but if Unionists want to make Northern Ireland work and nationalists want to make Northern Ireland work regardless of that, everyone benefits.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It has been a pleasure to work with all the party leaders over the time I have been Secretary of State. I am absolutely convinced—indeed, I have seen this on a number of occasions—that they can work together behind the scenes. It was striking last February, when Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell, a police officer, was shot by dissident republicans, how all the political leaders of Northern Ireland came together in such a strong repudiation of that attack. I have seen them work together behind the scenes on a whole host of things, and I know that, when Stormont is up and running, they will be able to deliver strong government, make the right decisions for Northern Ireland and make Northern Ireland a much more prosperous place. I thank him for his intervention, and he is absolutely right.

Again, let me say from the outset that what united the Government and the DUP was our shared determination to strengthen our Union.

**Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP):** There was a memorial service on Tuesday for somebody who I think never gets enough credit for his role in the peace process. Peter Brooke once said that Britain had “no selfish strategic interest” in Northern Ireland, and that was later repeated in the Downing Street declaration. Reading the Command Paper, it seems to me that the Government have moved from that position, which I think undermines the Good Friday agreement. They seem to have moved away from the principle of rigorous impartiality. Does the Secretary of State agree with Peter Brooke’s assertion and the Downing Street declaration, or is he moving to a different place?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I disagree with what the hon. Gentleman said at the end of his intervention and completely agree with what Sir Peter Brooke said at the time and our commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all of its different facets.

I want to stress our determination to strengthen the Union, and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has powerfully argued that strong and effective devolution delivering a thriving Northern Ireland within our United Kingdom is the surest way to ensure that this United Kingdom remains united in the time ahead. In taking the steps he has taken, he is delivering far more for the future of Northern Ireland in the Union than any of his detractors.

**Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con):** Can the Secretary of State give a list or summary of what those who are against the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) feel they have actually achieved in their months of campaigning?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I would love to be able to outline anything. I have a piece of paper with that on it; oh, it is blank—nothing, absolutely zero.

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):** I am holding up the piece of paper.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am afraid that the back of a postage stamp is too big to write what they have achieved. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) has achieved so much in this deal in safeguarding the Union and his detractors have not come up with anything.

The changes the right hon. Gentleman has secured in these regulations and the other instrument before this House, which we will consider shortly, will further enhance those protections. The regulations end any presumption that there is any form of automatic and unchecked dynamic alignment with European goods rules. Section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the so-called pipeline of EU law, is now expressly subject to the operation of vital democratic safeguards that the Northern Ireland Assembly, when sitting, will be able to exercise, including the Stormont brake. Indeed when—I emphasise when—Stormont begins to sit again and first assembles, I will be able to sign that Stormont brake legislation into law and it will be available to be used by the Assembly as we move forward. When Parliament passed the 2018 Act, it was exercising its sovereignty so that the UK-EU withdrawal agreement could be implemented in domestic law.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** The Secretary of State indicates that there are now “vital democratic safeguards”—he used the plural term—to guard against EU law, including the Stormont brake. Can he tell us what the other safeguards are?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes: we have the withdrawal Act itself, and the right hon. Gentleman is sitting in the place that safeguards our laws themselves.

It is right that we are updating domestic law to reflect the fact that democratically elected representatives in Northern Ireland will now be able to reject new and amended EU law and that the withdrawal agreement’s implementation is subject to robust scrutiny.

**Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** The ability of Ministers to govern is already severely constrained by things like the Human Rights Act 1998. What worries me about this is not the deal as such; I am a Brexiteer and want a dynamic and deregulated economy, so what happens when we try to diverge from EU laws? Will some civil servant have to sign this off—will it be a question of “No, Minister” before we even get to the House of Commons? Can the Secretary of State therefore assure me that we will be able to enjoy our Brexit freedoms under this deal?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, which has been put before. It was put yesterday and it is a genuinely fair question. I can honestly say that this package of measures will not change the freedoms and powers we have secured through leaving the European Union or through the Windsor framework. It will not reduce our ability to diverge or our commitment to do so should it be in the interests of the United Kingdom, and if the legislation does carry significant adverse effects, of course the House would expect the Minister to set out any steps to be taken in response to that assessment.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may expect, I shall now refer to section 38 and ask him a question about it. On the amendments made under the statutory instrument—which is not by Act of Parliament, of course—the arrangements under section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2020 state that the Parliament of the United Kingdom is sovereign and that its sovereignty subsists notwithstanding section 7A of the 2018 Act, including the Windsor framework. My right hon. Friend will know what I am saying: in practice and in law constitutionally there is the capacity for overriding not only the withdrawal agreement and the protocol but the Windsor framework as a result of what is contained in those words.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I note my hon. Friend's point. As I said yesterday, I hope he recognises what we are doing in this statutory instrument—making Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom a strong addition to the section. As I said to him yesterday, his original clause has been a big part of the solution to this conundrum. I am grateful to him for it and completely understand the point he has just made and thank him for it.

**Colum Eastwood:** From listening to the Secretary of State and reading the Command Paper, we would perhaps think there is only the Democratic Unionist party in Northern Ireland and no people with any other constitutional preferences, but of course there are many people in the north of Ireland who want to see a new Ireland as soon as possible. Despite what might be in the Command Paper and what the Secretary of State and others have said, does he agree that the Good Friday agreement is sacrosanct and that it is absolutely clear that if people vote for constitutional change, that is what will happen—that it is not up to the British Government or anybody else; it is up to the people of Ireland, north and south?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes, nothing that we are doing here changes that fundamental principle. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point and I hope I have clarified it for him properly.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), the difficulty was that in the eyes of Unionists the Northern Ireland protocol undermined the principle of consent, which is at the heart of the Good Friday agreement. Does the Secretary of State agree that these new measures and the legislation reset the balance so that the principle of consent and the will of the people of Northern Ireland alone will determine the future of our country as part of the United Kingdom?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Yes, and I think the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) are making exactly the same point, and rightly so. They represent two communities that have governed by consent in the past and what we are doing here today is trying to get government by consent back up and running in Stormont in the future.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): As one who in living memory served as a Minister responsible for the environment and for agriculture in Northern

Ireland because the Northern Ireland political process was not working, may I say that, as well as the exercise in syntax and the like in the writing of these instruments, the key point is that the Assembly should be effective and Ministers should come from Northern Ireland doing the jobs we do not want to have to do from Westminster?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Anyone who ever becomes Father of the House is obviously wise and well experienced and that was a particularly wise comment from a particularly well experienced hon. Member. My hon. Friend is completely right in everything he said.

Crucially, this legislation will also change the law so that new regulatory borders between Great Britain and Northern Ireland cannot emerge from future agreements with the European Union. That is an important new safeguard to future-proof Northern Ireland's constitutional status. No Government in the future can agree to another protocol; neither can the UK internal market be salami-sliced by any future agreement with the European Union.

This legislation will also introduce safeguards so that Government Bills that affect trade between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK are properly assessed. Ministers in charge of such Bills will need to provide—my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) raised this point—a written ministerial statement to Parliament as to whether a Bill would have a significant adverse effect on trade between Northern Ireland and another part of the United Kingdom. If the legislation does carry that significant adverse effect, the House would expect the Minister to set out any steps to be taken in response to that assessment. Indeed, we have Select Committee Chairmen present, and they would expect to do high levels of scrutiny in that space. This is a very good transparency measure that we should all welcome.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Secretary of State has repeatedly said that the deal we are looking at today will not prevent Britain from diverging from EU laws, which is obviously welcome. On page 17 of the Command Paper, it states:

“We will also...set out plans to introduce legislation in the spring that would avoid new regulatory divergence between GB and NI on veterinary medicines.”

Is the Command Paper saying that in that area there will be no future divergence?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** If my right hon. Friend goes through paragraphs 136 to 141 of the Command Paper, she will see us stating that we know that the current situation is not right. We have a grace period that will run out soon, and we want to find a solution similar to the one we found for human medicines. It has been suggested that we set up a working group of experts and people who truly know and care about this subject to look at this matter quickly and come to Ministers and Parliament with a solution that we will take to our European partners and negotiate hard to get, and we want to do that. The situation is not quite as she states; there is a process to get to a point where we have a settled view from this House, and indeed from experts from Northern Ireland in this space, so that we can move forward on this matter. I know it is important to all Members from Northern Ireland.



As I was saying before that intervention, the SI will increase transparency by ensuring that Parliament is presented with evidence of the GB-NI trade impacts of relevant legislation before proceeding with it. The concrete steps we are taking and enshrining in law will deliver clarity to business that Northern Ireland's unfettered access to the UK internal market will not be threatened by a new regulatory border.

Finally, with this legislation the Government will provide for additional duties and further requirements in statute regarding the operation of an independent review of the Windsor framework, reflecting our steadfast commitment to ensuring that the framework operates on the basis of the broadest cross-community support. As Secretary of State, I will be put under a duty to commission a review within one month of the Assembly having passed a consent vote, but without cross-community consent, and I will be obliged to respond to the report from that review within six months. That constitutes a new and important commitment by this Government. All those steps we are taking are designed to ensure that tangible action is taken off the back of a review and solutions are found. Government Ministers are being placed under a legal duty to raise the contents of the review at the UK-EU Joint Committee on the withdrawal agreement.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): Can the Secretary of State provide a little further clarity about the independent review of the Windsor framework? He will appreciate the spectrum of views on the Windsor framework, and it is worth stating that most people in Northern Ireland, most elected representatives and most businesses are pragmatic about it, although there are those who are opposed to it. Can he assure us that it will be a genuinely independent review that takes on board the full spectrum of opinion, not least in the context of the Assembly potentially having confirmed at that stage ongoing support for the Windsor framework?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I can give the hon. Gentleman that confirmation. It will be for Ministers to make sure that the panel is completely independent.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): On the regulatory issues in Northern Ireland, several laws have been passed in Europe—we hear that up to 300 have gone through since we agreed to leave—and some of those are already in place in Northern Ireland. As part of the review, is it possible to look at those that have been implemented to make sure that we get rid of those that we can? That mechanism should be in place.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The review will be based on the entirety of law, but essentially it has to look forward. The hon. Gentleman is right that there is always a pipeline of European Union law. I was a Member of the European Parliament for 10 years, and I saw at first hand the quantity of law that came from the European Union. The point I would make to him is that had we been able to get to this place earlier, we would have had the Stormont brake in operation earlier, and Northern Ireland Assembly Members might well have been able to trigger the Stormont brake and see it in action. I very much hope that we will see it in action in the future to demonstrate its worth in this space.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): It is worth making the point that while the Secretary of State is right in his response on the review, which was the subject of the rightful concern raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), he is also right to focus on the democratic scrutiny and accountability mechanism. That is not before us today, but it has been legislated for and it was a change to the Northern Ireland protocol.

The Secretary of State will also know that in this statutory instrument, there is a proper amendment, being made here in the UK Parliament, to section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which relates in particular to that pipeline. To give a sense of how regulations have been changed through this process, on Tuesday evening when the European Union and the UK Government reached agreement on what was contained in the red lane for rest-of-the-world products, 60 pages or more of legislative text and change were published that show the benefits. Not only has this legislation dealt with regulatory barriers that could be created in the future; as part of the overall package, some of those barriers have already been removed.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I could not have put it better myself. The hon. Gentleman is knowledgeable about the subject and has been well involved in the negotiations behind the document and the statutory instruments we are talking about. He is 100% right.

**Sir William Cash:** Does my right hon. Friend, who himself was on the European Scrutiny Committee, recognise that we are constantly monitoring these things? Indeed, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) is on that Committee.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I had the pleasure of serving for five years on the European Scrutiny Committee under the wise chairmanship of my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. That scrutiny is what this House does best. The Select Committee system is there to scrutinise all aspects of legislation, what the Government do and what comes our way. I know his expertise, having experienced it.

When we were members of the European Union, wading through the hundreds of different explanatory memorandums that came the Committee's way was quite a job and quite a responsibility. One of the commitments we have made is that we will make sure that information is freely available to Assembly Members in Northern Ireland—when they take their seats—to ensure that they can undertake democratic scrutiny of proposals that might well affect Northern Ireland, so that they have the information they need to use the Stormont brake, should they so choose. Scrutiny is a vital part of all this.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State and everyone on these Benches will know that over the past two years, I have done lots of consultation and had lots of discussion with party groups, community groups, the Orange Order, those in the NHS and many other people as well, seeking their opinions. From all that comes where we are today. I suspect that this legislation is not the fulfilment of everything we would wish to see, and with that in mind I ask one question.

The constitutional legislation and the legislation to secure our place in the internal market are here, but I and my constituents retain some level of concern, so

[*Jim Shannon*]

I press the Government for more assurance. It was highlighted yesterday that European laws might be overruled by the Government, but that wording suggests they may also be accepted, allowing Northern Ireland to diverge. I want the answer, Secretary of State. Does the last word lie in this place, or does it lie with the EU when it comes to making those decisions?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** Actually, for an element of law that would be triggered by the Stormont brake, I think the biggest say would be with Assembly Members, though this place—Parliament—is sovereign, and the hon. Gentleman will know that this place has already chosen for Great Britain to diverge from Northern Ireland. That has happened on the matter of animal welfare and livestock exports, and for good reason: Northern Ireland has a land border and a vociferous and lively trade in live animal exports with the Republic of Ireland, and were we to extend the ban in Great Britain to Northern Ireland, that would affect the export of about 3,500 cattle, 1,700 pigs, 337,000 sheep, and so on. Those are the figures for livestock moved to Ireland from Northern Ireland in 2022. This place already makes such decisions and it will continue to do so.

**Sammy Wilson:** The Secretary of State is at odds in making that argument. That is one argument that the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries made in saying why Northern Ireland should be excluded, but the reason given was that, because Northern Ireland is part of the EU single market, there could not be discrimination between cattle being transported to the Republic of Ireland and cattle being transported thousands of miles away to the south of Italy. That is the real reason why this House once again found itself subservient to EU rules in Northern Ireland.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is completely wrong. I know that he has written to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries—I have his reply, which I was copied into—expounding that some sort of carve-out should be made. But this is on the basis of a range of international agreements and their core principles, and that includes the World Trade Organisation. As good a Euro-sceptic as I am, I am careful not to blame the wrong organisation for the wrong things. We have signed up to World Trade Organisation rules, and we benefit from those rules. One element of this issue is World Trade Organisation rules, and he is picking the wrong thing to point his finger at. Those rules prevent discrimination against different countries in all sorts of ways, and they are important, vital rules. I am afraid that on this particular point, he is completely wrong.

I have long been clear to right hon. and hon. Members that I serve in the Government proudly as a Unionist. I am pleased that the regulations, which I commend to the House, will address the concerns expressed by part of the community in Northern Ireland in past years that our Union of nations has been somehow diminished as a whole. The regulations demonstrate that the Government have listened so that trust can be rebuilt, so that people and businesses can be reassured that they are in the UK's long-term future, and so that we can see Northern Ireland's political institutions restored.

**Julian Smith:** We are obviously debating the regulations, but may I point right hon. and hon. Members to annex A of the Government's "Safeguarding the Union" Command Paper, which provides an excellent summary of the historical context of the Acts of Union, including article 6? Many keyboard warriors across Northern Ireland—I am not sure what they have achieved in the last eight months other than to create a whole kerfuffle—would be well advised to read it. They would see that none of the Acts of Union is under threat in any way.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. He is right that a lot of noise and heat have been generated in many ways by people who have done absolutely nothing in this space. They are trying to cloud the reality that he expressed and which we have set out in annex A for everybody to see. I very much hope that right hon. and hon. Members will welcome the progress we have made in delivering the agreement by supporting the passage of these regulations and that, in coming days, they will join me in welcoming the return of Stormont, so that the Assembly and the Executive may serve the people of Northern Ireland once more.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Secretary of State for being generous in giving way. As he knows, I always try to be constructive. It is for all the people out there, including my constituents, who have concerns and probably do not have trust in the Government, for genuine reasons—forgive me, but we have been let down on a number of occasions—that I ask the Secretary of State to reiterate this once again; my apologies for asking him to do so. With his hand on the Dispatch Box—we all know what that means and are aware of the duty of his position—will he answer in simple terms for my constituents: does this deal constitute the renewal of our place in the constitutional and economic United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as fully and as completely as any other area in this great UK?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I believe that it does—100%.

**John Redwood:** Someone wanting to send goods from GB to NI would naturally expect to use the new internal market lane—the green lane. Who decides whether they would not be allowed to do so? Would it be the EU, the UK Government or the Stormont Executive?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** It is the UK Government in that area.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** Further to that point, in respect of paragraph 96 of the Command Paper, will the Secretary of State outline whether he expects further SIs in the pipeline to give full effect, impact and clarity to the issues raised in this wide-ranging document?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** We will give legal direction to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on these matters. We will use other legal instruments for the deal, but it is for us to give legal direction to DAERA on that point.

**Colum Eastwood:** We all accept that the DUP had a particular issue about all this, but does the Secretary of State accept that it is not good practice in Northern

Ireland to have a one Government, one party process? Will he commit in the future to having a much more inclusive process for dealing with these types of issues?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point; he makes it fairly. To be honest with him, there was one party that was staying out of government, and that party represents a community. I did try to keep him as updated as I could throughout the process, as we have done with the other political parties, but I needed to talk more to the party we needed to persuade to go back into government.

In future, I will always try to treat everybody equitably, but I hope the hon. Gentleman understands that I had to ensure there was an agreement that the Democratic Unionist party could stand behind so that I could start to rebuild the trust—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) used the word “trust”—that had been lost between the Democratic Unionist party and the United Kingdom Government. That is something we had to do between the two of us.

**Colum Eastwood:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. I think it has to be understood that there are more people in Northern Ireland than just the DUP and Unionism. I think nationalism feels that north-south has been undermined by the massive emphasis put on east-west. I ask him to think carefully about that. For me, the Command Paper undermines the Good Friday agreement, undermines north-south, and goes far too far in the direction of the DUP’s thinking.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** The hon. Gentleman is a friend of mine, so I hope that he does not mind my disagreeing with him on this. The Command Paper will, I hope, deliver the restoration of Stormont: the most important strand 1 institution of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It will also allow for Ministers to be appointed to the North South Ministerial Council: an important institution in a different strand of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which could then function properly. What the Command Paper does is allow for all strands of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement to start humming again as they should. He will have to forgive me, but I must disagree with him on that point.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for being so generous. Does it not all boil down to this? As is outlined in annex A, it is important to distinguish between Northern Ireland’s “integral place” constitutionally within the United Kingdom and its internal market, and the access it has to the single market as a result of its unique position. Those two words—the difference between access and its constitutional place—are what we really need to focus on when trying to square this circle.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He makes an important point eloquently, as ever.

Mr Speaker—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is very nice to see you in your place, and I am sorry I did not see you come in—the regulations undoubtedly will

strengthen Union. It is for that reason, and more, that I wholeheartedly and unequivocally commend them to the House.

1 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his explanation of the first set of regulations that we are considering, and I join him in wanting to see the institutions up and running again as soon as possible. I welcome the measures, and the Opposition will support them.

Ever since our leaving the EU created the problems that have caused Northern Ireland to be without a Government for two years, we have been trying as a nation to find a common-sense way through. The SIs are a continuation of that process to balance two objectives: first, to enable the free flow of trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain; and secondly, to make sure that goods that enter the Republic across the open border meet the single market rules.

We should note the further commitments, to which reference has been made, contained in the Command Paper published yesterday. We look forward to regulations and guidance to implement them where required, perhaps with a little bit more time to read them, although I understand completely and support the timetable we are dealing with today.

I commend the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) for drawing the House’s attention to the annex of the Command Paper on the history. I certainly learned some things from reading it. I have heard the argument that there was always free and unfettered trade and now that has changed, only to discover that the Government of Ireland Act 1920 required that the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland be treated as exports and imports, and that customs officers were instructed to conduct physical inspections of ships and daily sailings twice weekly, at a check rate of 28%. It is a jolly good idea to understand one’s history when trying to deal with the problems of the future.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Some suggest that the Acts of Union should be as they were in 1801, but my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) would be perplexed to discover that a bottle of Bushmills whiskey distilled in his constituency would have a £3 tariff added to it to be sold in Great Britain—the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we certainly do not want to go back to that?

**Hilary Benn:** I am a teetotaler, so perhaps I do not feel the suffering in that example in the same way as other Members. However, the right hon. Gentleman is an observant student of Northern Ireland history, and he makes his point extremely forcefully.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the right hon. Member recognise the difference between a tariff being put on by this Parliament or the Assembly or a Parliament in Northern Ireland, where the people of the country elect representatives who take a decision on tariffs that act as an impediment to trade, and a tariff imposed by an outside body such as the EU, which is the case in Northern Ireland? That is how the Act of Union is being disrupted, because an outside body can interfere with it.



**Hilary Benn:** We have seen quite a lot of disruption to arrangements in recent years, have we not? The point I tried to make a moment ago was that our departure from the European Union caused a problem. Everybody knew that there would be a problem between Northern Ireland and the Republic, because of the open border that everyone continued to support. I think I said last week that it was about the only thing in Brexit where there was agreement. If there is a problem, we have to find a way through it. What we are grappling with here, and have done previously and may do in the future, is how to solve that problem, which is the result of a democratic decision taken by the British people.

Turning to these particular regulations, part of them updates previous legislation to include references to the Windsor framework, which came after those pieces of legislation, or reaffirms for clarity the existing legal position. I welcome the prohibition made by regulation 2(3) of any agreement with the EU that would

“create a...regulatory border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.”

However, if we were to form the next Government, Labour would seek to negotiate a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU with the intention of removing checks on animals, food and plants, not only between GB and NI, but between the whole of the UK and the EU. That would benefit farmers, food businesses, the horticultural industry in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Regulation 3 amends section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act to include a reference to the Stormont brake procedure and the democratic consent vote. I note that the Secretary of State said that the Windsor Framework (Democratic Scrutiny) Regulations 2023 passed by Parliament last March, which I think he said he had signed, will take effect once the Assembly is back up and running.

**Chris Heaton-Harris** *indicated assent.*

**Hilary Benn:** I see that the Secretary of State is nodding. It is also important to remind ourselves of the significance of those regulations and the democratic checks that they will create. The Stormont brake will be available to the Assembly when the EU seeks to amend or replace existing EU goods legislation in annex 2 of the framework. The Windsor framework gives a new role to the Assembly to approve or reject any proposed new EU legislation being added to the framework. I note that page 47 of the Command Paper states that the full operational details for the Stormont brake will be set out “in writing” for the Assembly. Can the Secretary of State confirm when that will happen and what form it will take, so that we in the House can see it?

**Sir William Cash:** Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a distinction between new and amended legislation in this context? They are not by any means the same thing, particularly as amended legislation can be very extensive.

**Hilary Benn:** I take that point, but we are talking about two separate categories: one is a long list relating to the legislation that formed part of the original protocol in the annex; and the other relates to new stuff coming from the European Union.

**Stephen Farry:** Does the shadow Secretary of State recognise that there is a different school of thought from some people and businesses in Northern Ireland around the Stormont brake? If there is a degree of delay or uncertainty in the application of an updated EU regulation, that could inadvertently undermine Northern Ireland’s dual market access, by creating uncertainty for businesses seeking to invest or remain in Northern Ireland. By far the better way is for Northern Ireland institutions to talk to the European Union at the start, to make sure that our concerns are reflected as fresh EU law is undertaken or updated.

**Hilary Benn:** The hon. Member makes an extremely powerful and useful point. The businesses that I have spoken to in Northern Ireland support Northern Ireland’s access to the EU market. In choosing to pull or not pull the Stormont brake there are many considerations, which I am sure elected politicians in Northern Ireland will take into consideration. Let us be honest: it depends on what we are talking about. What impact will it have? Will it have a really bad effect, in which case people might reach for the brake? Other times it may be a perfectly sensible change and nobody needs to worry about it. But there is a mechanism that gives Northern Ireland politicians and the Assembly the chance to decide between the two.

**John Redwood:** Further to that point, which is a very good one, would the EU not decide to use its powers if Stormont tried to use the brake too often and change the amount of EU law that applied?

**Hilary Benn:** The Stormont brake was the result of a negotiation between the Government and the European Union. It was a really big step forward—it is why we are having this discussion now, and I support it. Anything is possible in the future with regard to what one or another party that is engaged in continuing discussions and negotiations may seek to do, but we have a deal with the European Union and it expects us to honour the Windsor framework—a point I have made in the House many times before—and we would expect the EU to do entirely the same. Nobody can guard with absolute certainty against what may happen in the future; we have to deal with the world as it is today.

**Julian Smith:** What people have missed over the past few weeks is the cross-party support for both the Windsor framework and this deal. The reality is that anybody campaigning, or continuing to campaign, against the decisions democratically taken by the Democratic Unionist party is campaigning against something that this House has supported in voting numbers I could have only dreamed of when I was the Government Chief Whip during Brexit. This House supports the Windsor framework and the deal secured by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

**Hilary Benn:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely powerful point. I hope everyone will notice the near—if not complete—unanimity that we will see reflected in the House today. Those who wish to rail against reality and the fact that we have to make choices and deal with issues as they arise, as the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson)

has so eloquently pointed out, achieve nothing and contribute nothing. What the House is trying to do is to take this forward and, crucially, to restore the institutions.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I am not trying to rail against reality; I am just seeking the truth. Would it be a fair summing-up of the Labour party's position that it is supremely relaxed about all these future trading arrangements because, if there is to be a Labour Government, they will have absolutely no intention of diverging further away from the EU from a deregulatory point of view? If the right hon. Gentleman becomes Secretary of State, there is no danger that any civil servant will say, "Minister, be careful about this." Labour is very relaxed about this matter. It is going to get closer and closer to the EU, isn't it?

**Hilary Benn:** It is very kind of the right hon. Gentleman to say that we are intensely relaxed about the prospect that we might form the next Government, and who am I to disagree with him in that observation?

The point about divergence is that it is a choice. It is striking to note the number of instances since we left the European Union when the current Government decided that they were going to diverge, and then suddenly had second thoughts about it because it did not really make a lot of sense. I make no apology for having given the example of the veterinary SPS agreement that we would like to reach, because it would help our businesses in the UK, businesses in Northern Ireland and businesses in the European Union. That is my definition of common-sense negotiation—the decision has been made, but that does not mean Britain cannot seek to improve the relationship we have with the European Union in our interests and the interests of our European neighbours.

I also welcome regulation 3(3), which would require a Minister before the Second Reading of a Bill containing provisions that would affect trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom either to make a statement that it would not have such an effect, or to set out the reasons why the Government want to proceed none the less. It may be difficult at this stage, but I wonder whether the Secretary of State in winding up could give us an example of the circumstances in which Ministers might want to make use of the provisions in proposed new section 13C(2)(b) to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, found at the top of page 4 of the regulations. In other words, in what circumstances would the Government want to proceed with legislation even though it would have an adverse effect?

I welcome the clarifications made in regulation 4 regarding any independent review that may follow the democratic consent vote. That vote by Assembly Members must take place, as I understand it, by the end of this year. Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with Northern Ireland political parties as to when, exactly, that vote might take place, or does he intend to do so, or is it entirely a matter for those parties?

I will return in the subsequent debate to the matters I wish to raise on the UK internal market regulations, Madam Deputy Speaker. I now bring my remarks to a close.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** There is obviously a big time pressure on this debate. I want to bring the Secretary of State back in at 1.49 pm, so I urge colleagues to be brief if they possibly can. I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

1.15 pm

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): I will certainly bear that exhortation in mind, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This debate has properly focused on the statutory instrument that will amend primary legislation through the powers of the 2018 Act, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) and I both spent a lot of time dealing with in its enactment. However, it is right to look again at what is outlined in the helpful annex A to the Command Paper, in terms of the history and the legal background to what the parties have been dealing with and why it is that many of the arguments from the naysayers do not pass close scrutiny at all.

I am delighted to see on page 53 of the Command Paper a clear exposition of the position with regard to the Acts of Union—I say the Acts of Union because, of course, there was more than the one in 1801. Since that time the Acts have been amended, and not just by the seismic events of 1921; they were amended right through the 19th century, and indeed beyond, to take into account the evolving position of Northern Ireland. Just as every other part of our United Kingdom has evolved, so has Northern Ireland.

It is right to pause and say that the arguments that were asserted, in particular in the Supreme Court, about what we can now call the old protocol being inconsistent with the Acts of Union are just wrong. That point was never at issue before that Court. The Court specifically said that it did not have to rule on it.

**Ian Paisley:** A lot of this is quite surreal, because it falls into the grounds of piffle. I remember sitting in the Select Committee on Northern Ireland, and the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), telling me, in October 2019, "This will all be light touch—you won't even notice it." We have spent the last four years now trying to unravel the heavy hand of Europe and still need to prise those fingers off what is happening in Northern Ireland. We have also been told that yes, there was a problem, and we all now know what the problem was: this House failed to stand up to Europe and allowed Northern Ireland to be a buffer zone to protect its single market and threw our single market down the toilet in the process.

**Sir Robert Buckland:** I feel the emotion and hear the proper points that the hon. Gentleman makes. The process became the legislative and constitutional equivalent of brain surgery, and the patient was Northern Ireland. Everybody was feeling it. This is not just an archaic debate: this is a debate about the business and economy of Northern Ireland. This is real and important for the businesses that right hon. and hon. Members represent—absolutely right—which is why the hon. Gentleman's party should claim proper credit for the painstaking approach that he and his colleagues, including the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), have shown in this process. They have not taken no for an answer. They have actually sought to try to reach a solution and be part of that brain surgery process—that neurological change.

But I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that there is a distinction between the integral part that Northern Ireland plays in our United Kingdom constitution and

[*Sir Robert Buckland*]

our internal market—our single market—and the inevitable access that Northern Ireland will have to the EU single market. Why? Because of the nature of the border that exists in Northern Ireland, the unique nature of its status and all the history and, indeed, the reality that goes with that. That is why there is not going to be an elegant or perfect solution to all this. It was always going to involve compromise.

Compromise is a difficult word—it implies weakness and fudging; it implies a lack of clarity—but right hon. and hon. Members opposite have recognised that that is the world in which they operate, which is why we are able to be here today to debate important changes that will underpin not just declaratory words about Northern Ireland's place within the UK internal market, but concrete actions that are set out in the Command Paper. I am thinking in particular of the operation of the Stormont brake. Yes, we need to see more guidance about its operation—we need to understand the evidential thresholds that will be required for MLAs to bring the brake to the attention of the UK Government to lodge their objections; that work has to be done—but today will allow it to happen.

In its judgment, the Supreme Court looked in particular at the question of the sovereignty of Parliament, and affirmed that—as article 6 of the Acts of Union itself recognised—it is the most fundamental rule of UK constitutional law. There is nothing novel, unexpected or controversial about that, which is why some of the language that emerged from that case was not just unhelpful but wrong. I know that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley, the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, shares my view. It was time for leadership, and leadership means being straightforward and getting it right. That is why I commend the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues for the work that they have done: they got it right, and as a result of their approach we are able today, I hope, to pass this much-needed change. I welcome it warmly, I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I commend this measure to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

1.21 pm

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** My party and I have never made any secret of our disagreement with Brexit and the manner in which it was delivered. That has certainly caused issues for us in Scotland. However, we broadly welcome the point that matters have reached today. It has been a long road. Having clarity about Northern Ireland's constitutional status is, I believe, helpful, as indeed is the reaffirmation of the principle of consent, which is the basis on which many of us in Scotland, not just in Northern Ireland, understand the Union of which we are, willingly or otherwise, a part.

The manner in which Brexit has come about has, as I say, caused issues in Scotland. It has placed our own constitutional question back at the forefront and under renewed scrutiny, but despite the tensions that that has released, or brought about, politically, I hope that my party and I have been able to understand and empathise with some of the concerns of people in Northern Ireland,

and not just over the way in which Brexit, as originally constituted, threatened to undermine the basis on which peace and progress had been secured over the previous quarter century.

I hope that my party and I have also been able to understand and reflect on the fact that aspects of the protocol have left Unionists in Northern Ireland in particular feeling that they have been in some way separated, or set on a course of being separated, from the UK. In that regard, as I have said on a number of occasions, we never considered it unreasonable in and of itself, in the light of experience, that the UK Government should seek to renegotiate, or to rework, aspects of the deal that had been put in place.

Although there were certainly opportunities to recast a deal which, I would argue, could have worked better in the interests of all parts of the UK—I would highlight sanitary and phytosanitary alignments as being essential to that—and while I regret that those options have not been pursued today, I do not begrudge Northern Ireland a single aspect of what has been agreed in recent days or what appears in the statutory instruments.

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** The hon. Gentleman says that he does not begrudge us the achievement of some of the objectives that we set out to achieve. Does he agree that one of the advantages that we have and Scotland does not have is a 300-mile unclosable land border that makes virtual accommodation with access to the Irish Republic and onwards into the wider EU market almost impossible to prevent?

**Richard Thomson:** The border is certainly a complex one to try to police, and that has been at the forefront of many of the discussions. By contrast, we have what would be a very straightforward border between Scotland and England were it ever to take on international significance.

There appears to be something of a contradiction, in that Northern Ireland cannot conform to the requirements of the single market to maintain access there, and also the UK internal market, in the event of a future divergence. That brings to mind paragraph 146 of the Command Paper, which provides that

“the Government will legislate to require that a Minister in charge...must assess whether or not”

something

“has an impact on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland”

and make statements.

That contrasts with new section 38A (1) of the SI, which states:

“His Majesty's Government must not ratify a Northern Ireland-related agreement with the European Union that would create a new regulatory border”.

A Minister might lay a statement before Parliament to that effect, but that does not mean that the Minister's opinion will necessarily be shared, or make the statement any less subjective. Ministers might be capable of thinking six impossible things before breakfast, and indeed at times during the Brexit debate it seemed that that was a necessary qualification for office. Nevertheless, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State, in summing up the debate, could clarify how any such dispute might ultimately be determined and resolved.



With these publications, we appear to have reached something of a conclusion. It has been a thoroughly exhausting process, which has occupied talents and energies—not just in the Government and Parliament here, but across swathes of public life in Northern Ireland and beyond—that could, I believe, have been directed more productively. Much work has built up in the absence of an Assembly, but hopefully these provisions will allow for all the political mechanisms to bring the Assembly back. It is important for that to happen because a peaceful, prosperous Northern Ireland, at ease with itself, in control of its future and able to be respectful of all shades of opinion, is manifestly in the interests of all people in all these islands. To the extent that the statutory instruments pave a way towards restoring that state of affairs, we support them.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Let me once again emphasise the need for brevity so that we can get the majority of people in.

1.26 pm

**Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con):** Section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 prescribes that parliamentary sovereignty will prevail, notwithstanding section 7A of the 2018 Act. The wording is a bit difficult to read because one has to go through all the enactments to ensure that one has got it right, but it does say “including the Windsor Framework”, so for practical purposes our parliamentary sovereignty subsists. However, I find it incongruous, and rather Lewis Carroll, that we should end up continuing to maintain EU law in relation to Northern Ireland. I could make a long speech about this, but I will not do so.

The fact is that no man can serve two masters. In respect of the wording of the statutes, let me paraphrase the words of Humpty Dumpty: words mean what we choose them to mean, and the question is who is to be master—that is all. This is the problem, this is the dilemma, this is the basis on which most of the controversies occur, and I regret to have to say that it may ultimately be decided, on some day in the future, by the prospect of a referendum. That, of course, is what Sinn Féin have been asking for. I personally believe that we should protect Northern Ireland, and I have always done everything in my power to do just that.

Having said that, I should also mention that my family have been involved in the Irish question since the 1840s in this House—for instance, John Bright and Frederick Lucas, the Member of Parliament for County Meath. I make that point to emphasise that I take this very seriously, and, indeed, I pay respect to the members of the DUP for the way in which they have fought for their interests. There are some measures in the statutory instruments that I can understand as having benefits, but ultimately the question will turn on the issue of whether, given the constitutional framework within which this is being presented, with all the assurances that we are hearing and all the hopeful aspects—which I expect to be delivered—we find that it will be decided by the test of time. We will see whether it works.

There will be continuing arguments and continuing debates, but unfortunately I have to say that, just as with section 2 of the European Communities Act 1972,

there is no way in which section 8C of the 2018 Act had anything other than the same fundamental limitation as regulations under that section, in that they cannot contradict or restrict the scope of EU law. It has to be said, because it is the honest truth. However, that does not alter the fact that efforts can be made; the Stormont brake may come in and may be able to make changes—I say everything with reservation. I voted against the Windsor framework, because I foresaw that issues of this kind would arise. I pay tribute to all the people involved in trying to mitigate the ultimate impact of the Windsor framework, but the scope of EU law that still remains leaves me with serious concern. As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, I end by saying that we will be monitoring this and we are concerned—I am concerned. The devolved Assembly is a democratic plus: we cannot issue orders from Westminster to Northern Ireland if the people do not want it. The bottom line is that those in the DUP have a real issue on their hands with Sinn Féin. Be that as it may, I believe they will do everything in their power to maintain their democratic rights.

**Gavin Robinson:** The Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, who is my friend, has outlined his concern about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. He will know that, legislatively, in 1998 it was settled that the future of Northern Ireland’s place in the UK is based solely on the decision made by the people of Northern Ireland. He will remember that in 2000 Gerry Adams said that there would be a united Ireland by 2016. He will also know that today, in 2024, the Government who will have to decide whether there should be a border poll have declared in the Command Paper, “Safeguarding the Union”, on page 68, paragraph 3:

“On the basis of all recent polling, the Government sees no realistic prospect of a border poll leading to a united Ireland.”

**Sir William Cash:** I am extremely glad to hear the hon. Gentleman make that point.

To conclude, I simply say that you can read the crystal ball, but the question is: can you always read the book?

1.32 pm

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP):** It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash); we truly value his continuing interest in Northern Ireland. The problem for DUP Members is that the origin of our difficulty was the withdrawal agreement itself and the decision to go with the Northern Ireland protocol. Sadly, it placed Northern Ireland in a situation where we were separated from the rest of the UK in key elements of the benefits that ought to have flowed from Brexit. My task and that of my colleagues ever since has been to repair the damage that decision did, and it is work in progress; I do not pretend that we have completed the task. I recognise there are ongoing concerns about how the new arrangements will work in practice, and it will be our task to hold the Government to account on their commitments and ensure that they are honoured in full and delivered. That is why my party executive mandated me, as party leader, to proceed on the basis that we needed the Government to progress key elements of the arrangements before we would recall the Assembly and restore the Executive.

[*Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson*]

I welcome the publication of, and the opportunity to debate, the statutory instruments. They amend key constitutional laws of the UK in a way that, in my humble opinion, strengthens Northern Ireland's place within our United Kingdom and reaffirms our place in the UK, underpinned by the Acts of Union, and by the principle of consent that is at the heart of the Belfast agreement and the 1998 legislation. That is to say, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has stated, that the will of the people of Northern Ireland will ultimately determine our future. Nevertheless, it is welcome that this Parliament, which is sovereign in our United Kingdom, reasserts its sovereignty in regard to Northern Ireland and reaffirms our place within the UK.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my right hon. Friend and colleague for bringing that forward. He is absolutely right to state the fact—I say this, with respect, to the Secretary of State and the Government—of the distrust that many Unionists have for this process. The opinion of this House on sovereignty should be clear, and my party leader has sought not simply to secure but to future-proof the legislation and the change. The difficulty is that many people I represent have stated their lack of trust in the Government, who told us that they would give us their best and did not do so. How can the Government and the Secretary of State reassure the Unionist people whom we represent that our sovereignty is protected?

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He restates a point he made earlier to the Secretary of State and he will have heard the response given. It is the task of all DUP Members to ensure that the Government deliver, and we bank the gains we have made in this process and move forward on that basis, recognising not only that there is more to do, but that there are new opportunities to seek and secure change. The Secretary of State referred earlier to my detractors, who have been very vocal, even challenging me to a debate on these issues. My challenge back to them is clear and simple. As I said last week in this House, when they are in a position to set out clearly for the people of Northern Ireland what they have achieved, the changes they have secured to the protocol and to the Windsor framework, and the changes they have secured to safeguard our place in the Union, I will consider discussion with them. But what I will not do is accept their criticism of what we have achieved on safeguarding the Union—real achievements and real changes, which my party has long sought.

We were disappointed when the Government abandoned the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, because all DUP Members recognised that those proposals provided a way forward for Northern Ireland. We have sought to incorporate into these new arrangements many aspects of that Bill, but we have gone further and achieved more. We will come to this more fully on the second SI before us this afternoon, but that Bill, which was endorsed fully by my parliamentary party, proposed a green lane and a red lane as the means by which goods would move between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. What we have achieved is to remove the need for the green lane, because we have restored Northern Ireland's place within the UK's internal market. Under these new arrangements,

goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and staying within the UK will flow through the UK internal market system. There is no need for a so-called "green lane". There is a need for only one lane, which deals with goods that flow through our Northern Ireland ports and onwards to the EU or that are deemed at risk of entering the EU.

The red lane was endorsed and supported by my party, and every one of my MPs voted for that proposal. That was my mandate and it is what I have secured. It removes the Irish sea border within our internal market of the United Kingdom, and it means the only checks we need to carry out are those on goods moving into, or at risk of going into, the European Union. That is what we stated in our response to the Windsor framework, endorsed unanimously by all our party officers. We made clear what we wanted, and I have gone further even than that response in removing the green lane from the new arrangements.

This is progress. Does it give us everything we want? It does not. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has been assiduous in his pursuit of a solution on veterinary medicines. He has worked with the Government and campaigned alongside representatives of the Northern Ireland agrifood sector. As a result of that work, in the Command Paper we now have clarity on the position of the UK Government. In the absence of an agreement with the European Union that maintains Northern Ireland's full access to UK veterinary medicines, the UK Government will legislate to protect our access to veterinary medicines in the United Kingdom. That is a commitment given by the Government and I commend my hon. Friend for his work. That is the business we are in—it is unfinished business. We will continue to work to ensure the Government deliver on their commitments in the Command Paper on veterinary medicines.

**Ian Paisley:** I thank the leader of the party for his comments. This is crucial: it affects every single person in Northern Ireland because it is about food security across the whole of the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland food industry feeds about 17 million people, not only in Northern Ireland, but across the United Kingdom and the world. It is vital to our food security. Damaging it, as was happening under the previous agreement, is wholly destructive to food health and farming. I also welcome paragraph 22, which addresses the movement of cattle and livestock. That is significant for our farming industry. I agree that more needs to be done and I will hold the Secretary of State to account to get that legislation on the statute book if Europe does not move.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I need add nothing to the point made by my hon. Friend. We welcome the explicit reference in the Command Paper to Northern Ireland's part in the economy of the United Kingdom, including the fact that we are within the customs territory of the United Kingdom. We are part of the UK internal market and it is important that that is maintained.

**Colum Eastwood:** May I put it on record that I think the right hon. Gentleman has done a lot of good work over the past couple of weeks and he has been very brave? It is not easy for a Member to face down people in their own constituency, and it is important that he

did. May I also put it on record that the Social Democratic and Labour party do not support the Command Paper? We think it has moved far beyond the principles set out in the Good Friday agreement. It undermines north-south co-operation and has far too much focus on east-west co-operation. Moving on from that point, we need to ensure that any future negotiation is done with all parties and both Governments, so that everybody can feel comfortable in the result.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** The hon. Member has made his point with fortitude and determination, but he will understand that I make no apology as a Unionist for having a focus on protecting, preserving, strengthening and binding together our United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is a proud part.

Today is an important moment for us as Unionists. The strengthening of our constitutional position within the United Kingdom is important because our primary focus has been on the protection of the Union. In that context, I welcome and draw attention to annex A, paragraph 47 of the Command Paper published yesterday:

“Northern Ireland’s place in the economic union remains the single most important factor in ensuring its prosperity”.

That is the economic union of the United Kingdom: we sell more goods to Great Britain than anywhere else in the world, and we want to maintain our ability to trade freely within our own country. These new arrangements guarantee our unfettered access to the internal market of the United Kingdom, not just now but in all scenarios in the future. The safeguards built into these arrangements will protect our place in the economic union of the United Kingdom.

**Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con):** I echo the right hon. Gentleman’s sentiments about paragraph 47 in annex A. I want to comment on the good will and character through these last months that have been essential to achieving this progress and these gains. Does he agree with me that the polling referenced by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) is not as important as the stamp of approval from this House that comes through good debate and scrutiny?

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, his continuing interest in Northern Ireland and his work in this place to strengthen and protect our Union. He makes a strong point, which I welcome.

**Sammy Wilson:** I acknowledge the point made by my right hon. Friend, but does he also accept that, in proposed new section 13C of the Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, the Government still reserve a right in the statute book to introduce laws that will interfere with trade in Northern Ireland?

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I urge my right hon. Friend to read all the proposals. If he does, he will see that a new statutory duty will be introduced that will ensure that in circumstances where there is the risk of divergence, the Minister in charge of the new policy or law will come to this House and make a statement, not only informing the House of any potential impact on Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom internal

market, but setting out the measures that the Government must take to ameliorate that situation. That is set out clearly in the Command Paper. It is a commitment by the Government, on which we intend to hold them to account.

Going forward, it is important that we have a means of scrutiny and cutting the EU pipeline, as we have through the amendment to section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. People told us, by the way, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we would not achieve legal change, and yet that amendment to section 7A cuts the EU pipeline and ends the automatic alignment of Northern Ireland with EU law. That is something this party can take great credit for, because we have achieved what none of our detractors has been capable of achieving. That offers us the opportunity to influence clearly, as we stated in our seven tests, how we might proceed.

In conclusion, on behalf of my party, I welcome this legislation. It is important constitutional legislation that safeguards our place in the United Kingdom. We will hear later about further changes to the law that will protect our place in the UK internal market. Taken together with all the proposals in the Command Paper, I believe we have a basis for moving forward.

1.48 pm

**Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con):** I pay tribute to the nationalist and other parties who have been patient during the process, and to the Labour party for its support of the Government, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

These are very important constitutional safeguards, as we have heard, but this SI is about much more than the constitution. It unlocks something much bigger: getting back into Stormont, making Northern Ireland a success and making it work. This SI is about people, public sector pay, health, charities that are desperate to get moving again, schools, agriculture and the economic growth of Northern Ireland. I commend this SI and believe that it will get the full support of the House.

1.49 pm

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** With the leave of the house, I will answer a few of the points that have been raised. We have heard a wide and varied range of contributions on all aspects of the regulations from Members across the House. In my closing remarks, I wish to take the opportunity to address those points.

First, I thank the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) for the way that he has approached everything we have done. He asked a few questions, which I shall try to answer. He talked about these measures and how we will be protecting the European single market with this package. What these measures also do, which is unbelievably important, is protect our internal market at the same time. *[Interruption.]* I know that the right hon. Gentleman knows that, but I just wanted to emphasise the point, because it is important. He asked for an example—I think that it is in proposed new section 13C introduced through the regulations—of where there would be a significant adverse effect. I can refer him best to the example I gave of the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill, where there is an obvious advantage to Northern Ireland to be different,



[Chris Heaton-Harris]

which we took on board. He very kindly showed some ankle on Labour's position on our future relationship with the EU. Can I beg him to continue to do that? While we all enjoy a good political debate—I will not go too far into this point, because we are in a consensual place—we would very much like to explore exactly what Labour's position is on European Union free movement and a whole host of other things.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): The right hon. Member makes reference to the fact that, within the legislation, there is now a safeguard around significant disadvantage towards Northern Ireland and significant adverse effect. Does he not agree, though, that the significant adverse effect is very subjective? It has no concrete definition and section 13B allows the Minister to go ahead anyway, even if it does cause a significant adverse effect.

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Before I answer it, may I say that I owe her an apology, because I completely misheard her question yesterday? I was having trouble hearing her—I think it might be my age, but hopefully it was the microphone—so I wanted to apologise for not answering her question properly. I disagree with her and I think a written ministerial statement allows this place to scrutinise what the Minister is doing and to allow more transparency.

I also wish to make a point—I hope that I will not punch a bruise here—about the intervention of the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) on the right hon. Member for Leeds Central. The hon. Member for North Antrim said that tariffs between GB and Northern Ireland would be acceptable if they were the will of the Parliament. I disagree. I think a £3 tariff on Bushmills would not be that great. None the less, all of the arrangements in the framework are given full effect by the will of this Parliament, and so, by his definition, it must be completely acceptable. I thank him for his support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

## United Kingdom Internal Market

1.53 pm

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker):** I beg to move,

That the draft Windsor Framework (UK Internal Market and Unfettered Access) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

It is the view of the Government and, I believe, of the overwhelming number of right hon. and hon. Members across the House that the Union ought not be reduced to matters of the law or the constitution alone. Ours is a thriving economic, cultural and political Union whose health is insured, in no small part, by the free flow of trade across it. Enhancing that economic aspect of the Union is the purpose of this second set of regulations before the House today.

The views of businesses and traders on the progress that we have made are also important in the context of today's debate. I am pleased to confirm that the early reaction from business has been promising. The view of a collaboration of 14 key Northern Ireland industry bodies was clear yesterday in saying that they welcomed the agreement.

The Government are clear that the old protocol created unacceptable barriers within our internal market, and I invite anyone to consider the full implementation of the old protocol against what we have achieved in the Windsor framework. The Windsor framework takes major steps forward, and I acknowledge that this is first and foremost an achievement of the Democratic Unionist party and also a great achievement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

The framework restored the functioning of the UK internal market by ensuring the smooth flow of trade within the UK, and disapplied a range of EU laws, including ensuring that Northern Ireland benefits from the same VAT and alcohol taxes as the rest of the UK. Members of the House can also be encouraged by the smooth functioning of the framework since October 2023, when the first phase of arrangements came on stream, supporting trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I should just say that colleagues did ask me how it was going. I said, "Have you seen any news on it?" Of course, no one has; it has been going very well, and I want to thank and congratulate all those officials here and in Northern Ireland who have made that possible.

These regulations go further in that aim to strengthen our UK internal market now and in the long term. Following the agreement of the Windsor framework, the border target operating model sets out that we will begin phasing in checks and controls for Irish goods and non-qualifying goods moving from the island of Ireland to Great Britain from 31 January—indeed from yesterday. This is a powerful demonstration of Northern Ireland's integral place in the UK's internal market, and it rebuts incorrect claims that it is instead a member of the EU single market. The reality is that third country members of the EU single market will now have full third country processes applied, while Northern Ireland's businesses will have full unfettered access to their most important market in Great Britain.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Minister is absolutely right. Perhaps the most powerful illustration of the change that we have secured is to consider what will happen now on the ferry route between Dublin and Holyhead as a result of these new arrangements. A Northern Ireland haulier using that service will board the ferry, travel to Holyhead, leave the ferry and travel straight out of the port and on to their destination, with no customs procedures and with full unfettered access. In contrast, a southern Irish haulier arriving at Holyhead will be subjected to full UK customs procedures at the port before they can proceed. Does he join me in welcoming Northern Ireland's restoration fully within the UK internal market?

**Mr Baker:** Yes. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he has just set out, and I do join him in that. It is a proud day for me, as it is for him, and I join other Members in congratulating him on his courage in bringing all of us this far.

As a result of these regulations, we now have guarantees for Northern Ireland goods moving to the rest of the UK, via Dublin. This unfettered access is future-proofed, regardless of how rules evolve in either Northern Ireland or Great Britain. These regulations will more squarely focus the benefits of unfettered access on Northern Ireland traders. The regulations tackle avoidance of the rules and ensure that, for agri-food goods to benefit from unfettered access in avoiding sanitary and phytosanitary processes, they must be dispatched from registered Northern Ireland food and feed operators. We will also expressly affirm through these regulations that export procedures will not be applied to goods moving from Northern Ireland to other parts of the UK's internal market.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): It has been said that maybe 80% of goods moving from GB to NI will be able to use the internal market lane. Why will 20% not be able to do so, and why would the UK Government, who I was told were in charge, not want to ensure that practically all goods use the internal market lane?

**Mr Baker:** With great respect to my right hon. Friend, with whom I have gone a very long way in this cause, he might like to revisit the text. The point is that the 80% of goods going on that route are staying in Northern Ireland; they are UK goods. The other 20% are goods that are going on to the European Union. That is the point: 80% is UK internal market trade, and 20% is trade going on to the European Union.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** *rose*—

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Baker:** I will. I cannot say that I am astonished; this is the important moment.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the Minister accept that all the statistics show that it is not true that 20% of the trade that goes through Northern Ireland goes to the Irish Republic? In fact, it is about 0.1% to 0.4%. Much of that trade, which will go through the red lane, consists of goods going into Northern Ireland, either to warehouses or to manufacturers in Northern Ireland. They might never go near the Irish Republic. They might stay in

Northern Ireland, go back to GB, or go to the rest of the world, yet such products will still be subject to checks going into Northern Ireland.

**Mr Baker:** I would not accept that. I am not in a position to set out the statistics, and I do not doubt that the statistics need some work applied to them. It pains me to say this, as I have always regarded the right hon. Gentleman as a great friend—he and I have walked a long way together on this and I have always regarded him as an ideological bedfellow, both on the Union and on Brexit—but as his group leader, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), said earlier, we voted for, and fervently supported, the protocol Bill. We said that we were willing to have a red lane in order to safeguard the legitimate interests of our friends and partners—and family members, as the Irish ambassador Martin Fraser said. This was always a family dispute, and we were always going to get through it.

Our friends in Ireland, and indeed in the EU, have legitimate interests, which we should have the humility to respect. Even if we had acted unilaterally as a single united Parliament, ridden roughshod over any international negotiation and just done what suited ourselves with the protocol Bill, we would have implemented the red lane. I am afraid that I will part company now with anyone who says otherwise. We would rightly have implemented the red lane, even acting unilaterally, out of respect for the legitimate interests of our friends and trading partners.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Will the Minister join me in welcoming the announcement on Tuesday of agreement on a joint legal text that will significantly change the status of goods coming from the rest of the world into Great Britain and travelling on to Northern Ireland? The effect of that change, which is part of the arrangements and the published Command Paper, will be that some 4 million goods movements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland will now be moving out of the red lane and into the UK internal market system. That is this party delivering, and securing real change that ensures that more goods flow freely between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, save for those going into the EU or that are at risk of doing so because they are part of a manufacturing process for goods being sold to the EU.

**Mr Baker:** I strongly welcome that intervention. I thought that the right hon. Gentleman was going to mention the draft joint agreement on tariff rate quotas. For a while I was concerned that TRQs needed to be applied to Northern Ireland so that Northern Ireland could share fully in the benefits of free trade agreements with the rest of the world.

I hope to return to this later, but in case I do not have the opportunity to do so, I want to say what an extraordinary situation Northern Ireland is now in. Northern Ireland is not in the single market. I draw everyone's attention to page 4 of the Command Paper, which sets out checkmarks comparing Northern Ireland with Ireland, as a member of the EU, and with Norway, which is a member of the single market through the European economic area but is not in the customs union or the European Union. Northern Ireland really has the minimum of EU law compatible with

[Mr Steve Baker]

unfettered—or privileged, perhaps—goods access to the EU market, and consistent with having an open, infrastructure-free border.

I wonder at people who thought that we could leave the European Union and establish a hard border, or do absolutely nothing about the border. We were always going to leave the European Union and have special arrangements in relation to Northern Ireland. This is a moment of great feeling for me, because before the referendum vote, I and other colleagues set up a committee of Eurosceptics to consider how we might deal with these issues. I confess that we did not have the SPS and customs expertise to proceed. That then became the great story of this battle.

If the United Kingdom had united in accepting the result of the referendum, if this Parliament had united in going forward with resolve to further our own interests as an independent nation state outside the EU, but crucially with the humility to respect the legitimate interests of our friends and partners, and if from the beginning we had had united resolve and clarity of vision, I do not doubt that in a spirit of friendship and good will—the kind that exists today between Ireland and us, and between the European Union and us, thanks to the work of the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and others—we would have been, as we are now, in a totally transformed position to make our way forward as friends, respectful of their interests and resolved on ours.

That is not what happened. The House does not need me to rehearse it. It has taken eight years of drama for us to arrive at this moment, when we have reduced EU law to this extent and put in place a red lane to protect the legitimate interests of Ireland and the EU. That is something that we should all be very proud of, after everything that we have faced and all the risks that could have put us in a far worse position.

**Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP): I totally understand the need for a red lane to ensure that goods going into the Republic of Ireland are checked, but there is a business in Northern Ireland 98% of whose sales are into Northern Ireland. The stuff all comes to it in one container. Maybe 2% of that load might make its way into the Irish Republic as part of a service agreement with another dealer. I am talking about a major firm in my constituency that has an all-Ireland approach. That means that the red lane applies to every single item, even though 98% of its stuff is used in Northern Ireland, Scotland or England. It is a main distributor, and it will end up having to put all its goods through that. A job of work might need to be done to try to ameliorate its problems.

**Mr Baker:** The hon. Gentleman is right that a job of work will need to be done; I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has just said that of course it does. I am grateful that we will be doing that further work in a spirit of good will and co-operation through the joint committee with the European Union. If the hon. Gentleman drops an email to my Northern Ireland Office address, I shall be glad to visit the firm with him, bringing officials, and we will see whether we can move further to assist it. I need to find out more about its exact circumstances.

My goodness, that was a long series of interventions. This legislation ensures that we can avoid any unnecessary gold-plating in the implementation of new arrangements through new statutory guidance on section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, setting out how public authorities should have special regard to Northern Ireland's place in the UK's internal market and customs territory, and the need to maintain the free flow of goods from NI to GB. We will take a power through the regulations to issue such statutory guidance, and public authorities will be required to have regard to it. Those changes to the law will help to ensure that public authorities take every proper effort to prevent new barriers to intra-UK trade. In doing so, they will maintain and strengthen the health of the UK internal market in the long term.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): One issue that greatly vexes those in my party is that farmers in my constituency, and in others, have said that vets now cost even more, as they have to source medicines and devices from an acceptable source. The Command Paper suggests that the issue has not been resolved but will be worked on. Is that a firm demand on the Government, or is it just another working group that will talk about things? My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has been at the fore on this. We need a person on that committee to push things forward. If we have a solution through the committee, we need a timescale for delivery.

**Mr Baker:** We understand that point and we are listening to the hon. Gentleman and others. We are resolute that of course Northern Ireland must have proper access to veterinary medicines, and will be glad to work with him and others. He will appreciate what the priorities are and have been, and we will certainly continue to make pursuing veterinary medicines a high priority. I am personally resolute on the issue and look forward to pursuing it.

The regulations must be seen in the context of the overall package agreed between the Government and the DUP. The passage of these regulations demonstrates the Government's commitment to taking forward that whole package and to maintaining the participation and trust of the whole community in Northern Ireland's political processes and the Stormont institutions going forward.

If I may touch on what the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) said earlier, I, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the whole Government are completely committed to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions. As I said to one nationalist politician—about a year ago now, if I recall—it is perfectly possible to be a Unionist and support the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, just as it is possible to be a nationalist or a republican and support the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions. It is the beauty and the triumph of the agreement that we can all support it and move forward.

I am trying to say this as gently as possible: I can understand a degree of discomfort from the hon. Gentleman, because this is a big breakthrough for Unionism. A Unionist Conservative Government have agreed to do Unionist things with the Democratic Unionist Party, and that is something I am very proud of. However,



that does not in any way diminish our impartiality, or our commitment to governing or seeing to the government of Northern Ireland in a proper manner.

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP) *rose*—

**Mr Baker:** Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, may I just say that I think, after the experience of the last eight years—perhaps the last 14—I need defer to no one in my vociferous commitment to democratic self-determination.

**Colum Eastwood:** The Minister says he supports the Good Friday agreement in all its parts. Does he support the bit that says that the Government should be rigorously impartial?

**Mr Baker:** Yes, I—[*Interruption.*] I do not quite hear the comment from the leader of the DUP.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Not on the Union!

**Mr Baker:** It has long been said that this is the Conservative and Unionist party and we have long been understood to be a Unionist party. This agreement is entirely consistent with both our Unionism and our full respect for all dimensions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. We will continue to govern in a spirit of good will and impartiality.

**Sir Robert Buckland** (South Swindon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Mr Baker:** I will, but after I have given way to my right hon. and learned Friend, I will make progress and finish so that other colleagues can have their say.

**Sir Robert Buckland:** I have listened carefully to the interventions from the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and the concerns that he and others will have about the scrapping of the legal obligation with regard to the all-island economy. Is the point not that while, as a UK Government, we have to uphold the rules that apply within our United Kingdom and the promotion of our own internal market, that does not detract from the access to the single market that Northern Ireland businesses will continue to enjoy? That is the compromise that has been reached here. Therefore there is not a binary either/or choice; the hon. Gentleman's concerns can largely be met and continue to be met in a way that is fully in accordance with the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

**Mr Baker:** I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend, who demonstrates his expertise.

I look forward as much as anyone to the re-establishment of the Assembly and the Executive, and along with that the re-establishment of the north-south institutions. They are much needed and I look forward to their work. I do not mind admitting that I find myself able to work constructively with politicians of all political parties in Northern Ireland, and I am glad to do so.

Let me return, in concluding, to what is at stake in this process. I firmly believe that all parties in this House and all parties eligible to form part of an Executive want Northern Ireland to work. I have seen what unites

political leaders in Northern Ireland: a real determination to make life better for their constituents—and, my goodness, on a wide range of fronts that is necessary—and to allow Northern Ireland to grasp the opportunities of the future—and what opportunities they are. I elaborated on some of the things Northern Ireland has before it right now. If we combine the institutional arrangements before Northern Ireland with the very substantial financial package to transform public services and deal with the public finances, and if Northern Irish politicians reach out and grasp the opportunity now before them, they can make Northern Ireland a beacon to the world—a beacon of prosperity and, I hope, of reconciliation. These regulations are part of that process and I commend them to everyone in the House.

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

2.15 pm

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): I begin by agreeing with the Minister that businesses in Northern Ireland want to make the current and future arrangements work, that they want them to work well and that there is huge potential for the people of Northern Ireland in the economic benefits that its current and future circumstances provide it.

I have some specific points about the regulations—I see the Minister clearly relishes responding to those. Paragraph 81 of the Command Paper states:

“We are now changing arrangements...to ensure...that checks are eliminated save for those conducted by UK authorities needed for the protection of the UK's internal market on a risk and intelligence basis.

Will the Minister clarify which checks on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will be got rid of? Is he referring to identity checks, checks on paperwork or something else? At the moment, about 10% of goods using what is called the green lane—which will become the UK internal market lane—are subject to some checks on paperwork. Will he clarify what will happen to them?

I welcome the amendments to the UK Internal Market Act 2020 provided for in regulation 2. Proposed new section 45A would reaffirm Northern Ireland's unfettered access to the rest of the internal market and ensure that no new NI-GB checks can be introduced. The regulation also makes provision for the Secretary of State to issue guidance to Departments on how they should carry out their duties under section 46 of the 2020 Act—namely, ensuring that they have special regard to, among other things, Northern Ireland's status in the UK internal market when they formulate policy. Will the Minister confirm that guidance will soon be forthcoming and share any further details he can at this stage about what that will contain?

I note the changes to the Definition of Qualifying Northern Ireland Goods (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 made by regulation 3, which are intended to prevent Northern Ireland from being used as a back door for EU goods moving into GB and to protect Northern Ireland's agricultural sector. Ensuring that NI-registered agrifood operators fully benefit from unfettered access is a very positive step and I welcome it. Will the Minister tell the House whether the Government envisage any

[Hilary Benn]

further changes to the definition of qualifying Northern Ireland goods? I also note the Government's confirmation in the Command Paper that

"there will be no Border Control Post at Cairnryan."

That is greatly to be welcomed, but can the Minister say anything further about how checks and formalities on non-qualifying goods that enter GB from Northern Ireland through Cairnryan will work in practice?

Let me turn to some of the other commitments set out in the Command Paper. Will the Minister confirm when he expects the new body announced to promote trade within the UK, InterTrade UK, to become operational, and how it will be overseen?

I welcome the Government's determination, which has been brought up by a number of Members, to ensure the continued supply of veterinary medicines into Northern Ireland beyond the end of 2025, when the current grace period expires. We all hope that an agreement can be reached with our European partners as soon as possible. I share the view expressed by others in the debate that we had the same problem with human medicines and, in the end, the EU recognised that something had to be done about that. I hope very much that the EU will show the same spirit in approaching this question. The Command Paper, however, says:

"we will if necessary deploy all available flexibilities to safeguard and sustain the supply of veterinary medicines".

Will the Minister tell the House what those flexibilities are and how they will be applied if we get to that point?

In approving the regulations—which I hope we will do unanimously as we just did with the constitutional set—we will be taking another step closer, in this really important week, to the restoration of power sharing. The people of Northern Ireland, who have been without a Government for so long, may not, in all fairness, be studying the regulations in the way that we are doing today, but they very clearly understand why they are essential to getting their Government back. Once we have done our bit today, it will be over to the politicians of Northern Ireland, and I am sure that every single Member of the House wishes them the very best in the task that lies ahead of them.

2.20 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The important statutory instruments that we are discussing today are the latest in the process of implementing the result of the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union. They may not have attracted the same volume, attention or emotion as those endless meaningful votes in 2018 and 2019, but they are no less important. This has been a long and difficult process that has divided the nation, but the end goal of restoring our status as an independent, self-governing democracy has been a prize worth fighting for.

For centuries, Members of this Parliament strived to ensure that we would be governed only by the laws made by our own elected representatives, and that is what Brexit seeks to deliver, but we all know that the job is not yet finished when it comes to Northern Ireland, so I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, the Minister and the DUP for their work and determination to tackle the problems with the Windsor framework and secure Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market. I very much welcome the advances being made

towards the restoration of power sharing and devolved government, and I accept that the statutory instruments are an important part of enabling that to happen because of the significant changes they contain.

Of course, I completely understand the DUP's concerns regarding the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework. We must do all we can to minimise trade frictions between Britain and Northern Ireland. The agreement on the Windsor framework started that process—for example, by making the movement of medicines, food and items for retail sale much less problematic. I believe that further improvements will be delivered by the deal that we are looking at today, which will further reduce checks and inspections. My concern is that the central problem remains that Northern Ireland is subject to single market rules without having a vote on them. The instruments we are considering do not change that, although I welcome the important further clarity and safeguards offered on the Stormont brake.

Dialogue with the EU has to continue so that ultimately we can move to a situation in which only items destined for export to the south are subject to EU rules and regulations in Northern Ireland. With pragmatism and advancing border technology, that should be possible. It is important that we continue to strive to bring that about, so that we can restore democratic control over making our laws in every part of our United Kingdom and Brexit is fully delivered for Northern Ireland, as it is for Great Britain.

We also need assurances from Ministers that nothing in regulation 3 of the Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations will prevent regulatory divergence between Britain and the EU. Of course, any responsible Minister must consider the impact of his or her decisions on the unity of the UK and its single market, but new screening obligations must not be allowed to create a chilling effect, which would stop us charting our own course with regard to how we regulate our economy. Taking back control of making our own laws was a key reason that people voted to leave the EU. We have yet to fully deliver that for Northern Ireland and, as I have said, we must go further on it in the future.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the conversations we have had on this specific point. She is right to highlight her concerns and to seek assurances from the Government, but she does accept that it is right to get assessments; that it is right that Governments should always be going through the process of assessing the impact of their decisions on every part of this United Kingdom; and that there is nothing wrong with transparency, with knowing any possible consequence, nor—if that potential consequence is negative—with all of us determinedly trying to ensure that it does not arise.

**Theresa Villiers**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention; the dialogue that he and I have had over recent days has done a lot to reassure me that this package is about transparency, not a block on divergence. I hope the Minister will confirm that in his closing remarks, because divergence is important. The regulatory reform made possible by exit is, I think, crucial for our future economic success. By making us more competitive, modernising regulation is a key means to boost growth, raise living standards and reduce taxes.

In conclusion, it took courage and determination from Northern Ireland's elected leaders to secure peace after three horrific decades of terrorist violence. Asking very different parties to sit in a permanent mandatory coalition was never going to be easy, not least because some of the divisions between them date back decades, or even centuries. That devolved government has worked for so much of the past quarter of a century is a testament to Northern Ireland's leaders and their determination to make the '98 settlement work—to make Northern Ireland work. I pay particular tribute to the DUP in that regard: for so often it is they who have found ways to fix problems and keep devolved government going, while always safeguarding Unionist principles.

We in this House must recognise the significant problems caused by the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework—including, of course, what the courts have described as a “subjugation” of article 6 of the Act of Union of 1801—but, as we have heard today, we are making real progress on tackling these issues by setting out in the statutory instruments stronger legal protections for access to the GB market. I also think that the historical perspective, as set out in annex A of the Command Paper, is something that everyone should read. We are making progress on remedying these problems.

It was a privilege for me, as Secretary of State for just under four years, to play a part in Northern Ireland's inspiring story, and I truly hope that a way can now be found for its devolved institutions to resume their work of taking Northern Ireland forward to further success and an even brighter future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):**

I am trying to get an idea of how many Members wish to speak. Some who had indicated that they wanted to speak are now not standing—fine. That is very helpful. I call the SNP spokesperson.

2.27 pm

**Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP):** We on the SNP Benches start from the principle that the fewer impediments there are to trade between all parts of the UK, and between the UK and the EU, the better. That is something that clearly took a step backwards with Brexit, so we very much welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland situation at least has been largely addressed by the regulations before us, which we will support. With that dual market access, Northern Ireland will clearly now enjoy a highly advantageous situation relative to other parts of the UK, and although we very much support this SI, my hope is that in time the people of England, Wales and Scotland will wish to rediscover that advantageous situation for themselves, and ultimately render the content of this SI obsolete.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to miss the opportunity to tweak the Minister's tail slightly, given that he says he is an enthusiast for democratic self-determination—so am I, and I look forward to a similar stout defence from the Minister of that right to democratic self-determination in other parts of the Union in the future.

2.29 pm

**Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con):** It is a privilege to speak in the debate and to follow the many hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken with great wisdom, knowledge and personal experience on these matters.

It is informative to apply to article 6 of the Acts of Union the four tests for impact that were developed by Justice Colton—specifically, Northern Ireland's compliance with certain EU standards; the bureaucracy and associated costs of complying with customs documentation and checks; the payment of tariffs for goods at risk; and the unfettered access enjoyed by Northern Ireland businesses to the EU single market. I question the representation of the Supreme Court judgment as set out in paragraph 14 of annex A to the Command Paper, but those were matters for the last debate, and there is not time to make my point.

The Windsor framework removed many EU standards for GB-produced consumer goods destined for Northern Ireland. That does not change under the SI before us. The second test—on bureaucracy and compliance costs associated with customs—should concern us, as the protocol saw the diversion of £1.2 billion-worth of goods in supply chains from GB to the Republic. Indeed, logistics businesses testified to the Lords Windsor Framework Sub-Committee on the complexity of managing mixed loads, with two large haulage firms stating that groupage had been “forgotten” in the framework.

Expert analysis has also suggested that 75% of output in non-exempted manufacturing sectors, including electronics, engineering and chemicals, comes from firms with turnover above £2 million, which will see their GB supply chains stuck in the red lane or diverted abroad. The Command Paper published yesterday contains a pledge—a UK internal market guarantee—that no more than 20% of goods will flow through the red lane. In practice, that creates a monitoring panel to report on any failures to hit the target and make recommendations to which the Government must respond. That is admirable but does not represent a material change to existing customs requirements under the protocol. It is also worth noting that, worryingly, that could be achieved simply by diverting supply chains away from GB towards the EU, as affected GB businesses cut Northern Ireland out of their distribution chains.

The regulations before us create important easements for Northern Ireland to GB trade, including a guarantee that future divergence will not impact the ability of Northern Ireland traders to freely access GB markets. That is welcome, but the bulk of distribution has always pertained to GB-to-NI trade, not the reverse. As is also noted in the Command Paper, although technology may ease compliance costs in the medium to long-term, those costs will still exist. Shipping from London to Belfast will continue to require significantly more bureaucracy than shipping to York or Edinburgh. The third test, on tariffs, is not covered and does not apply.

Finally, let me turn to Northern Ireland's preferential access to the EU single market. I must emphasise that the clear trade-off that we have chosen to give Northern Ireland unregulated access to EU supply chains comes at the cost of complicating access to GB ones, despite the fact that Northern Ireland imports from GB are two and a half times those from the EU and six times those from Ireland. Whatever easements we offer, that has created a customs, judicial and legislative border across the kingdom, and it is hurting our businesses. The fact that Northern Ireland continues to have preferential access to the EU single market is unarguable, but it should not be misunderstood. Again, I find that final test informative.



[Robin Millar]

Nothing I say today is intended to diminish the achievement of the deal when it comes to material gain for Northern Ireland. Although I welcome the elements within the new deal, which undoubtedly offer increased safeguards for the Union, it does not change the fact of EU law's application to Northern Ireland, additional bureaucracy for GB businesses attempting to access Northern Ireland, the existence of tariffs, or Northern Ireland's de facto placement within the EU single market. Once again, the qualities and effectiveness of this deal will emerge over the months and years ahead, I am sure, and through the scrutiny that must come from this place. I will continue to offer my support in those months and years ahead.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)**: Order. I believe the hon. Gentleman has finished his speech. I call Gavin Robinson.

2.33 pm

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would be very happy to let my colleague in if she wishes to respond to the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar).

**Carla Lockhart**: I think it needs to be reiterated that if the people of England, Wales or Scotland woke up tomorrow morning and found that they would have to stand for election to try to stop laws in 300 areas being imposed on them by a foreign Parliament, it would be outrageous and seen as outrageous by this House. That point should not be lost on this gathering.

**Gavin Robinson**: I am glad that I allowed my hon. Friend to make that intervention even though the hon. Member for Aberconwy had brought his contribution to a conclusion, because that is an important point.

In the context of the UK Parliament, I am proud to stand in support of the SI before us, and to recognise the efforts over the past number of years to deal with what was imposed on us and the people of Northern Ireland by colleagues in this Chamber and by a Government, arising from the arrangements reached in the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol. A series of measures were taken designed to encourage those who did not overly concern themselves with the position in which they had left Northern Ireland, to redress the harm done.

Today is, in many ways, a culmination of part of that process, but not an end to it. For the past number of years, my colleagues and I have stood firm in this regard. We have taken a principled position about the imposition of the Northern Ireland protocol and the harm it has caused our country and our place within our country, and have worked determinedly for solutions.

**Paul Girvan**: On the damage done, and the diversion of trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, many suppliers have found that it was easier to get products from the Republic of Ireland because UK suppliers were fed up with the bureaucracy they were encountering. A job of work needs to be done with UK suppliers to ensure they can bring back that trade.

**Gavin Robinson**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Intertrade UK, a body about which Members will read in The Command Paper, will have an important job of work to do in that regard.

Back in October 2022, whenever we were under significant pressure to move and to accept our lot, my parliamentary predecessor, former First Minister of Northern Ireland and my mentor, Peter Robinson, issued a powerful post reminding colleagues and those of us who were under pressure that we had not come this far only to come this far. He was encouraging us to stand, and we stood our ground not only then but throughout all the hype and all the pressure associated with the publication of the Windsor framework. The three fundamentals that are expanded on in our seven tests were to repair the constitutional harm imposed upon our country, to remove the democratic deficit at the heart of the arrangements for parliamentarians in our Northern Ireland Assembly, and to reduce the friction on trade, and remove it in respect of GB-to-NI goods that are staying in the UK internal market.

That has been our quest. On the constitutional harm, I am delighted that, as a consequence of our party's resolution, determination and stand over the past number of years, the leader of my party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and this Parliament were able to speak to and agree the constitutional SI that just passed the House. That is an important milestone.

On the democratic deficit, let us not forget that what has been achieved in repairing and removing the democratic deficit, and giving Stormont a say in the rules that apply to Northern Ireland, did not just come by way of change in this place. The agreement of that resolution required a structural amendment to the Northern Ireland protocol, and article 13.3 and 13.4 of that protocol was amended. The Windsor framework did that, and, in the constitutional SI that we just passed, we have strengthened further still the legislative provisions around the operation of that process. I say that to indicate that what we were told could not happen—changes to these texts, these tablets of stone—has happened.

These regulations are an important document not in and of themselves but as part of a much wider package that has been secured, and that was published in yesterday's Command Paper. That wider package has import in and of itself, and today's proceedings have an importance attached to the prospect of a return to devolution. Our party is a devolutionist party. We believe in locally elected representatives in Northern Ireland having the ability to shape our future within the United Kingdom. The cost and consequence of not recognising the opportunity before us, of not seeing the gains that have been achieved, would be too damaging for Unionism and too damaging for the future of our Province within this country.

Neither this SI nor the SI we have just passed is the sum total of what we have agreed. I listened to the hon. Member for Aberconwy say that there is no issue for goods moving from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. He believes that because it has been said so many times, but it is not so. From 2017, successive Conservative Governments have always dismissed the fact that traders trade in both directions, and they have always answered through one prism, never recognising that we should be equally free to buy and sell in the marketplace.

Saying that trade has not been a concern is to belie the fact that, as Unionists within this country, we had a situation in which UK trade deals did not automatically apply to us in Northern Ireland. Consumers in Northern Ireland could not benefit from those trade deals.

Although it is not in this SI, it is worth mentioning that on Tuesday evening, as a consequence of our discussions and negotiations with the Government, and as published in the Command Paper, we saw the publication of 60 pages of legislative text that will see products from the rest of the world that are freely available in the rest of the United Kingdom now be available in Northern Ireland. Those products will be taken from the red lane into the UK internal market system.

Some 13,000 tonnes of products will be available that were not available until we secured the concession that recognises our rightful place within this United Kingdom and our access to UK free trade deals. That important step means that 14 million items will move from the red lane into the UK internal market system, and it will mean that free trade deals benefit the people of Northern Ireland in a way that they previously could not, in a way that they did not and in a way that was never previously considered. That progress has been secured by this agreement.

The House will also recognise that, as outlined not in this SI but in the deal itself, primary legislation will be introduced to remove what I can describe only as the legislative litter retained from the 2017 joint report on the fictional all-Ireland economy, which does not exist. The reason why goods are labelled “not for sale in the EU” when moving from GB to NI is because we have a separate and distinct arrangement. We are not the same as the rest of the island of Ireland. We are part of the United Kingdom, and this deal reinforces that.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the phrase “all-Ireland economy,” but does he not recognise that a number of companies based in Northern Ireland essentially operate on an all-Ireland basis? His party’s leader, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), has highlighted the obvious example of Coca-Cola, which is based in Lisburn and serves the entire island.

**Gavin Robinson:** It is always good to hear from the hon. Gentleman, but he knowingly confuses my point. He knows that Coca-Cola being situated in Northern Ireland and sending its products throughout the island of Ireland is a point that recognises our access to the single market, with which I take no issue—I see it as a practical benefit. He also ignores the fact that, in Northern Ireland, Coca-Cola is able to manage different tax regimes, different currencies and many different aspects which, in and of themselves, clearly demonstrate that there is no all-Ireland economy. I am not concerned about there being one, but I am concerned that there is one remaining reference in legislation that is totally irrelevant and has no force in effect but requires Ministers to have due regard to something that does not exist, and is part of this agreement.

The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill accepted red and green lanes but, under this new arrangement, there is no need for a lane to deal with goods coming from GB to NI and staying within the United Kingdom internal market. The checks required by the Windsor framework—

tapering down to 5% by 2025 but, in real terms, 100% on some fruit and veg, 30% on meat, fish and poultry, and 15% on dairy—are gone, save for the ordinary checks we have in relation to smuggling and criminality. Those changes can only be achieved by opening the EU text and securing change in a way that we were told could not happen, that we were told was mythical or wishful thinking.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been very gracious in letting me speak around the SI up until this point. In the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the Government proposed many things that were to be of benefit to us, but they dropped them. They had our support in protecting our place within the UK internal market, but they dropped the proposals. This deal brings them back again, but it also goes further.

Other Members have commented on this, but proposed new section 45A(2) of the 2020 Act says:

“Accordingly, this Act—

- (a) prohibits the application of export procedures to goods removed from Northern Ireland to Great Britain”.

Whether or not Members think it has practical import, I can say as a Unionist that it has principled import. There should be no exit procedures. The exit procedures under the Northern Ireland protocol have caused us so much harm, and they have gone. That is important for all of us.

Subsection (3) says:

“In particular, that permanent unfettered access is achieved in relation to qualifying Northern Ireland goods through (among other things)—

- (a) the mutual recognition”.

Mutual recognition has been discussed many times in this House, and it is an aspiration we all share. We were told it was mythical. We were told it was a unicorn project. We were told that it could never be achieved because the EU would never agree, yet in this SI, we have mutual recognition—something that could do away with the checks, the impediments and the impositions that were put upon us by this Parliament and resolve the barriers to trade within our own country. Something that had consequences for the principled and political integrity of our country is now gone, because we have achieved mutual recognition.

Why is that important? It is important in the context of the debate we have been having across the House. I am proud that we have put in measures about internal market impact assessments that probably seem a little boring, methodical and bureaucratic, but even if we go through the process of getting civil servants and policy-makers to understand that any choice they make could have an impact on the UK internal market and Northern Ireland’s place within it, to understand what those impacts are and seek to address them, and even if the conclusion is that parliamentary sovereignty reigns and the principal policymakers in this place decide that they will diverge in policy terms from where we are in Northern Ireland, we have a goods guarantee. Nobody on the DUP Benches is going to upset parliamentary sovereignty, but we will protect our place within this United Kingdom.

The goods guarantee—the mutual recognition that says that, irrespective of the standards that apply in either part of this country, our goods from Northern Ireland will always be welcome in the rest of the United Kingdom—is a gain. It is a gain even when others did not see it as a problem, because it future-proofs our place within this United Kingdom. It is something that

[Gavin Robinson]

was absent from the Windsor framework. It has been a long quest for all of those who have walked hard yards to resolve some of the issues that have arisen from our choice to leave the European Union, but our determination on those issues has never wavered, and a resolution has been achieved.

New section 46A of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act deals with indirect access. In that section, our Government are now saying very clearly that there can be no administrative checks, controls and processes, not only for direct movements between one part of our country and another but for indirect movements—direct movements, but for the fact that the goods have merely passed through the Republic of Ireland. That crystallises yet again the fact that we are not in an all-Ireland economy: we are different from our near neighbours. Legislatively, Northern Ireland hauliers and Northern Ireland businesses that are sending goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain will be able to do so in an unfettered way, even if they travel through a foreign country. Those controls will not apply to them.

Those achievements are worth focusing on, because we have been trying to resolve the unresolvable—to get focus on places where attention had moved elsewhere. It has taken much longer than we would have liked. I am sure that many Members on other Benches would have preferred the process to end a lot sooner as well, if only we had agreed to less, but we were not prepared to do so. The Windsor framework marked progress, but we said that there were unresolved issues: not only the potential for future divergence in GB that would put us in a difficult position, or gains that were offered in the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill or, indeed, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act that were ultimately dropped—which we have now brought back and secured, and this Parliament is agreeing to—but resolving the unresolvable in a way that will have practical application for Northern Ireland, and for our place within this United Kingdom, now and for a long time to come.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I have three more Members wishing to speak. I want to bring the Minister in at 3.18 pm, so perhaps people could bear that in mind.

2.52 pm

**Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Again, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), the Prime Minister, all of the Northern Ireland parties and, most importantly, the DUP for this negotiation, and I thank the Opposition for their support. I note that this instrument, like the previous one, is liable not to go to a vote, and that there will again be total unanimity across this House. It is really important that we continue to make that point.

I know that the DUP was very concerned that in 2020 measures were dropped from the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, and I am delighted to see those protections returned. This instrument, like the previous one, emphasises how the DUP has negotiated all the detailed elements that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has just outlined, compared with a blank sheet from those who are currently making arguments against the DUP's acceptance of this deal.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I thank the right hon. Member for his work in trying to move things forward. On the very point he has just made, does he agree with me that it was due to the tenacity of my colleagues and me in not giving up when, in 2020, those clauses were dropped? We persevered and we kept pressing—when others gave up, this party kept at it—and now we see the fruits of our labours with the insertion into the United Kingdom Internal Market Act of key clauses that protect our unfettered access to the United Kingdom and its internal market.

**Julian Smith:** I wholeheartedly agree with the leader of the DUP. This negotiation, as I have observed, has involved hours and hours from the negotiating team, from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and from the Prime Minister's team. It has been dogged and ongoing, and it has been hours of work. I observe some of the debate in Northern Ireland and some of the criticism, but I look at the lists of improvements that have been won, and I again pay tribute to those improvements.

This statutory instrument speaks to a broader point in Northern Ireland, which is the economy and the opportunity for economic improvement. Before talking briefly about that, I would like to pay tribute to the business groups in Northern Ireland that have shown great patience since the Brexit vote on how to resolve many of the practical issues they were faced with. In the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Northern Ireland Business Brexit Working Group, many people have been working very hard to seek resolution, and I know that each and every one of those organisations will be pleased with what they have seen this week.

There are huge opportunities in Northern Ireland for the defence sector, the cyber sector, agriculture, pharma and more. Whether it is meat exporters who will be welcoming the tariff deal, the many businesses working with the US special envoy this week in Northern Ireland, or the various economic and inward investment seminars and activities my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been organising, all of these businesses will benefit, and they will create jobs and opportunities for families, young people and citizens in the future.

I would like to move away slightly from the statutory instrument, and go back to the Command Paper to reference the paragraph on corporation tax. What has been negotiated by the Government and the DUP on that front is to begin a working group between the Treasury here in London and the Department of Finance in the Northern Ireland Executive to look at the competitiveness of Northern Ireland's corporation tax, and that gives Northern Ireland an additional opportunity to maximise its already unique position in the United Kingdom.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** I draw the right hon. Member's attention to a further element in the Command Paper that proposes a special investment zone for Northern Ireland, which will deliver an extra £150 million of funding to drive growth in our economy. Does he join me in welcoming the interest of the Secretary of State for Scotland in working with us to ensure that the ports of Cairnryan and Stranraer are included, so that the links with Larne and Belfast are strengthened, and the Union connectivity that binds our country together is valued, invested in and expanded for the future?



**Julian Smith:** I absolutely agree with those comments. We see that in the Command Paper with Intertrade UK, which I hope will have excellent subject matter experts to build trade opportunities further, as well as with the East-West Council and various other groups.

The Command Paper is much more than a constitutional or legislative document. It is the basis for building on the already extremely exciting opportunity that Northern Ireland has to conquer in multiple sectors of the economy. I presume we will now be moving on to looking at talent and skills, and at how people from poorer nationalist areas or poorer Unionist areas can maximise these economic opportunities. This document is the basis for moving forward for Northern Ireland under a new devolved Executive, and for Northern Ireland knocking the lights out in various sectors of the economy in years to come.

**Jim Shannon** *rose*—

**Sammy Wilson** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** There are two speakers left, and I suggest they speak for nine minutes each.

2.59 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I will adhere, as I always do, to your timescale, Madam Deputy Speaker; I know my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) has a lot to say as well.

The combined years of negotiation have to be recognised. There has been movement, and even the harshest critics must be fair and admit to the huge steps that have been taken. It is right and proper that I thank those in the DUP, notably my leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and deputy leader, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), sitting on the right and left of me here in this Chamber. I also thank the others who have contributed, such as the Secretary of State and others with influence: the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) has been a great advocate for Unionism in Northern Ireland, and we thank him for that. So I am grateful to all who have done the bulk of the work by tirelessly advocating for change. They have secured a deal, and I am thankful for that.

However, I must be clear: this is not the fulfilment of a wish list. It does not go as far as I would wish and I would like to see more, but how can I change that? I change that from in this House; I change it in this Westminster House of Commons. That is how we do it—as a democrat, that is how I believe we must do it. That is a point worth making.

I am an active constituency MP, as we all are—I am not saying that no other Members are—and I have travelled the length and breadth of my constituency discussing this matter. I met with Orange brethren and sisters in January this year, and did the same last year. I met with teachers, NHS workers, individuals and community groups. I took time on the doorsteps to explain to my people why we had to take the necessary step of bringing down Stormont, to try to provide the justification for staying out of Stormont at times when money was being withheld and every threat other than

physical was being lodged at us. I took the time to attempt to tell people that it was not a matter of us being thran, to use an Ulster Scotsism, but it was a matter of us taking seriously the economic and constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the Union.

That is what my colleagues have done for two years, and I have stood firm on this and on the seven tests that the DUP outlined. Now today we see the legislation that I and others called for—constitutional legislation to secure our place within the internal market—and I retain some level of concern and press the Government for more assurances. Ministers would expect me to do that.

It was highlighted yesterday that the European laws may be overruled by Government, but the wording suggests that they may also be accepted, allowing Northern Ireland to diverge. All the people I represent seek an assurance from our Government that this deal and the legislation before this House will do exactly what it says on the tin and secure our place in the internal market—in fact restore and then secure our place.

I say gently to my colleagues on the Treasury Bench and across the Chamber that there is a lack of trust, which boils down to the treatment of Unionists by ruling Governments in this House for decades. The Secretary of State kindly took that on board when I raised it in an intervention. I look forward to that trust being built upon in a way that enables us to secure the trust of the people I am privileged to represent in this House.

The Irish Government have no issues with supporting calls for reunification, yet our Government Ministers have been afraid to appear unbiased. Government need to be unbiased. The opinion of this House on our sovereignty should be clear. My party leader sought not simply to secure legislation and change for this to take place now, but to future-proof it. In other words, we are not just dealing with it for today: we are dealing with it for the future of my children and grandchildren and those I probably will not be here for. Many of the people I represent have stated their lack of trust in a Government who told us they had given us the best they could and then did not deliver.

**Carla Lockhart:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about trust. The way the people of Northern Ireland have been treated over the past number of years by this Government is terrible. We need only look at the abortion laws that were forced on the people of Northern Ireland and the relationship and sexuality education change brought into Northern Ireland. So trust is at an all-time low, and there are people in my constituency who look at this not through rose-tinted glasses but with the view that we need to go much further and do more.

**Jim Shannon:** My hon. Friend clearly illustrates the distrust. To be fair, the Minister of State and Secretary of State have recognised that and know the job they have to do. It is clear why some of my electorate question not the dealings of the DUP, but rather those of the Government, wondering whether this deal is deliverable and will stand the test of time. Under the methodology before us, the Government must take a step, and only when they take that step can we then make an assessment of whether the deal is deliverable and will stand the test of time. That is what the issue boils down to, and it is why I express concerns. There is a huge lack of trust, and that has spilled over to many

[Jim Shannon]

being unable to accept the spirit of the deal, and in all honesty—I say this respectfully—I fully understand the distrust.

Just to give the House one quick example, on Tuesday morning I had the opportunity to look over the deal. A gentleman has been in touch not just with me, but with my hon. Friends on these Benches. He said, “Jim, I’m going to test this out to see if the paperwork is less.” That was Tuesday morning. He came back to me Tuesday night, and he sent me a text today, which I think others may have had, to say that for the 251 products that had each needed 300 pages of paperwork, the paperwork was away. He also told me that the pet foods that he could not get, he will be able to get in three weeks’ time. That has to be progress. Why did that happen? It happened because of some of the things that have been done here.

I took the opportunity to speak to businesses and to the farmers. Farmers and their union have told me that as far as they are concerned, they see progress on machinery, tractors and vehicles. In an intervention on the Minister earlier, I mentioned the importance of having a veterinary committee. I make a plug for my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) to be a member of that, because his influence in that area will be critical. He has done the spadework, and he seems to me to be the right man to be in there to fight for us.

My electorate want their representatives back to Stormont, but not at any price. Rather than the spirit of Chamberlain’s peace at any price, which emboldened our enemy, they hold to the mantra of Churchill that we will fight them on the beaches, and how true that is. We have sought to secure the internal market, but reading the SI makes it clear that a lot of interpretation is in the hands of the sitting Government. My constituents are desperate to get the billions that have been wilfully withheld. I said that with great respect to the Secretary of State last week. Those awaiting treatment on the NHS list deserve funding to reduce their time in pain. The bus drivers standing a few yards down from my constituency office in the freezing cold deserve a pay raise. The children with special needs deserve the security of knowing that their day centre will remain open and not close due to insufficient funding.

All those people deserve those things, whether or not this deal is struck, but we also deserve the truth of who we are in the light of the legislation. Are we a casual member—[*Interruption.*] I will finish soon, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am rushing quickly to meet your timing. Are we a casual member of the UK, with the EU to have a continuing say on laws and the recognition of status, or do we have full UK membership, with the benefits and security of every other part of the UK? The deal has been hard fought for and seeks to address that, but the real power to assure us lies in this House, with the Ministers and the Government. At home, people are urging us to keep our word, and I agree we must, but we can do so only if the Government in this place also keep their word. Northern Ireland deserves our place in the UK, and my party leadership has fought hard for it. The question is simple, and so is the answer I seek: are we British in law, in economics and in parity, or are we not? Speak the word today and ensure that my Government and Ministers here keep it tomorrow.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I will bring in the Minister no later than 3.18 pm.

3.8 pm

**Sammy Wilson:** I will not go over the wide range of what is in the Command Paper or the SI, but will focus on some particular points in the SI. It is well known that I do not support this deal or agreement, and I have given reasons why not. It is important that we have the opportunity to examine the detail of it, and the way that this legislation has been hurried through today has not allowed that examination. That is one reason why I will focus just on one particular aspect of it.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) was speaking, he talked about the need to get rid of the debris or litter that was still around. The first point I want to make—perhaps the Minister can answer this in summing up—is that a lot of legislative litter is still around as a result of the arrangements put in place for the red lane and the green lane. We have statutory instruments on which I have spoken in Committee on a number of occasions, and EU regulations, including regulation 2023/1231, which gives the EU the right to make the final decision to suspend goods going through the green lane—and, I suspect, the internal market lane—and make the red lane the default position. I wonder when we will see the removal of all the infrastructure around the previous arrangements in the protocol and the Windsor framework. That would indicate that the UK Government were totally in command of goods flowing into Northern Ireland, rather than, as the EU legislation and indeed the withdrawal agreement state at present, the EU having the final say.

Secondly, my hon. Friend indicated that the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and GB was an issue of concern. It is, and indeed it is likely to be an issue of concern in the future, especially since the Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024 make it clear that legislation could be introduced in the House that would impact on trade between Northern Ireland and GB—for example, if the Government decide to change some retained EU law. The only assurance given is that a Minister would have to make an assessment of the impact and report it to the House. But at the end of the day—this is clear in proposed new section 13C of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018—he could make a decision to proceed nevertheless, even though that would likely have an impact on trade.

EU law could be another reason for divergence. We could find decisions made or practices allowed in the EU that put the GB market at risk. That is why we will be introducing the border operating model. The danger is that Northern Ireland goods could get caught in that. I imagine hearing people, including the Minister, saying, “But the legislation prevents that.” It does—on the face of it, we cannot have any border checks for what are called Northern Ireland qualifying goods going into GB. Indeed, local authorities will be informed that trade cannot be restricted, that no barriers can be put up to that trade and that Northern Ireland qualifying goods should have free access. Of course, all the export declarations previously required are to be dropped. However, perhaps the Minister can tell us what is meant in proposed new section 45B of the UK Internal Market Act 2020, which indicates that if goods fall into one of five categories, they will require export declarations.

Leaving that aside, let us look at the situation—actually, it is provided for in this legislation—whereby it is quite clear that the freedoms given for Northern Ireland qualifying goods to sail through into GB are being abused by exporters from the Republic, who bring goods through Northern Ireland and declare them as qualifying goods. By the way, it appears that no evidence has to be given; it will simply be taken on trust when goods are declared to be qualifying goods. I see the Minister is nodding.

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris)** *indicated dissent.*

**Sammy Wilson:** Perhaps the Minister can tell us what proof companies will have to give and how onerous that proof will be. What will happen where it becomes clear that there is abuse in goods moving through Northern Ireland into GB? It appears—again, if I am misreading this, perhaps the Minister can explain it to me—that proposed new section 45C indicates that guidance will be given to local authorities, probably through bodies and so on, as to what needs to be done to keep the free flow of goods between Northern Ireland and GB, but proposed new section 46A states:

“The Secretary of State may revise or revoke (in whole or in part) any guidance issued under this section.”

In what circumstances would that guidance be given? If it were given, what would the impact be on the free flow of goods from Northern Ireland to GB, which is more than 60% of our market? It is about those details.

When we have this kind of seal of an agreement, with all the wide-ranging and broad-brush aspects, we sometimes find that when we get down to the detail it falls apart, as happened in the Windsor framework—let us not forget that it fell apart within about two days of the Prime Minister giving the assurances. It is important that we understand all the various scenarios that are being painted in such a detailed SI as this.

First, will the Minister give us an assurance about what is happening to the green lane infrastructure—will the SIs and the EU regulations be removed, or will they stay in place, as part of the Windsor framework, the protocol and the withdrawal agreement? Secondly, what are the five categories of goods that will require export declarations? People need to know. Thirdly, when it comes to the goods flowing into GB, under what circumstances will the border operating model be applied to them? The final point I want to make is this—

**Julian Smith:** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sammy Wilson:** I only have one minute left. We are told in paragraph 100 of the Command Paper that for goods going through the green lane, some declarations of “standard commercial information” will be required. Perhaps the Minister could tell us what standard commercial information companies will be continue to be required to supply, even under the agreement.

3.17 pm

**Mr Baker:** Time is short, but I will do my level best to answer as many questions as I can. It has been a very interesting debate.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) asked me which checks will be eliminated. The changes will apply both for identity or visual checks and for

physical checks. We will take powers shortly to make direction to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to ensure that is the case.

On the change to the definition of qualifying Northern Ireland goods, we will require them to have a genuine connection to Northern Ireland, and not to be merely crossing through. The SI requires qualifying Northern Ireland goods to be dispatched from NI-registered food-business operators. It concentrates competitive advantage on Northern Ireland firms. We will continue to engage closely with Northern Ireland businesses on future changes and will always be responsive if arrangements need to be improved—a theme that I can safely say runs throughout everything the Government will do.

The right hon. Gentleman asked when we will introduce guidance on section 46 of the UK Internal Market Act. We will work rapidly to deliver on every aspect of the deal announced yesterday. Guidance on section 46 will be prepared as quickly as possible. I certainly hear him on that point, and he will continue to press us. The guidance will be help to avoid unnecessary gold plating.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about Cairnryan. EU goods arriving there will be checked in line with the border target operating model, but I can confirm there will be no border control post at Cairnryan. We are working through the options and will work closely with the devolved Governments, including the newly restored Executive, to achieve our shared objectives.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about flexibilities for veterinary medicines. We are committed to exploring flexibilities that can be deployed, where they are consistent with international law, to guarantee the supply of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland. We will establish a veterinary medicines working group to identify possibilities in this policy area, but I am not in a position to set out those flexibilities now. However, as we have all put so much effort into resetting the relationship with the European Union, I hope and expect that we will be able to succeed in a negotiation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the former Secretary of State, made a powerful case that Brexit must be fully delivered, with which I agree. I reassure her that nothing in this deal will prevent us from diverging. For the record, there are no commitments of any kind as part of this deal to align Great Britain with EU law, to prevent Great Britain from diverging from any retained EU law or to increase alignment in Northern Ireland beyond the strictly limited scope that Parliament has approved, which is itself subject to democratic consent and safeguards. For the avoidance of doubt, there is no legal mechanism to prevent divergence or force alignment across the whole of the UK. Ministers retain full freedom to diverge from retained EU law.

Both sides of the argument have expressed concern in this debate. I want to draw the House’s attention to paragraph 150 of the Command Paper:

“Internal Market Assessments will be publicly available so this change will enable Parliament and the NI Assembly to more readily have the information they need for their scrutiny functions. These steps will fundamentally rewire structures within the Government to ensure full consideration of the potential Northern Ireland impacts of any measures, ensuring that the internal market is integral to policy development.”

Of course, we will continue to work with all parties on outstanding issues.



**Sammy Wilson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Baker:** I am extremely short of time but, out of respect, I will give way.

**Sammy Wilson:** Will the Minister admit to the bottom line, as contained in proposed new section 13C(2)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, set out in the draft Windsor Framework (Constitutional Status of Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which requires “a statement to the effect that the Minister is unable to make such a statement”—

that is, that the Bill in question will not affect trade between Northern Ireland and GB—

“but His Majesty’s Government nevertheless wishes the House to proceed with the Bill”?

The bottom line is: yes, divergence can happen and trade can be disrupted.

**Mr Baker:** I readily concede that there can be changes to retained EU law and that divergence can happen, but we have set out the safeguards at some length. I also encourage the right hon. Gentleman—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), who made an excellent speech, said, and as indeed the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said—to look at the section of the Command Paper in relation to the Acts of Union. I myself learned a great deal about it.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Baker:** I need to finish in one minute, but I will give way.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson:** Very briefly, I draw the Minister’s attention to paragraph 146 of the Command Paper, which makes it very clear that where primary

legislation carries implications for the internal market, the Government will set out the measures they propose to take to protect Northern Ireland’s place in the internal market.

**Mr Baker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Yes, that is the position.

In closing, there are sensitivities on all sides, as we have heard over the course of the debate, but real life in the age of intervention is complex, and we will press on as best we can. With that, I believe this Government have kept to the timetable as we agreed. I very much hope we will be able to look forward now to a restored Executive—one we will be very pleased to support in serving the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Windsor Framework (UK Internal Market and Unfettered Access) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

*Ordered,*

At this day’s sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of paragraphs (1) and (2) of Standing Order No. 22D relating to the scheduling of select committee statements, a select committee statement on the Third Report of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee may be made after the conclusion of proceedings on this motion.—(*Robert Langan.*)

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** As Members may know, the Backbench Business debate on miners and mining communities has been postponed to a later date. We will now move on to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

## Financial Distress in Local Authorities

### LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

*Select Committee statement (Order, this day)*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Mr Clive Betts, the Select Committee Chair, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions can be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions about it. These should be brief questions, not speeches. I should also emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

3.24 pm

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to make this statement on behalf of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee about its report “Financial distress in local authorities”. Let me first thank the Leader of the House for tabling the business motion that has allowed the statement to be made. Our Committee Clerk is excited about the fact that we have apparently set a procedural precedent today; I was certainly not aware of that, but I am now. Let me also thank the Backbench Business Committee for originally providing the time for the statement.

Our inquiry looked into the extent of the funding gap in local authorities’ finances, and some of the main spending challenges that they face: social care, special educational needs and homelessness. The report brings attention to key issues ahead of the upcoming local government financial settlement. It makes recommendations not only for urgent action to resolve the immediate crisis, but larger reforms for the Government to consider after the next election.

Everyone recognises that the financial crisis in local authorities across England is out of control. In recent months an alarming number of them have issued section 114 notices—admissions that their spending is exceeding their income—thus effectively declaring bankruptcy. In the last six years, eight authorities have issued such notices; in the previous 18 years, none did. It is no longer the case that a small number of individual councils with particular issues are in financial distress. We are now seeing widespread financial distress across large parts of local government, and the situation is only getting worse. The Committee has heard evidence from the Local Government Association that one fifth of councils may be in financial distress within the next year.

At the heart of this crisis is a multi-billion-pound funding gap. The income available to local authorities from council tax, retained business rates and government grants has not kept pace with the increased demand for their services and the effect of inflation. As a result, the Local Government Association estimates that authorities face a funding gap of £4 billion over the next two years to maintain services at their current levels.

Witnesses have told us that the current funding system is “broken” and “not fit for purpose”. Successive Governments since 2010 have reduced the level of central Government grants awarded to local authorities by about 50%. This has been partly offset by a 20% increase

in council tax, which has therefore led to an overall reduction in local authority core spending power of 26% in real terms between 2010 and 2021.

In the short term, local authorities need immediate additional funding. Our report recommends that the Government must include additional funding in the local government finance settlement for 2024-25 to fill the gap. Last week the Government announced £600 million of extra funding, and I give credit to the Minister, who has been assiduous in listening to the views of Members on this subject. However, although those measures are welcome, they are not sufficient.

Our report recognises that the Government have recently begun consultations on other methods of increasing the funds available to local authorities. We have cautiously welcomed the fact that they are considering giving authorities additional capital flexibilities to fund day-to-day costs, but we have recommended that those additional flexibilities should be considered carefully and limited to extending flexibilities over invest-to-save activity. We do not want to store up problems for future years.

Our report also recommends other ways in which the Government can improve funding for local authorities in the medium term. We have repeated the recommendation, which our Committee first made in 2021, that the Government must urgently reform council tax. This would involve undertaking a revaluation of properties and introducing additional council tax bands. Finally, we have once again called for the Government to implement the business rates reset and fair funding review, to which they committed themselves in 2016 but which they have yet to deliver, and to reintroduce multi-year settlements.

Our inquiry asked witnesses what had caused the sharp rise in council expenditures. It identified three particular areas where costs have risen significantly: adults’ and children’s social care, special educational needs, and homelessness. On adults’ social care, the increasingly complex needs of a changing population continue to drive up costs, and long-term workforce shortages and inflationary pressures have made the position worse. As the Committee recommended back in 2022, the Government need to recognise that local authorities will need several billion pounds of additional funding each year to continue to deliver and improve adult social care, and should plan a sustainable mechanism to deliver this funding that does not simply rely on increasing council tax.

On children’s social care, our inquiry found that councils are facing rising demand for residential care placements and a poorly functioning market for providing them. That has driven significant cost increases. Our report recommends an urgent comprehensive reform of the children’s social care system. As part of that, the Government should help local authorities consider greater collaboration so that between them they can deliver more children’s care services directly, instead of through private suppliers. Our inquiry also found that local authorities face significant financial pressures in providing services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities—SEND. The number of education, health and care plans has “skyrocketed” since they were introduced in 2014, which has significantly increased demand for more expensive forms of SEND provision and home-to-school transport. Funding is provided to local authorities through the dedicated schools grant, but it is not enough to meet the demand and does not cover home-to-school transport.

[*Mr Clive Betts*]

The Government have already been forced to take temporary measures to prevent SEND costs from forcing a large number of councils into bankruptcy. In 2020, the Government introduced a “statutory override”, allowing local authorities to exclude any deficits on their DSG spending from their main revenue budgets. Local government faces a potential cliff edge of section 114 notices whenever the statutory override comes to an end. The question is: will the Treasury write off that extra borrowing when the time comes? Our report recommends, therefore, that in the short term the Government should provide additional funding for home-to-school transport. In the long term, there needs to be a fundamental reform of the EHCPs, based on a cross-Government review.

Finally, our report makes it clear that rising homelessness has increased costs for councils. A big cause of the increase has been the Government’s decision to freeze local housing allowance rates in April 2020, so our report welcomes the Government’s recent announcement that they will increase local housing allowance rates from April 2024. However, it also raises concerns about the Government’s decision to then re-freeze the rates in 2026. Instead, we recommend that local housing allowance should be retained at at least the 30th percentile of local market rents. In the longer term, the best solution, as the Committee has recommended repeatedly, is to build more social housing, which will always be cheaper than paying for temporary accommodation.

These problems require a long-term solution. That is why the Committee has made recommendations in this report for whichever Government are elected after the next election. The next Government, regardless of their political persuasion, must embark on a fundamental review of the systems of local authority funding and local taxation, both council tax and business rates. In doing so, they must be clear about what local authorities are for and how they can best co-ordinate with delivery of the Government’s wider objectives. We have recommended that the next Government should consider many options, which may include land value taxes and others, and wider fiscal devolution. They must also explore all options for reforming the funding and delivery of social care services, to address the underlying causes of the acute funding and delivery pressures currently faced by local authorities. It is my hope that the need we have identified for additional funding will be properly reflected in the local government financial settlement we will debate next week, and that our other recommendations will be carefully considered by this Government and whoever form the Government after the next election. I commend this report to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you very much for your statement, Mr Betts. I call Bob Blackman. I intend to call the Front Benchers at the end, if everybody is happy with that.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for what he said. Clearly, one problem is that adult social services, children’s social services and homelessness services are all demand led, so it is very difficult for a local authority to predict the number of people involved and how much money

will be required. Does he agree that what the Government and the Department need to look at now is how we can enable local authorities to have a pool of money nationally that could be used by a particular local authority when these demand-led services have dramatically increased the burden on it?

**Mr Betts:** I thank the hon. Gentleman—I call him my Select Committee Friend—because he has been part of all these debates and always the Committee report was unanimous. He is absolutely right: we have to find a way of funding social care in the specific parts and for the general social care issues. Council tax simply cannot meet that burden; we cannot keep putting council tax up to cover it. That leads on to the additional challenge that most people do not receive social care and what they are seeing every year is their council tax going up but the services they do get—the libraries, parks, buses and road sweeping—being reduced. They are paying more and getting less, and that is not sustainable in the long term.

**Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab):** I commend my hon. Friend on his brilliant work. On local government funding, he will know that Birmingham City Council is under special measures having issued a section 114 notice, and other services have been hugely hit by the lack of funding. One reason councils have been forced into this position is that there has been a lack of funding to the reserves that keep them out of bankruptcy, so the lack of proper funding for local authorities is a real issue.

**Mr Betts:** I recognise the particular problems in Birmingham. Some councils that have issued section 114 notices have specific problems; we know about the equal pay issues in Birmingham, for example. Some councils—I am referring generally—have perhaps brought those problems on themselves. However, as we say in the report, the challenge is no longer just individual councils with particular problems, but the generality of local government being under pressure, as set out by all our witnesses from the sector. In that situation, any challenging problem that comes to a council on top of a general problem can tip it over the edge.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for his report. Barnsley Council’s budget has seen some of the biggest cuts in the country, which makes it even more impressive that it has been given two awards for being council of the year. To date, my constituency of Barnsley East has received no levelling-up funding, although such funding is a drop in the ocean compared with the figures my hon. Friend was discussing. We are awaiting the decision on our final bid, which was made to the cultural fund. Does the Chair of the Select Committee know when that might be announced? I note the Minister is in his place and I hope he will look on the Elsecar Heritage Centre bid favourably.

**Mr Betts:** If it was in my gift, of course I would give Barnsley the money it is asking for today, but unfortunately it is not. In another report, the Committee was fairly critical of the individual pots for levelling up, which are not joined up together. It is unsatisfactory that some councils can get bits of money from all these pots, while others get nothing at all. To address those problems, we



have suggested a move towards single pots for local authorities, reflecting their needs and giving greater discretion and freedom to decide on spending at a local level. We are quite a long way off that at this stage. In principle, the Government recognise that is the way to travel, but they have not got a road map about how we are going to get there.

**Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all his work on this important report. It is a privilege to serve on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee under his chairship. He does not need me to tell him that, like many local authorities, Nottingham City Council is in a perilous financial position. Our council's spending power has been cut by a huge 28% compared with 2010, despite high levels of deprivation in our city. This is considerably higher than the average, still devastating, reduction of 19% among councils. How important does he believe it is to make the local government funding system fairer?

**Mr Betts:** I completely agree that it should be made fairer. The only caveat I would add is that one authority's system of fair funding is another authority's unfair funding, which is always a challenge. Everyone accepts that the funding system must be brought up to date. The current funding system has data in it that goes back to the last century, which is not a reasonable way to allocate money in the current age, so yes, it needs to be revised.

On the funding cuts and the council tax increases, the biggest funding cuts have tended to be made to those councils that used to receive the most grant, which tend to be the poorer councils. The council tax increases have disadvantaged councils with a low council tax base, which tend to be those councils who received the biggest cuts. We have not gone into that in detail in this report, but I know we have had evidence to that effect in the past.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for this important report, which makes sobering reading for Members across the House. Does he agree that the reason his measures are so necessary in Leeds is that Government funding to Leeds City Council has been cut by the Conservative Government by £2.5 billion since 2010? That has left Leeds City Council, an excellent Labour-run council, with a shortfall of £65 million for the 2024-25 financial year. The £2.5 billion of cuts to Government funding since 2010 equate to about £75 million per ward, leaving the council struggling to deliver essential services for some of the most vulnerable people in our city. Is that not why everyone here, regardless of their political party, needs to support the measures set out in this report?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We clearly set out that the problem is due to a cut in funding. That is the result of a reduction in the central Government grant, with council tax increases only partly, but not wholly, replacing the funds. That issue needs addressing if we want councils to continue not only performing social care functions, but doing everything else that our communities rely on. We need fundamental reform; that is what we are calling for in the longer term. That is a challenge for any Government—I look

at both Front Benches here—because if we reform local finance, some people will have to pay more and some will have to pay less. I always say that those people who pay more never forget about it and continue to blame the Government for years to come. Those who pay less will thank the Government and then forget about it next year. There is always a challenge when it comes to spreading the tax take around differently. But we will have to do it differently, because these council services—not just social care, but the parks, the buses, the libraries, the roads, the environmental services, the planning, and the economic development, which has almost fallen off the scale in some councils—are really important.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality is that 14 years of ideological austerity cuts have left many authorities on the brink of bankruptcy. From 2015 to now, Bradford Council has had £100 million-worth of cuts, which has left our services decimated and our communities devastated and deprived of much-needed services. I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his report. I particularly welcome the call for much-needed and immediate funding for local authorities. Does he agree that the much-needed funding must be given, and if it is not given, any blame for section 144 notices should lie directly and squarely at the door of this Government?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The report says that not every section 144 notice can be blamed on the Government. There will be circumstances in which councils get themselves into difficulty, but what we have said is that there are general problems coming down for councils, which have been created by a shortage of funding. We did make reference to Bradford. Bradford's problem is the young age of its population—the number of children. Children services are run by trustees appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. That body has demanded from the council an amount equivalent to about 50% of its council budget. We could get the ridiculous situation in which the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities sends in commissioners to run services to try to find the money to pay the trustees who are appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. That does not seem a great way for local government to operate.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for what I think is a very important report. I also thank the Committee members who have spent a significant amount of time getting under the skin of the issue. First, does he agree that, ahead of the scheduled finance settlement next Wednesday, the Government need to finally take responsibility for the financial crisis in local government? Secondly, does he share my concern that the breakdown in local government audit is contributing to the removal of the early warning system?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Yes, it certainly is doing so. I have just produced a report about local government audit. There is a real problem there. If accounts have not been audited for three years, as in most cases, but probably longer in other cases, how on earth do we know what is happening in local council finances? Certainly, getting local audit on an even keel by the end of this year is very important,

[Mr Betts]

but where accounts are qualified, as they will be, councils should not be blamed for that; it is the problem of the local audit system, and we really must sort that out.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare):** On behalf of the Government, I thank the Chair of the Select Committee and all his colleagues on it for the work that they do in general, and for the report in particular. I will obviously study it with great care, and respond in the usual way. He made a number of points. I think we can all agree that certainty and security for the local government sector are important, and I concur with his view that there is clear merit in multi-year settlements. I also agree that whoever is standing at the Dispatch Box in the role of local government Minister after the next general election—I pray to God that it will be me, and I hope that my prayers will be answered—reforms will always be difficult and complex. I would be interested to know whether the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) sees any merit in establishing some cross-party working and blue-sky thinking on the issue, in order hopefully to land something that can deliver certainty and security for five, 10, 15 or 20 years ahead, to give comfort to local government leaders, section 151 officers and others.

**Mr Betts:** While I might not completely agree with the Minister's prayers, I agree that if we are to sort this out for the long term, particularly social care funding, we need a system that has general support. The Committee has called for that in the past. What we did on pensions reform a few years ago, cross party, has stuck, so there is merit in that suggestion. Whether we can achieve it, I do not know, but we ought to try.

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This morning, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) asked

the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what owners of XL bully dogs who have missed the registration deadline for genuine reasons can do to ensure that they keep in line with guidance. A constituent who missed the deadline contacted my office today. They were unable to get their dog neutered in time for genuine reasons. The advice of the Secretary of State was to register as soon as possible; however, the Government's website says that the service is now closed. I seek your advice on how things can be corrected, and the website can be reopened, if that was the intention of the Secretary of State, so that dog owners who want to do the right thing and register their pet can do so.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the hon. Member for her point of order and her forward notice of it. Clearly, the Chair is not responsible for the accuracy of Ministers' remarks, but at the same time we want them to be accurate. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench have heard what she has had to say, and will ensure that the Secretary of State has it brought to his attention. At the same, given that she is a diligent Member of Parliament, I am sure that she will bring it directly to the notice of Ministers.

**Simon Hoare:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have heard what the hon. Lady said. It is a serious point. I will ensure that my officials raise it with the office of the Secretary of State this afternoon to ensure that the situation is clarified. It is a sensitive issue, and her constituent and others will want to have clarity.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I cannot do it quicker than that, can I?

**Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):** You have set the bar now.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** It is a very high bar. I should quit now. Thank you very much everybody.

## Backbench Business

### Iran: Freedom and Democracy

3.48 pm

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House condemns unreservedly the actions of the government of Iran and the violent conduct of the police in suppressing protests in that country; is deeply concerned over Tehran's growing use of terrorism, espionage, cyber attacks and hostage-taking diplomacy to restrict and eliminate the Iranian democratic opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), targeting in particular members of the organised opposition, PMOI (MEK), in Ashraf 3, Albania and NCRI gatherings since 2018; notes that the resistance is struggling for the establishment of a secular democratic republic; calls on European governments, especially the government of Albania, to counter Tehran's illegal activities and uphold the rights of members of the Iranian opposition PMOI (MEK) at Ashraf-3 in accordance with the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, the European Convention of Human Rights and international law; is further concerned by reports of threats made to Iranian dissidents in the UK; urges the Government to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations; and further calls upon the Government to work with international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay and Iran is held to account for its illegal activities at home and abroad.

I thank the Speakers-Collect and the Backbench Business Committee for the various arrangements that had to be made because of this afternoon's emergency business.

I am truly horrified by the current situation in Iran, which was sparked by the brutal murder of a young girl by the authorities while she was in police custody. Her crime—if we could call it a crime—was merely wearing her hijab in a manner that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps determined to be too loose. I thank Mr Speaker in particular for allowing me on a number of occasions to debate this issue in the House. However, I wish this debate had taken place under different circumstances and that by now our Government had taken decisive action to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety.

The urgency for this charge is now more relevant than ever. Not only does the human rights situation in Iran remain dire, but the uncertainty around the middle east, which is spreading further afield at a rapid rate, is predominantly driven by the funding and support from this exceptionally threatening, conniving and deceitful regime.

**Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the Iranian people are locked in a vital struggle for justice, democracy and particularly equality, and that that struggle must go on until the oppression of women in Iran and the use of sexual violence as a means of doing so stop?

**Bob Blackman**: I thank my hon. Friend—she must have looked at the next section of my speech. The IRGC literally runs and rules Iran, disregarding democracy, freedom of expression and basic human rights. The majority of people live in fear of speaking out or engaging in political matters in any form, with vigorous covert intelligence deployed to all parts of the country, seeking to sift out any potential opposition that might pose a threat to the regime.

The authorities censor all media, jamming satellite TV channels and filtering and blocking social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Further, the authorities shut off or disrupt the internet and mobile phone networks, particularly during protests, in order to suppress mobilisation and hide from civilians the sheer scale of the violations and privacy breaches committed by the security forces. In attempting to justify the infringements, the IRGC is even trying to push an internet user protection Bill through the Parliament in Iran. That legislation would further erode online freedoms and people's access to the global internet.

All opposition in Iran, whether it is independent political parties, trade unions, striking workers, protesters, civil society organisations or simply truth-sharing journalists, is brutally suppressed. There has never been a clearer example of an undemocratic self-claimed democracy. Political opposition frequently receives the harshest treatment from the regime, and Iran is the country responsible for the second highest number of executions each year, behind only China. Whatever people's views on capital punishment, it cannot be acceptable that that position persists.

The House will no doubt recall the uprising that took place in September 2022, sparking nationwide protests that continue even today. I take this opportunity to honour the bravery of those people. It cannot be easy for anyone to stand up and speak for basic rights when there is a high likelihood that they or their family will be brutally targeted as a result. Following the riots, the United Nations special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Javād Rehmān, raised the alarm about the concerning trend of arbitrary arrests, detentions and executions targeting individuals for merely exercising their freedom of expression.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Member is making a brilliant speech. The dead hand of Iran is, unfortunately, everywhere; its influence and impact is incredible, and I would suggest that it is even in this place. There is an all-party parliamentary group whose secretariat is BIRD—the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. That is led by a man, Sayed Al-Wadaei, who was outed as a front leader for the promotion of Iranian foreign policy. In 2012, a man called Saeed Al-Shehabi was exposed by the *London Evening Standard* as part of a terrorist group with links to Iran. That organisation and those people are part of a secretariat to an APPG here, and that needs to be exposed and Members need to take action.

**Bob Blackman**: I thank the hon. Member for raising that point. That is now clearly on the record, and the House authorities will need to look at that particular issue.

Recently released figures, which I am sure will have been generously tainted by the regime, show that 870 executions took place in 2023 alone. That is a 30% increase on the previous year, and many of those people were women and children. Tens of thousands of political prisoners, the overwhelming majority being peaceful, have been arrested in Iran—arrested for merely holding a sign or removing a headscarf. Once arrested, their treatment is utterly unfathomable. Amnesty International has recently reported that the atrocities such prisoners are subjected



[*Bob Blackman*]

to include being beaten, raped, gang raped and psychologically abused; the list of horrors goes on. It is truly despicable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) said.

The plight of women remains intensely troubling. Women remain second-class citizens in Iran: they continue to receive intensified opposition from the regime; they face entrenched discrimination in both law and practice; and they are subject to domestic violence, child marriage, unequal divorce and custody rights, mandatory dress code, restricted nationality and travel rights, and unfair inheritance laws—to name but a few examples. Women in Iran have been jailed for merely singing in public or publishing their work on social media.

Perhaps even more troublingly, Iran celebrates the greatest number of female executions, beating even China on that particular front. Armita Geravand was a 16-year-old schoolgirl, who was tragically killed through the brutality of the so-called Iranian morality police. Like Mahsa Amini, her only crime was refusing to wear her hijab. Sadly, such stories are not isolated in Iran, and I am sad to say that they will continue without significant intervention from international communities and the Iranian people.

I am proud that in this House alone, we have an abundance of great women representing us; their contribution is vital and championed by us all. It is shocking that, in 2024, this is far from the case across many other parts of the globe.

**Anna Firth:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way yet again. He is making an absolutely brilliant, first-class speech, and shining a light on the despicable, brutal regime in Iran. Does he agree that that brutal regime is literally on an execution spree at the moment, having executed more than 350 protesters and dissidents since the conflict in Gaza began? That is a rate of execution of not far off 100 protesters per month. Does he agree that it is long overdue that the UK and our partners demand that the UN Human Rights Council dispatch an international fact-finding mission to Iran to visit the regime's prisoners—to meet political prisoners and detained protesters—so that, globally, we can finally shine a light on what is happening in Iran? And, of course, he is right that the IRGC should be proscribed.

**Bob Blackman:** I thank my hon. Friend—that was almost a speech rather than an intervention!

I have had the privilege on a number of occasions to visit Ashraf 3, which is home to some 2,700 Iranian refugees. The museum on the site exceptionally depicts the long struggle that people have endured, with brutal attacks and massacres occurring all too frequently. In Albania, the regime's laws continue to menace the people. The IRGC has repeatedly targeted the Albanian Government through cyber-attacks, disinformation and terror attacks. I am saddened that, on occasion—most notably in June last year—the camp has been raided by the Albanian police forces. There have been reports of unjustified force and copious amounts of pepper spray being used. Unfortunately, one man died from the injuries that he suffered. I am almost certain that that attack was founded on false claims generated by the IRGC.

The regime holds a power over Albania. Its continued attacks on cyber-systems are used as so-called warnings to the Government, blackmailing them with threats of continued attacks if they do not suppress the rights of camp members. I urge the Albanian Government to stand up to those threats. No country should infringe its morals for fear of such a corrupt and wicked enemy. This is a time for western allies to stick together and stand up to malicious terror acts. I am glad that our Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation will be going to Albania shortly, and I hope that they will raise this issue.

The Albanian Prime Minister has said publicly that residents of Ashraf 3 should not engage in any political activity—even peaceful conversation. That is tantamount to denying the right to freedom of expression. I am saddened that that announcement came after a show of support for the camp by Albanian parliamentarians, showing that the dramatic shift in opinion must be down to the negotiations with the IRGC. I hope that the Minister will assure the House that he will offer support to our Albanian counterparts, encouraging them to stand up to the regime and protect the rights of those in that camp, who have already experienced too much brutality.

This debate comes at a time when the world has never been so unsafe. We have a war raging in Europe, attacks by the Houthis in the Red sea, an illegal war in Gaza by the Hamas terror group, Hezbollah in Lebanon and war in Syria, as well as other dangerous militant groups. The one thing that links all those examples is the IRGC, which stands as the head of the snake, funding, training and supplying weaponry to all those organisations. Its outreach and capabilities are frankly frightening.

The IRGC has been found to have supplied drones and weapons to Russia as Moscow and Tehran deepen their co-operation in a partnership that is likely to continue and intensify as they commonly seek to weaken the west. Furthermore, the IRGC provided significant direct funding and training to Hamas in the lead-up to the dreadful 7 October attacks. Most recently, the Houthis in Yemen have targeted shipping lanes in the Red sea. The Houthi militant group was set up by Iran and remains under its influence. Linked to those attacks, Iran announced that it had subsequently launched into low-earth orbit three satellites that the US believes can be used to more accurately target intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The regime in Iran ignites a threat not only to the international community, but, perhaps most concerningly, to the domestic security of the UK. Individuals with Iranian links, or who have spoken out against the IRGC in this country, have frequently been targeted. Furthermore, MI5 announced last year that it had intercepted a significant number of Iran-backed terror attacks.

**Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab):** The hon. Member is making an incredibly powerful speech, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. He is quite right: last year, we heard from the director general of MI5 and the head of counter-terrorism policing that they had intervened to disrupt up to 15 kidnapping and assassination attempts in the UK coming from Iran. That is why the argument for proscription is such a powerful one. It would not be merely symbolic; it would be about granting the security services and police forces in the UK additional powers to truly dismantle any foothold that the IRGC has in

the UK that allows it to facilitate those assassination attempts, which we must close down. Does he agree that that is why proscription is so important?

**Bob Blackman:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The position here is that the Iranian Government are funding professional gangs to inflict attacks and violence on individuals in this country. They have neither mercy nor morals in how far they will go. A Spanish politician and vocal opponent of the Iranian regime was shot outside his home by a criminal gang employed by the IRGC. We must not allow such despicable attacks to occur on domestic soil. It is completely unacceptable that people in this country are being followed home or having to suppress their freedom of expression for fear of being targeted. I urge the Government to tackle this issue with urgency.

The Iranian authorities have been targeting BBC Persian staff, who are predominantly based in the UK, and their families since 2009 in an attempt to intimidate them into stopping their work as journalists. The intimidation escalated in 2017 and has been at an unprecedented level since September 2022. BBC Persian staff frequently receive credible death threats, threats of horrific violence, thousands of abusive comments and increased threats to their personal safety on online platforms.

With several colleagues, I was a target of the Iranian regime when we attended the annual gathering of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, with delegations from almost every major democracy, back in 2016. An Iranian diplomat tried to bomb the conference. He had the audacity to smuggle the bomb through security in diplomatic bags. Thankfully, the Belgian and French authorities apprehended the terrorist and no one was harmed. Had he succeeded, there would have been a world war.

The Iranians assumed responsibility, and they forced the Belgian authorities to hand over this despicable so-called diplomat after they kidnapped two Belgian journalists and held them as hostages. If this does not highlight to the Government that we cannot engage in dialogue with the Iranian regime, I do not know what will. The key point is that the current policy on Iran is not working. Its influence is stretching across the middle east and further. It is time to look for an alternative solution, and I urge the Government to proscribe this merciless regime with utmost priority.

I am aware that we have already sanctioned individuals, but we must go further. Until we start cracking down on the IRGC, it will continue to extort and suppress innocent people. Its military capacity is growing and, even if it does not already possess a nuclear capability—I have my doubts—its nuclear capability will also grow.

The international community must wake up and protect countries such as Israel by killing the initial piece of the chain. Without funding and support from Iran, terrorists like Hamas will not be able to carry out their dreadful attacks. Iran will feel the pinch only if there is full proscription, and I reiterate my plea for the Government to do so. Hezbollah is already proscribed, and it is the birthchild of the IRGC. The IRGC must therefore be proscribed, too.

I have heard the rumours that the Government are holding off such action in order to continue a line of dialogue, but there is no honest or trustworthy dialogue

to be had with this terrorist regime. Instead, we must show Iran that such action is not and will not be tolerated. Fifty per cent. of the IRGC's training efforts are on indoctrination, creating more ruthless, more radical and more committed generations. The dangers are only increasing, so we must act before it is too late.

It is high time that we work together to banish this unlawful regime, to protect innocent protestors and to champion free democratic rights across the world—we often take those rights for granted. To oppose the Iranian regime is no longer a political calculation but a simple humanitarian choice. We must support the Iranian people and acknowledge the legitimacy of the Iranian opposition if we are ever to see a free and democratic Iran.

I look forward to hearing from colleagues on both sides of the House. I know that several Members who wanted to take part in this debate have unfortunately had to leave, but I hope we will have excellent replies from my hon. Friend the Minister and, indeed, the shadow Minister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. Mr Paisley, during your intervention on Mr Blackman you made reference to an individual member of the secretariat to an all-party parliamentary group. It is a very serious allegation. If you have any correspondence or information in relation to that individual, could you please pass it to Mr Speaker? Inform me, and I will follow it through.

**Ian Paisley:** Thank you for that ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that you are taking it seriously. I have made arrangements for a substantial dossier of information to be left with Mr Speaker this afternoon.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am very grateful.

4.8 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on setting the scene. His passion and interest in this subject is renowned. In my short time in the House, I cannot remember a time when he did not lead or sponsor such debates. It seems that for various reasons, others who wished to speak have not been able to. It is unfortunate that the input of others has been curtailed, but that does not lessen the importance of the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. When it comes to Iran, we in this place have spoken up on many occasions; indeed, we did so yesterday in the free Iran group with Maryam Rajavi. The hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) was at that meeting, and led and chaired it for a short period of time.

This is a big issue—a massive issue. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, speaking up for those of Christian faith, those of other faiths and those of no faith. It is clear to me that that is not just about people's right to express themselves religiously and the beliefs that they have, but about standing up for human rights. The issue of freedom and democracy in Iran, especially the freedom of religion or belief, continues to escalate—depressingly so. That is why this debate is so important. Violations of freedom of religion or belief happen frequently in Iran, and continue to escalate. The hon. Member for Harrow East is right to

[Jim Shannon]

highlight the danger that Iran poses to peace in the middle east: it supplies the Houthis with aid and finance, supplies Hezbollah in Lebanon with finance and weapons, supplies Hamas in Gaza with aid, arms and finance, and supplies many terrorist groups in Syria in the same way. Of course, Iran also supplies drones to Russia to use against Ukraine, so it is an instigator of war and an opposer of peace in the middle east.

As persecution and violations of religious freedom increase in frequency and impact, I and other members of the APPG have submitted several written questions to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place, because he is always helpful in his responses. We have written to the FCDO with a large number of questions over a period of time, but unfortunately, responses have not been forthcoming. I ask the Minister to introduce some speed into the process, if possible, to secure an answer within the prescribed time: the FCDO said it would respond to our questions, and is duty bound to do so, but has not responded yet. The incidents we have highlighted and the FCDO's response to them must be brought to Parliament's attention, as well as the importance of developing better policies and sanctions against Iran for those actions and for its denial of freedoms and democracy.

The one thing that has always bothered me when it comes to Iran is its violations against women and children. They have been attacked, brutalised, and scarred by acid attacks, they have no access to jobs, education or ownership of property, they do not have the right to marriage, and many other opportunities in society are denied them. Over Christmas, several Christians were arrested in Iran, with no response yet from the FCDO—again, we are waiting for a response. Iran finally released on temporary bail two journalists who covered the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, which led to the mass protests in 2022. We asked the FCDO whether the Minister would make an assessment of the implications of those releases for its policies, but as yet, there has been no response.

Recently, the Iranian Government displaced Baha'i farmers by seizing farmland that they had been tending for several generations. The FCDO responded to my question on that topic by stating:

“At the 78th UN General Assembly, we co-sponsored the Iran Human Rights Resolution, calling for Iran to eliminate, in law and in practice, all forms of discrimination on the basis of thought, conscience, religion or belief. We are committed to promoting religious freedom and will continue to work with partners to advocate for the rights of the Baha'i community in Iran.”

Such action is commendable and appreciated. What actions have been taken to help implement that resolution?

Again, I ask these questions because I know the Minister will respond; I also look forward to the response of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), and of the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). The UK recently enacted new sanctions against Iranian individuals for human rights violations, including flogging as a punishment for exercising freedom of religion or belief. Roya Heshmati was flogged by police for not wearing a hijab in a picture posted on her social media—

I have also posed a question to the FCDO on that topic. What sanctions have been imposed on those who inflict such persecution?

Most importantly, potential violence and armed conflict with other countries may impact the rights of democracy and freedom, especially for religious minorities in Iran, so we must decide what policies are going to be enacted. Iranian-backed groups have attacked a US base in Jordan, and this brings about the increase of tensions between the west and Iran, despite Iran's denial of its involvement in the attack—it got its proxies to carry out it out. As armed conflict and violence increase, the oppression of religious minorities increases tenfold. For someone to be a Shi'a, a Baha'i, a Christian or a member of an ethnic minority in Iran decreases their life expectancy.

We must be ever mindful of the situation of religious minorities in Iran, but also of what the potential effect may be of UK actions against Iran through sanctions and changes in diplomatic relations. The hon. Member for Harrow East made a point about what we need to do and to do more of, and it is quite clear that the sanctions the Government are imposing are not effective. Because of that, we have to look at other methods, such as stronger sanctions or other ideas. Again, I would like to hear from the Minister, if possible, what thoughts he has about how we can hit Iran harder.

Iran is continuing to arbitrarily detain human rights defender and 2023 Nobel peace prize recipient Narges Mohammadi, subjecting her to torture and other ill treatment by deliberately denying or severely delaying her access to adequate healthcare to coerce her into adhering to Iran's abusive and degrading compulsory veiling laws. This places Narges Mohammadi's health at great risk, particularly as she has serious heart and lung conditions. Jail is never good for someone's health, and if they are in bad health, it is even worse.

If Iran is willing to imprison and mistreat such an individual, what is to prevent it from doing so with ordinary individuals in Iran who have religious identities or beliefs different from those of the majority? Although we may not be able to force Iran to change its laws, we can place further requirements on their doing trade with the UK. When we look at trade last year, we see that the UK exported nearly £224 million of trade to Iran, and in return Iran sold back some £190 million. What regulations and policies are companies required to adhere to for such trade to occur? Are there any human rights and religious freedom requirements in place, or inspections of companies in Iran to ensure that they adhere to human rights working conditions and do not discriminate against religious minorities in hiring or in the workplace? These are the things I would like to see.

I conclude with this: the need for Iran to raise its treatment of religious minorities and to provide citizens with democracy is becoming more and more necessary. That is why the hon. Gentleman's debate today is so important, and we hope—we look to everyone for this, but ultimately to the Minister—that the response will be one that gives us heart. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I speak today on behalf of my brothers and sisters in the faith in Iran, who do not have the opportunity to worship their God as I do. It is for that reason that I thought I had to be here to speak for them.



4.17 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate. The issue of freedom and democracy in Iran is a very important one, and I find myself commending him for his speech and agreeing with every point he made.

As we have heard, the issue is really about a lack of democracy and a lack of freedom. Elections will of course be held on 1 March to Iran's Parliament, but they can in no way can be considered free, fair or credible. It is more of a selection than an election, with the unelected, 12-strong Guardian Council having the power to approve candidates. With a track record of banning moderates and reformers from standing, it is no surprise that many candidates have already been disqualified. This body can also veto laws made by the Parliament.

My litmus test for fair, free and credible democratic elections is: can any individual freely stand for election, can anyone vote in secret for any individual who is standing and can the sovereignty of the people be exercised by their representatives? Clearly, Iran fails on all those counts. The reality is that Iran is ruled as a totalitarian theocracy: it is not a democracy. Ultimate power rests in the hands of the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the unelected institutions under his control.

Corruption persists across all levels, with powerful actors such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps operating beyond scrutiny. Media and civil society face restrictions hindering their role as independent watchdogs for ensuring transparency and accountability. The regime, as we have heard, is ruthlessly held in place by its intelligence and security force the IRGC and is supported by the wider apparatus of the state, including the judiciary, the Ministry of Intelligence, the police and others.

Iranian authorities have extensively used Iran's repressive machinery to censor discussion of these issues and persecute women, human rights defenders and anti-death penalty activists. Political activists who support democratic change have been particularly vulnerable to detention and death over many years, despite which the organised resistance, the People's Mujaheddin Organisation of Iran—or MEK—have remained determined to establish a free democratic and secular republic, and I wish them every success with that struggle.

The level of oppression and human rights abuses by the current regime in Iran is truly appalling and is getting worse. According to Freedom House, Iran has decreased its total global freedom status from a derisory 14 out of 100 in 2022 to 12 out of 100 last year. Freedom House gave Iran zero scores for most areas of fundamental rights including: the individual right to practice or express religion, faith or non-belief in public and private; free and independent media; the Government operating with openness and transparency; safeguards against corruption; the question of whether the freely elected head of Government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the Government; and fair and free elections.

The UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran expressed alarm at

“the disproportionate number of executions of members of minority communities, in particular the Baluch and Kurdish minorities”,

and I share this concern. Last year, at least 864 people were executed, the highest figure since 2017. Any use of the death penalty is unacceptable to me and I believe this substantial increase reflects the regime's inability to suppress the protests that have arisen.

Women lack equality and face discrimination in both law and practice. Examples include a woman's testimony in court being given half the weight of a man's and unequal compensation for victims' families. Women also face disparities in inheritance rights. The regime fails to protect women and children from sex trafficking while Iranians and migrant workers, especially from Afghanistan, are subject to forced labour and debt bondage.

The reality is that some 88 million Iranians are effectively living in what is a state prison, otherwise known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. But it does not have to be that way and I applaud the courage and determination of those who have stood up to the regime and protested for the rights that we take for granted, and have done so at great risk to themselves.

The ongoing uprising began in September 2022 with the arrest of a Kurdish Iranian girl in Tehran by the Tehran morality police for not veiling, after which she was brutally beaten, fell into a coma and tragically lost her life while in custody. That brutal killing of Mahsa Amini prompted widespread protests across Iran, with thousands of people demanding regime change for a secular democratic republic. The ongoing uprising has resulted in over 800 unlawful deaths, including of minors and women. Additionally, around 30,000 Iranians face cruel treatment in jails, including torture and sexual violence, highlighting the dire situation in Iran.

Ultimately, Iran's future must be decided by its own people, but given that they have virtually no avenues for reform, the people have no option but to resist, to demonstrate, to defend themselves, and to seek alternative forms of opposition. Iran has been witnessing a massive popular uprising—a call for freedom and democracy largely led by women and young people. I have heard it described by some as a revolution, and I hope it is a successful one. It has clearly rattled the Tehran regime and I believe this is partly behind the regime promoting and encouraging conflict outwith its borders as it seeks to dampen the momentum of the protests inside Iran while simultaneously rallying the regime's own forces behind the Supreme Leader's fundamentalist agenda.

As we have heard, Iran is the biggest state sponsor of terrorism. This exporting of international terrorism by Iran cannot and will not be tolerated, nor should be its support for Russia in the war with Ukraine, use of cyber-attacks, or hostage-taking diplomacy, and I condemn the involvement of Iranian officials in the killing of US servicemen. According to reports in *The Times* on Tuesday this week:

“Tehran has already been accused by MI5 and police of more than a dozen assassination and kidnap plots in Britain against dissidents and media organisations in the past two years. Officials have previously expressed fears that, emboldened by the situation in the Middle East, Iran could ramp up its activity in the UK and present a wider terror threat.”

Although I welcome the recent announcement of additional sanctions on senior Iranian officials, I wonder why we are not taking an even stronger approach. At a minimum, we should urgently proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation. I have lost count of the number of times that I and others have called for that action.

[Martyn Day]

Proscription would be a tangible step in the UK in the furtherance of freedom and democracy in Iran. We should also support calls for the UN to dispatch international observers to visit Iran's prisons and to meet those detained by the regime. We should all support the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. I pay tribute to the work of the resistance units that emerged in late 2017 and have helped inspire Iranians to defy the prevailing tyranny.

In conclusion, the SNP stands in full solidarity with Iranians journalists, women, men and young people calling for democratic change. The bravery of Iranian citizens standing up against brutality and dictatorship is beyond inspiring. I wish them every success in seeking a new democratic and secular republic in Iran. It will be better for them and the world when they succeed.

4.25 pm

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time for it.

This debate is important and timely. Although we have had only a few contributions, they have been significant and important. The hon. Member mentioned the Ashraf 3 camp in Albania, and although it is not entirely clear what has happened there it is important to note his point that the Inter-Parliamentary Union, for which I am on the executive of the British group, will be sending a delegation to Albania. I will make a point of making sure, as best I can, that the delegation raises the matter in its visit.

At the start of my contribution, I make the point that the authoritarian and theocratic regime in Iran presents and presides over a reprehensible repressive state. As has been said, there is little real democracy in today's Iran. At the beginning of March, there will be elections to the Iranian Parliament and the Assembly of Experts. As has been the case in the past, the Council of Guardians will prevent candidates standing whom the Supreme Leader does not approve. We expect that those who are blocked will be moderate and reforming candidates.

The elections will rightly attract a great deal of attention, not least because they are the first to be held since the widespread protests in Iran following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. As I am sure many Members are aware, her death in September 2022 occurred in police custody after she had been arrested for not complying with strict Islamic dress code. Following her death, there were widespread protests across Iran for a number of months. They were cruelly repressed by the regime, but it is important to remember and to pay tribute to the many thousands of women and girls who were brave enough to take part. Indeed, I was proud to speak in an event in this House organised by the Azadi Network. Speakers were from all parties in this House, and they demonstrated a real solidarity, which all parties have clearly expressed, and I stress that that is so important. It was the House of Commons saying to the Iranian people, "We are with you."

The protests were subject to appalling brutality in Iran, meted out by the Iranian authorities. It is estimated that at least 20,000 people were detained, including many children. It is estimated, too, that more than 500 people

were killed, and many more were seriously injured. The violence did not stop with the end of the demonstrations: there have been many allegations of torture and appalling treatment of detainees, including reports of sexual and gender-based violence against women, men and children.

As has been said, Amnesty International has reported that Iranian security forces are guilty of using the most terrible sexual violence against people who are merely peaceful protesters. It is important to note the comments made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke eloquently about the lack of human rights and pointed out the lack of religious freedom in today's Iran.

If the Iranian regime is repressive at home, it is guilty of aggression abroad. In fact, it is among the world's foremost state sponsors of terrorism. Iran, through its so-called proxies, is guilty of helping to initiate violence across much of the middle east. Iran has supplied huge support to Hamas in Gaza. It has supplied and supported Hezbollah in Lebanon and is still doing so. In Iraq—including in Kurdistan—and in Syria, Iranian sponsored militants have attacked US forces. On Sunday, an Iran-backed group was responsible for a drone attack on a US military base in Jordan that resulted in the death of three American soldiers and the injury of many other people.

As we all know, the Houthis, who again are closely linked to the Iranian regime, have been conducting missile and drone attacks on international shipping in the Red sea. Of course, the US and the UK have been undertaking surgical strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, and Labour is on record as supporting that proportionate action. Further afield, the Iranian regime has developed close links with Russia and has supplied a large number of drones that are being used in Ukraine, so there can be absolutely no doubt about the Iranian regime's malign influence across the middle east and the world.

On Tuesday, I raised Iran's destructive activities across the globe with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), at FCDO questions. He indicated that the Foreign Secretary was in the region that day and holding meetings on the very issue. He also said that the Government were

"working extensively with Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Israel, Saudi Arabia and America."—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 710.]

I would be appreciative if the Minister indicated in his reply how those meetings went and how the ongoing discussions will proceed on this important issue.

We are aware that Iran is active in this country. As a number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Harrow East, said, the head of MI5 has previously referred to potential threats by Iran to kidnap or kill British or UK-based people. In 2015, the police discovered an Iranian-linked bomb factory in London. Since the beginning of 2022, Iranians have been responsible for at least 15 potential threats against British or UK-based individuals. That was recognised by a number of hon. Members in the Chamber.

Earlier this week, *The Times* reported that a number of members of the Iranian diaspora who have spoken out against the Iranian regime have been warned by counter-terrorism police that they face an increased

threat. It is also important to note that the Iranian authorities have been systematically targeting BBC Persian staff, intimidating their families in Iran as well as intimidating staff in this country. Since the protests in Iran in 2022, the BBC security team has reported that the risks to BBC Persian staff have “increased”. Because of those very real threats, I believe that the sanctions introduced, and the further ones announced, should be welcomed. I hope, however, that the Government will closely examine other ways in which pressure can be brought to bear on the appalling Iranian regime.

One additional measure ought to be the total proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I understand that there is ongoing debate in Government about this, but if they do not bring forward appropriate measures that would lead to a total ban of the IRGC in this country, Labour will do so if it forms a Government. If the Government do that now, Labour will support it. I hope that the Government will respond in a truly positive way.

This has been an important debate with excellent contributions. This issue should unite all of us who believe strongly in democracy, freedom and human rights in this country and throughout the world.

4.35 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):**

I am grateful to hon. Members of the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), whom I have known many years, for securing this debate. It is my honour to respond on behalf of the Government. I am grateful for the contributions of hon. Members and will respond to the points that have been raised. The shared concerns that have been echoed across the Dispatch Boxes and from all those who have participated speak volumes about the issues that have been raised.

Unwavering support for democracy and freedom worldwide is central to Britain’s diplomatic engagement. That is why Iran’s continued violation of its people’s rights, in conjunction with its widening pattern of malign activity around the world, remains a high priority for the Government. We will not tolerate Iran’s illegal threats against UK-based journalists, its escalating nuclear programme, its desperate coalition with Russia or its reckless use of proxies in the region.

As hon. Members will be aware, the shocking death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 sparked a popular grassroots call for change. The aptly named “Woman, Life, Freedom” protest challenged decades of gender-based discrimination and violence. Women and girls proudly defied discriminatory and degrading mandatory hijab law, at great risk to their safety and security. The Iranian authorities responded to the protests with intimidation and violence, by killing at least 500 people and detaining 19,000. They showed complete disregard for the rights of their own people. There have been fewer protests since then, but we should not take that as evidence of a diminishing appetite for change among the Iranian people. Suppressing dissent may momentarily silence the people, but it will never kill their desire for a more just future.

The UK has been consistent and clear in its condemnation of Iran’s undemocratic and disproportionate response to the protest movement. Iran has been designated an FCDO human rights priority country. Since October 2022,

we have sanctioned 94 individuals and entities for human rights violations, including decision makers responsible for drafting and implementing Iran’s mandatory hijab legislation, and political and security officials involved in the crackdown.

At the heart of the popular uprising were the rights of women and girls, which is a key element of our foreign policy. The UK Government stand in solidarity with them as they continue to show immense bravery in the face of brutal repression. The enforcement of mandatory hijab laws has become a symbol of gender inequality in Iranian society. But across the board, women and girls do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men. They face unequal rights—as highlighted so well by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth), who is no longer in her place—in marriage, divorce, child custody, and are even prevented from attending sporting events. Tens of thousands of girls continue to be married under the age of 15, and the age of criminal responsibility is just eight years and nine months. Female labour force participation remains one of the lowest globally at 17%, and 41% of women between the ages of 15 to 29 are unemployed. Women’s representation in the Iranian Parliament sits at 5.6%.

The UK is taking several bilateral and multilateral measures to support women and girls in Iran. We consistently raise women and girls’ human rights issues directly with the Iranian Government, condemning abuses and pushing for change. Last year, the Foreign Secretary hosted a roundtable with Iranian women’s rights activists and joined them in calling for an end to impunity and violence. We continue to commend the brave work of Iranian human rights defenders such as Narges Mohammadi, whose resolute commitment to change does not waver in the face of threats.

We are also working with international partners to mount pressure. At the 78th UN General Assembly, we co-sponsored the Iran human rights resolution condemning the targeted repression of women and girls. We call for the release of women human rights defenders imprisoned for exercising their fundamental freedoms. We also co-sponsored the fact finding mission with a mandate to report on the situation for women and girls in Iran, and we look forward to hearing its findings at the upcoming Human Rights Council session.

At the very centre of freedom and human rights is the right to life. The UK opposes the death penalty as a matter of principle in all circumstances across the world. Iran’s surging use of executions is a matter of grave concern for the United Kingdom. Last year, Iran executed more than 700 people, including protesters, as has been highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East and for Southend West. Far too often the death penalty is imposed absent of any fair trial or due process, and ethnic minorities such as Kurds and Baluchis make up a disproportionate number of executions, as rightly highlighted by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Marty Day). The Government are using all levers at our disposal, including working with the international community, to push back against this egregious crime. At the Human Rights Council last year, we signed a joint statement alongside partners calling for Iran to establish an immediate moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty altogether. At the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, we urged Iran to commute the sentences for



[David Rutley]

child offenders on death row. We will continue to monitor Iran's imposition of the death penalty on protesters, and we have made clear to Iran, both in public and in private, our opposition to its application of the death penalty.

I turn now to freedom of religion or belief, an important issue that is close to the heart of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and indeed my own, and the hearts of others involved in this debate. It is very clear that religious minorities face continued abuses of their most basic rights. Religious minorities, including Baha'i, Christian and Sunni Muslim communities, suffer discrimination in law and practice, including in access to education, employment, political office and—the most basic of all—places of worship.

In the international sphere, we have called on Iran to allow every individual the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in accordance with its obligation under the international covenant on civil and political rights. In October, we called on Iran to release imprisoned elderly and medically vulnerable Baha'is and reasserted our commitment to working with partners to promote the rights of Baha'i communities in Iran. I will follow up on the responses from the FCDO that the hon. Member for Strangford was talking about. We can discuss that after this debate if he would like to do so.

We continue to leverage our relationships with human rights organisations and religious communities in the UK to highlight and condemn abuses. The UK's dedicated and incredibly hard-working special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) works on the world stage to push back against abuses of basic freedoms at all opportunities, including in Iran. We had an excellent debate on this subject in Westminster Hall last week.

A free press is a central tenet of every healthy democracy, and Iran falls short in this area, too. As has been highlighted, two women journalists who reported on Mahsa Amini's death and the subsequent protests were given lengthy prison sentences simply for doing their job, while the Iranian authorities continue to use surveillance to censor and coerce the population. As a member of the Media Freedom Coalition, the UK has called on Iran to respect its commitments under international law. That also means co-operating with all UN bodies and mandate holders, including the UN special rapporteur, who is responsible for reporting on human rights abuses in Iran.

During the debate, we heard of concerns about BBC Persian correspondents. We remain committed to ensuring that journalists at home and abroad can do their jobs without fear of retribution. The Government's law enforcement and security services continue to work with international partners to identify, deter and respond to threats to UK journalists, including those working for BBC Persian. Last week we sanctioned members of the IRGC for an assassination plot against UK-based Persian language journalists at Iran International.

Our priority is the safety and security of the UK and the people who live here. Since January 2022 the UK has identified at least 15 threats—highlighted by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and, indeed, the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Caerphilly

(Wayne David)—to the lives of UK-based individuals, including journalists. That is clearly unacceptable. The UK Government, law enforcement agencies and our international partners are working together to ensure that Persian language media can operate without editorial interference and threats from Iran.

**Holly Lynch:** I am glad that the Minister has reflected on that point. Let me say again that to proscribe the IRGC would not be symbolic; it would be done to reflect the very serious threat that it poses to, in particular, the journalists who are here in the UK, and to equip our security services and police forces with additional powers to really go after those individuals. It seems that we are sending the Charity Commission to investigate institutions or bases that are believed to have links with the IRGC. I view the Charity Commission with the utmost respect, but we lack those other powers that we would enable us to send in those forces that would recognise the threat that the IRGC poses and drive it out of this country.

**David Rutley:** I know that the hon. Member feels passionately about this issue, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East feel strongly about it as well. That is exactly the point that I was going to come to.

Several Members have raised the issue of the IRGC, which we have already sanctioned in its entirety. The hon. Member for Halifax will be familiar with what I am about to say, but I will put it on the record. We have real concerns about the intent and activities of the IRGC. The separate list of terrorist organisation proscriptions is kept under review, but we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is under consideration. We are actively disrupting Iranian malign activity by means of a range of tools. This is about using effective measures to curb Iran's destabilising activity, which has been highlighted by the hon. Member for Halifax and others throughout the debate. The UK maintains sanctions on more than 400 Iranian individuals, entities and aligned groups for roles in weapons proliferation, regional conflicts, human rights violations and terrorism, and more than 47 IRGC officials have been sanctioned since October 2022.

Comments have been made about Iran's interference in other countries, notably, today, in Albania, which is typical of its nefarious tactics. We support partners in the face of pressure from Iran, and, following the visit of the hon. Member for Caerphilly and that of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we will be interested to find out whether there is any other intelligence that we need to learn from; if so, we will gather it in. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), who is no longer in the Chamber, raised a sad case involving the secretariat of an all-party parliamentary group. We would be very interested to see the dossier that the APPG has given to Mr Speaker if that is appropriate, and we will do anything we can to follow that up.

Points have also been made about Iran's nuclear programme, which has never been more advanced than it is today and which threatens international peace and security. Iran's behaviour since those negotiations has made progress much more difficult, and we are working with our international partners to co-ordinate our response. We are clear about the fact that Iran poses an unacceptable threat to Israel, for instance through its long-term support

for Hamas. In December, designations were made under our new Iran sanctions regime, targeting the head of the IRGC Quds Force, IRGC individuals, and an entity linked to Iran's relationship with proxy groups such as Hamas.

Other points were made about what we are doing in the light of the action in which Iran has been engaging through actors such as the Houthis. The targeted strikes, which have been supported by Members on both sides of the House, have been, as we have said today, limited, necessary and proportionate. Military action is, of course, always a last resort. We continue our diplomatic efforts, talking to countries in the region such as Oman and Turkey—the hon. Member for Caerphilly was interested in these points—but we provided warning after warning, including at the UN Security Council and directly to the Iran Foreign Minister, yet the Houthis have continued the attacks. If necessary, the UK will not hesitate to respond again in self-defence; we cannot stand by and allow these attacks to go unchallenged.

In conclusion, it is clear that Iranian authorities are imposing policies at odds with the values of freedom and democracy. As has been said across the Chamber, their upcoming elections are clearly not going to be free and fair, and will not address the concerns set out in this debate. For as long as that remains the case, we will continue to work across government, and with the international community, to hold Iran to account for its unacceptable behaviour. The repression of women and girls, the uninhibited use of the death penalty and violent crackdowns on dissenting voices within Iran cannot go unchallenged, but that is also true of Iran's behaviour in the region and beyond. We will continue to work with international partners to make it clear to Iran that we will not stand for destabilising activity that threatens our values and our security, and indeed the security of the region. Like the Iranian people, we want to see an Iran that respects the rights and freedoms of its citizens, and respects international law and norms. That is why we are urging its leaders to listen to the Iranian people, who are calling for a better future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am grateful for the Minister's comments about the dossier that is being passed to the Speaker in relation to the all-party parliamentary group. For the remaining two minutes, I call Bob Blackman.

4.51 pm

**Bob Blackman:** With the leave of the House, let me thank hon. Members from across the House for sending a joint message to the people currently administering Iran that we want to see a free and democratic Iran, with women, in particular, having the rights that they would enjoy in this country and in other countries around the world.

We see that the United States is likely to take action in the next few days against Iranian targets as a result of the recent murder of the three soldiers, and the Minister set out a series of measures that this country is taking to combat Iran and, in particular, the IRGC. Clearly, however, this is not working; the number of executions continues to increase and the nefarious activities of the IRGC continue. I find it difficult to understand why we do not take the ultimate step and proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. I, for one, will continue to lobby for that to be done, as will Members from across the House. I understand that the Minister cannot answer that today, but the Government need to consider the matter and come forward. We have proscribed Hamas, Hezbollah and, recently, Hizb ut-Tahrir, so surely the head of the snake must be proscribed. We can then look forward to a free and democratic Iran, and, as we always say, next year in a free and democratic Tehran.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House condemns unreservedly the actions of the government of Iran and the violent conduct of the police in suppressing protests in that country; is deeply concerned over Tehran's growing use of terrorism, espionage, cyber attacks and hostage-taking diplomacy to restrict and eliminate the Iranian democratic opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), targeting in particular members of the organised opposition, PMOI (MEK), in Ashraf 3, Albania and NCRI gatherings since 2018; notes that the resistance is struggling for the establishment of a secular democratic republic; calls on European governments, especially the government of Albania, to counter Tehran's illegal activities and uphold the rights of members of the Iranian opposition PMOI (MEK) at Ashraf-3 in accordance with the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, the European Convention of Human Rights and international law; is further concerned by reports of threats made to Iranian dissidents in the UK; urges the Government to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations; and further calls upon the Government to work with international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay and Iran is held to account for its illegal activities at home and abroad.

## Blackpool: Regeneration

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

4.53 pm

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to open this Adjournment debate on the regeneration of Bond Street and Waterloo Road in Blackpool, two areas of my constituency in particular need of capital investment, for reasons that will become clear.

Before I go on to speak particularly about those two areas, it would be remiss of me not to elaborate more on the significant level of capital and revenue regeneration moneys that have already flown into my constituency, thanks to the efforts of this Government: £400 million is the total of additional investment that has come into Blackpool since I was elected in 2019—it is a staggering figure. For all the criticisms thrown at this Government by the Opposition, the commitment of Ministers and different Prime Ministers from this Government to levelling up, and to Blackpool in particular, cannot be understated. That commitment is already bearing fruit in the substantial progress we are making, not just in terms of levelling up the different parts of Blackpool, but in getting people the well-paid jobs they need so badly and in welcoming investment into my constituency.

I would be here until midnight if I went through all the individual funding pots we have been allocated, but I will not test your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will give the House just a flavour of the different funding that has come to Blackpool, courtesy of this Government's faith in the work we are doing locally. We have secured £40 million for the court relocation, which has allowed a £300 million private investment project—one of the largest private investments in the whole of the north-west—on the old Blackpool central train station site. It will create 1,000 jobs and lead to tens of millions of pounds of additional consumer spending coming to Blackpool.

We have been granted £40 million for a brand new Multiversity, providing the next generation with the skills they need to get on in life. Some £39.5 million, provided by one of the largest town deals in the country, has been spent upgrading the Blackpool illuminations, creating thousands of jobs at the enterprise zone and a new sports hub at Revoe. On top of that, we have £15 million in levelling-up funding for transport improvements in the town centre, a further £8 million in levelling-up funding to redo the former post office building on Abingdon Street, and a plethora of extra funding for health, education, crime, cultural and sporting projects, all of which will lay the groundwork for investment in regeneration in Blackpool.

If we are getting so much money into Blackpool, what is the purpose of this Adjournment debate? It would be remiss of me not to point out that Blackpool is the most deprived local authority area in England, and it has often been said that my constituency is the most in need of levelling up. The communities that are the subject of this debate are in the top 0.1% most deprived communities in the entire country and in the second most deprived ward of some 8,500 wards in England. That ward and the communities of Revoe, Central Drive, Bond Street and Waterloo Road have significant challenges with poor health; low life expectancy,

on a par with sub-Saharan Africa; a drug-related death total that is the highest in the western world; and skills and education deficiencies that are sadly the highest in western Europe. The unemployment total is four times the national average.

In addition to those problems, the housing stock in these communities is among the worst in the country. It is estimated that a third of the properties in inner Blackpool are deemed to be “non-decent” by current standards. Poor housing is associated with a wide range of health conditions, and our local NHS practitioners estimate that the cost to the council and other local stakeholders is an additional £11 million because of the health conditions with which people present as a consequence of their appalling housing conditions. On top of that, some 10% of our working-age population is out of the workforce due to ill health and the vast majority of those people will live in substandard housing.

We talk about levelling up, and it is great for Ministers to cut the ribbon on a shiny new high street or a brilliant new project—we want that as part of the housing-led regeneration project I am talking about—but levelling up is ultimately about changing people's lives. It is about empowering them to have the educational opportunities, the health outcomes and the employment opportunities that people want to see. In the case of Blackpool, that comes down to housing, because far too many local people live in housing that was not fit for human beings 100 years ago, and certainly is not nowadays. It is a stain on this country that, in Blackpool, we have housing in the condition that it is currently in, so housing-led regeneration is desperately needed.

Despite some of the challenges that I have outlined, the areas of Waterloo Road, Bond Street and Revoe are proud communities where people live with hopes and aspirations not just for themselves, but for their children as well. There are many successful new businesses operating—

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Scott Benton:** Despite the challenges in these communities, the high streets are embedded with many new and successful businesses, such as Sarah at the Pitstop Café, the Bull pub, Rick at the Tube Station and Chris at Royal Oak Furnishings to mention just a few. But they need support if their high street is to thrive and if they are to make a successful going concern of those businesses.

As Conservatives, we believe in fiscal prudence and discipline and appreciate that the Government cannot throw money at every problem and just make it okay. We cannot legislate to increase people's living standards. Ultimately, it comes down to private investment, businesses being creative, and people working hard and generating wealth in the community. As Conservatives, we have to recognise that the market can on occasion fail, and there can be such a deterioration of conditions in particular localities that Government intervention for the longer term is needed. I would strongly argue that this is a unique case where the conditions in this community are such that it cannot continue without Government investment. In short, these communities have been thriving



in the past and they can do so again, but only with Government help. Not only is this community a particularly important case and in need of regeneration and investment, but I would argue that Bond Street and the Waterloo area have been missed out time and again when we talk about capital investment.

When Blackpool Council has asked my opinion on the levelling-up process, I have stated consistently for the past four years that this area should be an absolute priority for local and national Government investment. Yet time and again, levelling-up bids have come forward to this Government without this community being included. That is not to say that I am not thankful for the funding that I have previously outlined—of course I am. Those schemes are important and will help to create jobs, but people in these communities feel that they have been thrown on the scrapheap, and that local and national Government do not care about what goes on in their area and do not want to see it improved.

I know that that is not the case from this Government's point of view, and I know that the Government are working with Blackpool Council, which, after years of ignoring this community, has finally woken up over the past 12 or 18 months and promised to work with the Government to try to come up with a bespoke package for this area, along the lines of housing-led regeneration and improvements to the high streets. I am so pleased that the Government are working with Blackpool Council not just on this particular project, but on many of the other initiatives and programmes that I have already outlined.

I would like to think that I have articulated why this community is a special case for regeneration. Civic pride is so important in public life, and I am afraid that many people in this community have lost hope. When people lose hope, it is very difficult for them to get it back. For four years, I have been telling people that regeneration moneys will come. It is important that other areas of Blackpool get their fair share, too, but I have said that regeneration moneys will come. People are now expecting the Government and Blackpool Council to deliver on those promises.

I know the Minister understands the importance of people living in good housing. The fact is that levelling up ultimately comes down to improving somebody's own ability to use their natural skills and flair to get on in life. It is so important that the fundamental issue in these communities—poor housing—is addressed through the partnership with Blackpool Council. I am led to believe that thanks to the hard work of not just this Minister but some of his predecessors, the business case for that project has been transferred to the Treasury for sign-off. The purpose of this debate is to request that the Minister and the Secretary of State do everything that they can to continue their correspondence with the Treasury and try to get the project over the line.

The people of Bond Street, Waterloo Road, Revoe and Central Drive are looking at the outcome of this debate with interest. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get this community the funding that it so badly needs. This Conservative Government have been fantastic in standing by the people of Blackpool for the next four years. I have every confidence that they will be able to get the project over the line and give the area a new lease of life, and some hope at long last.

5.5 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare):** I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) for his speech, and for raising this important issue. I will start where he ended, by referring specifically to his words on Waterloo Road and Bond Street. I assure him and his community that Homes England and the council are working closely to find the best possible opportunities in the town for regeneration. I think he will agree—I hope he will—that the local council, with all its local knowledge and understanding, is clearly the best placed organisation to speak to specific plans, but I reassure him of our ambition to level up and secure the lasting change for Blackpool for which he has advocated since he came to this place in 2019.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's patience, and that of the community that he represents, in awaiting further news. Let me reassure him that I fully recognise how important the project is for Blackpool. It continues to be a priority for my Department. I will of course discuss the issue with the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), and collectively we will do all that we can with the Treasury to press the case that the hon. Gentleman has made today. I wanted to get those specifics on the record for him.

Let me now say a few words about Blackpool. The hon. Member for Blackpool South does not need me to tell him that it is a town of incredible strength and resilience, allied with enormous potential. Blackpool's tourism economy alone is worth more than £1.4 billion, supporting in excess of 20,000 jobs. Replying to this debate has reminded me, with a tinge of emotion, of a very enjoyable boyhood holiday that I had with my grandmother in Blackpool. My memory is a little hazier, for reasons that I really cannot recall, with regard to attendance at successive Tory party conferences. It must be something to do with the air that makes the mind a little fuzzy. Of course, the famous scene of Rita Fairclough and Alan Bradley, beaming Blackpool into the sitting rooms of millions of our fellow citizens, left an indelible impression on so many minds—hopefully encouraging people to use the trams, but to be a little careful when alighting from them.

The hon. Gentleman's speech and work has rightly reminded us that Blackpool should not be seen just as a holiday and tourist destination, as delightful as that is, and as important as it is for the economy. It is home to many businesses and thousands of people, with all their linked housing, education, and health service needs, together with their aspirations for hope, job security, economic growth and a better life for their children. It has been restrained for too long by some deeply rooted societal challenges in health, in housing and in skills and diverse investment, and the hon. Gentleman set out some of those in his remarks. He made the case, as he always does, for the pressing need for regeneration, and the dramatic statistics he used to underpin his argument only served to illuminate that point still further.

That is why the Government have been working in partnership with local leaders to level up the town. I was grateful to the hon. Gentleman for referencing the investment of around £400 million in the town since the Government took office. That is a phenomenal level of investment, and I hope it speaks to the faith and confidence

[Simon Hoare]

that this Government have in the whole of the north of England and in Blackpool in particular. We support their vision to make Blackpool better, a leading UK tourism destination and a brilliant place in which to live and work, with improved jobs, housing and skills.

We are committed to working in partnership with Blackpool Council to boost opportunity and restore local pride through levelling up housing and living standards and restoring pride of place. Blackpool has received more than £100 million of levelling-up funding alone since 2019, as well as investment helping to unlock a major £300 million development, as the hon. Gentleman said. That included £40 million from round 2 of the levelling-up fund to create that important state-of-the-art learning centre for more than 1,000 people, the Multiversity, which will replace the ageing Blackpool and the Fylde College facilities with new state-of-the-art facilities in the town centre. Another £15 million from round 3 of the fund will improve traffic flow, access to public transport and infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians—all key arteries and routes to see people moving across their town, visitors moving freely, jobs being created and business being done.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the town is benefiting from just shy of £40 million of investment from the towns fund, which is being spent on a host of job creation and tourism-boosting projects. He will know that that includes rejuvenating the famous Blackpool illuminations—and they are indeed famous—to attract more visitors to the town in the usually quiet autumn and winter period. It is the unique selling point of Blackpool to have that marvellous attraction in those darker months of the year. I know the hon. Gentleman's love of football, so of course I must mention the creation of a new sports village, which combines leisure, education, and residential facilities, while helping to address health deprivation and wellbeing and providing much stronger links with Blackpool Football Club.

The town is also benefiting from the wider Lancashire devolution deal, announced in the autumn statement by the Chancellor, through which £20 million will be provided to Lancashire Combined County Authority, along with a further £1 million to support the authority in the early stages of the deal. The adult education budget will also be devolved as part of the deal—this Government once again trusting local decision makers and local community leaders to help shape the place that they want their people to live in.

As the hon. Gentleman has referenced, housing is a key focus of the partnership working between Government and Blackpool. I thank him again for setting out the

opportunities for regeneration in Waterloo Road and Bond Street, which are indeed interesting and exciting. If we are to truly achieve our shared levelling-up ambitions for Blackpool, we must ensure that there is as wide a range as possible of quality homes across different tenures. To unlock Blackpool's immense economic potential, we want to see more homes, safer homes, better homes, in well-designed neighbourhoods that will help to attract and retain skilled residents in the town.

Part of our approach is through legislation—the Renters (Reform) Bill, which will apply decent homes standards to the private rented sector for the first time. This will ensure that tenants benefit from homes that are safe and decent, and will support the Government's ambition to reduce the number of non-decent rented homes by 50% by 2030—and one hopes that we will exceed that target. We know, of course, that the majority of landlords already provide decent housing and a good service for their tenants, but there is always room for improvement. The decent homes standard will help landlords by simplifying and clarifying requirements, and establishing a level playing field, backed up by consistent enforcement.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are running a pilot for the decent homes standard in Blackpool to improve standards in areas that are in greatest need, as part of our mission to halve the number of non-decent homes by 2030. The Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar, was in Blackpool in January, when he had the opportunity to see some of the fantastic work being undertaken locally, with Government support, to improve the standards of homes in the town.

Physical regeneration of the built environment is vital if we are to truly level up Blackpool. As the hon. Member for Blackpool South is aware, my Department, alongside Homes England, has been working closely with the council to develop transformational plans to improve the quality of housing. I hope that we will be able to say more about that in due course.

The hon. Gentleman has advocated so strongly for his town, as he always does. He need not convince me—he preaches to the choir, if you like—that Blackpool has incredible potential. I am proud of the work that this Government are doing, in partnership with local leaders and with him, to level up the town. I thank him once again for raising this important issue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.15 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Thursday 1 February 2024*

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Living Standards

1.30 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP):  
I beg to move,

That his House has considered living standards.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, to discuss what I think is the defining issue for all our constituents—not that you would know it from the acres of empty green seats surrounding us this afternoon—not just in the upcoming election campaign, but for many years and, arguably, for generations to come. There is no question but that living standards in this country are well below where they should be, and well below those of our western European counterparts on almost every single measure. Regardless of whether we are looking at wages, disposable income or things like business investment and investment in public services, we lag far behind what any Government in London or in the devolved capitals should be happy or comfortable with.

Broadly speaking, three strands of insecurity—economic, social and global—are eating away at living standards in the UK and causing our constituents anxiety. The economic insecurities include inflation, energy prices, food prices, and the disaster of the former Prime Minister’s so-called mini-Budget and what that did to household incomes, mortgage rates and rent. The social insecurities include the inability of many public services to properly recover from the covid pandemic—not just to get back to a pre-pandemic level, but to make the necessary modernisations that public services have to go through.

It is true that much of this is driven by global factors, such as the war in Ukraine and what that has done to food prices and energy prices, the more recent violence in the middle east between Gaza and Israel, and the attacks on international shipping carried out by terrorists in the Red sea, all of which is adding to the problems in this country and, indeed, countries around the world with regard to living standards. Then we have climate change, which is the biggest and most defining issue on which Governments, civil society, other institutions and the private sector must collaborate if we are to not just hit our targets, but deal with the effects of climate change here in the UK and around the world. Of course, as a result of violence and climate change, we also have the mass movement of people and irregular movements of people—a challenge that we need to deal with. I am grateful that the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) is here this afternoon, because I want to touch on the issue of immigration as well.

Those three factors—economic, social and global—eating away at our living standards are only made worse by the impact of the decision taken in this country in 2016 to leave the European Union. True, much of what I have

mentioned is a problem that can be found in the capital of any country around the world, and certainly in any western European country, but there can be no question—certainly not over the past few days—but that we have added to those problems with Brexit. This is not a debate on Brexit, and I have no desire to relitigate that here today, but we must take our heads out of the sand and not pretend that it has not made matters worse for our constituents.

The other issue I want to discuss is how Governments intend to tackle the drop in living standards. We have a Government who are, essentially, dying on their feet. Although I am not looking to get overly capital-P political, I will say that the country at large will certainly welcome some fresh ideas—and my goodness, they cannot come fast enough. However, the idea that the answer to those challenges lies in tax cuts and running the public realm further into the ground is not backed up by the public. We can see from public polling, even if we go back to a few months ago and the results of the British social attitudes survey, that for the first time people, even Conservative voters, do not want tax cuts. They understand the need for taxes to be where they are or to go up so that we can invest properly in a battered public realm. Yes, it has been battered by many global factors and the covid pandemic, but it has also been battered by more than a decade of decay.

There is also a stark need to reimagine the public realm and what public services are actually for. Rightly or wrongly, post-pandemic people have new and heightened expectations of the state, and any politician worth their salt would seek to answer that new reality with a sense of ambition, not least because the challenges we are all presented with absolutely demand it. As this pandemic Parliament enters its dying weeks and days, we no longer even talk about the post-pandemic recovery like we did back in 2020-21, when the phrase “build back better” was absolutely everywhere—I would love to see when those three words were last used on the record in this House. The idea of not just getting things back to where they were, but building back better is redolent with opportunity when we consider the existing new technologies that are at our fingertips, which in the coming years will become more readily available to modernise and revolutionise the public realm and public services. They will touch everything: planning, health inequalities, income—all those things. They have a real ability to turn things around from where they are.

Look at some of the very real issues that people face now—for example, financial strain. Four in 10 people are struggling with energy bills and rent. Some 5.5 million UK adults are behind on energy bills, and four in 10 adults are spending more than usual when food shopping. Just think about how corrosive that is to the average family, household and citizen and their sense of ambition for themselves, their community and their country.

Let us look at rent in particular—I have a constituency with a lot of renters. UK annual private rent price growth remained at 6.2% in the 12 months to December 2023. A third of adults find it difficult to afford their rent, and that is before we even start to discuss the issue of mortgage payments. Homeowners face a £19 billion increase in mortgage costs as fixed rate deals expire.

Income inequality in this country is greater than in any other large European country. Some 9 million young workers have never experienced sustained wage rises.



[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

Millennials are half as likely to own a home, and almost a third of young people in the UK are not undertaking any education by the age of 18. All those things are an attack on our society. How on earth do we get young people to buy into the idea of a fair marketplace and fair capitalism if they cannot accrue any capital, because at the moment everything is stacked against them?

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): My hon. Friend has hit on a crucial issue. All our citizens need us to focus on the cost of living crisis and he is outlining the problems very well. We see them in Stirling as well. Start Up Stirling has had a fall in donations of food for its food drives. A survey recently published by Citizens Advice Stirling found a 900% increase in people getting in touch for problems with energy bill arrears, and 64% of people have reported skipping meals in order to pay their energy costs. I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend wants to see action in the UK Budget in March. All of us need to put the badges to one side and focus on the cost of living crisis. It is what our citizens want to see happening, and the UK Government are in the best position to really assist households with their energy costs.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The problems that he mentions will manifest themselves in the constituency of every hon. Member present, without question. The idea that come the Budget, the answer is more tax cuts or maintaining an uncapped right for bankers to receive exorbitant bonuses is completely for the birds.

It cannot be overstated how deeply young people feel that things are stacked against them. Then they read in the papers that there is a new debate to be had on conscription. Get real! Give young people a stake in the society that they might well be called on to defend one day. There is an entire debate to be had about how we get the armed forces up to the scratch, size and modernised style that we need, but the answer does not lie in telling young people that they have to be conscripted in order to defend King and country. Good luck to any politician who wants to go out and sell that message at a time like this.

Among all those domestic challenges, which are being compounded by global factors, there are opportunities to tackle things such as health inequalities, and to modernise public services with real investment in the public realm and, of course, reform and new technologies. However, another area we need to think about is population growth. The way we debate immigration leaves me staggered. The bar gets lower with every passing day in this House. The truth is that if we want to keep a competitive advantage, whether in university research or key sectors and industries, we need people to come to this country. With the mass movement of people only growing around the world, we will have to rethink how we manage people coming into or leaving the country, and the reasons for that. I have spoken before in the House about how young researchers at universities up and down the UK—Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales—are staggered at the fact that everything costs a fortune, they cannot get appointments to see a doctor and trains do not run properly on time. So who

is surprised when they tell us that they want to move to another European city that has just as good opportunities for their research and a much higher, easier and better standard of living?

I am conscious that I say all these things representing a party that is also in Government, but we are going to have to seek to create a new consensus to drive up living standards, and an element of that has to be a much more realistic discussion about immigration and population growth. It needs to move away from this dark, ugly debate that we see all often, which starts with a desire to drive the numbers down. Those arguing for reduced immigration are arguing to make the country poorer. There is no question about that.

This is what I think a policy platform that could generate some kind of new consensus looks like. We can see the lessons from institutions such as the European Union and in legislation in the US in the style of the Inflation Reduction Act. I can understand entirely why the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the shadow Chancellor, wanted to move on to that ground, albeit that Labour's £28 billion green pledge is getting more and more diluted to the point of being hopeless and useless. Nevertheless, such a pledge is exactly where we need to go by using industrial policy, being realistic about immigration policy, and using those policies to tackle the challenges of our time, including climate change and technological development, in order to drive up living standards, while also pursuing our own economic interests and national security interests.

What did we get here in response? Such low ambition. I forget the actual name for it, but the then Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), was announcing his "green new deal day", or whatever he was going to call it. Such was the fear of the hardliners in the Conservative party that the Government had to take the word "green" out of it. That is not serious Government.

We might be able to create a new consensus that seeks to create prosperity and a sense of economic fairness, and that plans for the long-term resilience that—surely to God—the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the middle east tell us we all need. I have not even mentioned China, Taiwan and the South China sea. However, as I was saying, if we can work on creating a consensus built around prosperity, fairness and long-term resilience, it could be transformational, not just for our constituents now but for generations and generations to come. I have little faith that that consensus will come out of this Parliament or that we will see much of it in an election year, when these contests become all the more bitter because of the election, but if we look at any of the polling, we will see that our constituents and the public at large are far ahead of politics and the politicians on this stuff.

I look forward to hearing what colleagues, particularly the Minister, have to say today. A big reimagining of the state and citizen is what is badly, even starkly, needed. We are so far behind where we should be and we are so far behind many of our western European counterparts. If we do not see that reimagining emerge from this place, and I suspect that we will not, in Scotland the answer lies, yes, in our becoming a member of the European Union, which would put rocket boosters under Scotland's prosperity in the future.

1.47 pm

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this debate. Indeed, I was pleased to support his application for it, because the issue of living standards is of great importance to my constituents in Dover and Deal, and to people across the country.

Over the last 15 years, a series of major events have had a direct impact on our economy and on living standards. It started with the credit crunch and the global financial crash. More recently, we have had the covid pandemic, which has had a significant and lasting impact on our country and its finances. Even more recently, the disgraceful invasion of Ukraine by Russia has had severe negative effects on global prices and created major challenges for both global and local economies.

These big events have led many commentators to liken the current economic situation to that in the 1970s, because of the inflationary element that the Government have been grappling with recently. However, each recession or economic crisis is unique. If any historical comparison is to be made, perhaps the challenges we face today echo more closely the political and economic period after the second world war than that of the 1970s. The extreme costs incurred and the public debt overhang created in battling covid, the shortages of materials and supplies caused by global supply chain disruptions, and the simultaneous energy and food price spikes need particular and considered responses.

Following the second world war, problems with food, energy and housing plagued the economy for years. The rationing of goods, materials and even housing lasted long after VE Day, and the political consequences for Labour and the Conservative party were brutal. It was not just Churchill who faced a possibly ungrateful public when he was booted out of office after winning the war; Labour's Nye Bevan truly transformed the country in his approach to health and housing, only to see Labour unceremoniously dumped for not delivering quickly enough. The lessons of history are that the Government need to be muscular and act single-mindedly to deliver at pace for the people.

The seriousness of the current situation requires the Government to have a laser-like focus on overall household costs, yet the machinery of government does not allow that to happen, because in the division of the Departments, no single Department has overall sight of housing and household costs. The responsibility for and regulatory oversight of the key household utilities—gas, electricity, water, telephone, broadband, TV licensing or council tax, as well as mortgages and rent—that are responsible for so much pressure on individual households is split between multiple Government Departments, each with differing priorities. No one is responsible or accountable for total household costs, yet that is what every household, up and down the land, is thinking about—“How much do all my bills cost? How much do I have, to pay for them? How am I going to make ends meet?”

This matters because we do not just pay for the utilities we use; our living standards are directly affected by the bills, which include commitments such as the costs of net zero and of building new physical infrastructure to meet future population growth. All those costs need to be tightly managed, like any other tax or national

spending commitment. In my view, all household regulation should be under one roof, overseen by Ministers who can look at total household costs and the impact of regulatory decisions.

There is a real opportunity for Government to refocus regulators on getting the best deal for householders, rather than the best deal for the people they regulate. That means breaking down the existing silos of Government and regulatory structures to create a new, household-centred approach to allow better decisions to be made about how much households can pay at any time and when extra investment can best be afforded. That is one important way in which we could start to address living standards for the nation.

Back in 2009, as the impact of the financial crisis hit, I wrote about the likely impact of that massive event on household costs and repossessions, and the range of interventions that were available to the Government of the day. Things looked grim and hundreds of thousands of repossessions were forecast, in line with previous housing crashes. There were interventions that I could recommend, and recommendations were taken forward that helped people stay in their homes and weather the crisis. Judicial and financial regulatory policies were changed accordingly.

Given the immediate challenges facing our country, it is just as important today that the Government respond to support householders and households, because the distribution of housing today is very different from in those earlier recessionary events. The majority of rented housing is now owned by private sector landlords—about 20% of all housing stock. That is neither equitable nor feasible for renters, who need to pay high rents to fully shield landlords from challenging times. Rent needs to be affordable; otherwise we end up with inter-generational unfairness, but that is where we are today: unfairness not just for so-called generation rent but for people under 40 who have been unable to get a home of their own and find themselves having to pay more. We need to take a fresh look at how to deal with that, and at how renting is managed within the welfare bill. Too many people find themselves in overpriced, sub-standard rented accommodation with a housing allowance that does not meet the cost of the rent, so they are expected to make up the difference.

The situation is exacerbated by what I call the invisible money and invisible tax position. I recently asked a group of people to say how much energy support the Government had given during the energy spike. There was a silence. Not a single person in the room could give a figure. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that the energy support policies in 2022-23 cost more than £50 billion—2% of GDP—and yet not a single person could say how much money the Government had given. That money is very different from the £300 direct payments under the cost of living programme, which went directly into people's bank accounts. Invisible money contributes to the sense, but not the reality, that the Government are not helping, so I hope the Minister reflects on how the Government can better explain and make clear the money and support they are giving, and ensure it is done in such a way as to help people appreciate and understand what is happening.

It is the same for what I call invisible tax—the regulatory charges through utility companies. Again, they are not directly visible and do not form part of household assessment when the Government Budget is considered.

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

Living standards are crucial to all Members of Parliament and the Government of the day. It is right that we look at people's ability to meet their daily costs, but we must have a firm eye on the fairness of where costs and obligations lie. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, which is of great importance to us all. I hope the Minister will consider the ways in which the Government may better support the 22.6 million people on welfare—a third of the population. That should not just be through direct spending, or support of the type that households received during the pandemic, which protected lives and livelihoods. I recognise the Government's commitment to upgrading infrastructure, but I should be grateful if the Minister would reflect on my comments.

1.57 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to sum up for the SNP. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing the debate and opening it so comprehensively.

No issue is more pressing for our constituents at the moment than the cost of living crisis and its impact on living standards. The UK Government point to a range of factors to explain why, in the two years to March 2024, we have had the biggest fall in living standards since records began, as the Office for Budget Responsibility highlighted. Even as wages rise and inflation falls, there is yet more pain to come. Consumers with less to spend act as a drag on the economy. In addition, confidence in UK economic growth fell by 19% between June and July, according to the Hargreaves Lansdown investor confidence index.

The UK Government blame the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine—to be honest, they would blame the bogeyman if they could—but they are strangely reluctant to even mention the word “Brexit”, although we all know the impact it has had on our productivity and our living standards. The Resolution Foundation says that the UK is falling behind our European counterparts on living standards due to low growth and high inequality, and our prosperity gap has been widening since 2009.

Everybody knows that there is a global element to the current difficulties, but let us not forget—as so many Ministers have done already, it seems—the disastrous Budget of the previous Prime Minister, which sent inflation soaring, interest rates rocketing and the pensions system to the very verge of collapse. That is what true economic incompetence looks like, and the Tories have never recovered fully from that particular disaster.

My constituents and people across the UK are truly suffering and the Government must accept responsibility for their own incompetence. About 2.65 million people have reported being unable to afford a healthy amount of food. The expense of groceries remains the most significant stream of household finances, as 96% reported a rise in food expenses over the past month. Young adults aged 25 to 34 years are almost three and a half times more likely to experience vulnerability compared with those aged 75 years and above.

The cost of essential household expenditure for homeowners has soared by more than £9,000 a year on average over the past two years, with higher mortgage

rates the biggest contributing factor. There have been 14 mortgage rate rises over the past two years, with inflation peaking at 11.1% in October 2022. Food and energy prices have risen markedly since 2022, gas prices in particular, with the cost of energy doubling since 2021. The pain goes on and on. Many households use less fuel, such as gas or electricity, simply because they cannot afford to maintain the same level of usage, with about one in five adults reporting that they were occasionally, hardly ever or never able to keep comfortably warm in their home.

Nearly two thirds, or 64%, of those of working age who live in poverty live in working households. More than 5 million people live in homes with energy debt, with more than 3 million people disconnected from their energy last year because they simply could not afford to top up their meter. There seems to be no end to this because, alongside all that, food-bank reliance is at record levels, with many of the food banks in our communities simply unable to keep up with demand. At this juncture, I pay tribute to the work of the Ardrossan food bank in my constituency, which does excellent work.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, “UK Poverty 2024”, was clear that six successive UK Prime Ministers have overseen deepening poverty over the past 20 years. It also noted that the Scottish child payment is making a difference in Scotland. We know that the current UK Government will not implement a similar measure in England, but we also know that no incoming Labour Government will implement it, either. However, it is heartening to know that those parties are committed to ensuring no cap on bankers bonuses, but that there will be one on child benefit. That suggests that those parties are completely relaxed about increasing inequality in our society, with an apparent acceptance of the inevitability of poverty.

The reality is that amid all that pain, with the limited powers that the Scottish Government have—their powers are very limited—they are doing all they can to support people during this unprecedented decline in living standards, with a focus on a more progressive and equal society—the Scottish child payment; the baby box; the rent freeze; free school meals being rolled out for all primary 1 to primary 5 pupils, and to be extended to all primary school pupils on a universal basis; free bus travel for under-22s; five family payments from April 2024, which dwarf the payments made in England; the winter heating payment; the council tax reduction scheme, worth £800 per year for over 450,000 households; and the carer's allowance supplement, delivering £255 million to over 148,000 Scottish carers. But, if I may quote George Foulkes, we are “doing it deliberately”.

The SNP will always use its powers to support households through the damage inflicted by the mismanagement of this UK Government, with its £318 million a day spent on paying debt interest, after burning £4.2 million-worth of personal protective equipment and wasting £66,000 million on High Speed 2, which is just a rail link from London to Birmingham, for which all UK taxpayers will pay. The UK Government are not doing this deliberately; they are just dogged by their own inability to govern, and govern well.

An incoming UK Labour Government seems pretty likely at the moment, but as Labour U-turns on all that it was ever supposed to stand for, we know that it will remain committed to austerity, which it introduced in its



previous term in office, leaving bankers' bonuses uncapped as millions struggled to make ends meet. We all remember the admission from the current shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), that Labour is

“not the party of people on benefits”—

a sorry story indeed.

We look to the example of small, independent European nations, which show what can be done with a more equal, prosperous country with wellbeing at its heart. Scotland is rich in natural resources and we can build a nation, freed from the shackles, the dead hand, of Westminster, which is governed by a consensus from both the main parties that poverty and inequality are acceptable and inevitable. They are not.

With all the powers of an independent nation, Scotland can make meaningful improvements, by making different choices and having different priorities. That is the way that we will tackle the scandal of the record decline in living standards that is decimating our communities.

2.6 pm

**Michael Shanks** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and to speak in a debate brought by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I congratulate him on securing it. He and I endured many electoral scrapes before we got to this place, but this is the first opportunity we have had to participate in a debate at the same time. It is a pleasure.

This is a timely debate because, as we have already heard, over the past few weeks the Government seem to be trying to give the impression that everything is okay—that there is “nothing to see here” and we are back to normal; the cost of living crisis does not exist, and everybody, all across the country, is getting on just fine.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South made the important point that the cost of living crisis affects individuals, but also the very fabric of our society. I will come back to that point later on. From my own constituency casework and from meetings with community groups and others—I know it will be the same for all of us—I know that the cost of living crisis is far from over. In fact, people are struggling now more than ever. It is important that we keep talking about living standards and that we push the Government, in the weeks that they have left in office, to do more. This Parliament is on record as being the first in modern history during which living standards in the country will contract. Household income growth is down by more than 3% in this Parliament. Britain is worse off.

The hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) made some reflections on history, which was an interesting perspective to bring. At one point, I thought the praising of Bevan might have led to another faction in the Conservative party—the Bevanites—but it was an important point. I will take away particularly the idea of a unified Department to look at these issues. She made the point very well. Just a few weeks ago, I raised the issue of prepayment meters in the main Chamber. It is a classic example of a straightforward issue, but the

various bodies that deal with it are divided and sit at different parts of the system. Bringing them together would be very helpful.

I mentioned before the cumulative impact of the cost of living. That is important, because we see levels of poverty and destitution reaching horrifying levels. People who were teetering on the brink of poverty have been plunged into it, and into destitution. Inflation may be coming down, but the aftershocks are still being felt. Wages have not kept pace with costs. Debt is rising across many households. The ability to make the pay packet stretch just a little further every month is becoming more and more difficult, if not impossible.

We saw this week that even the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) has had to confront mortgage challenges. A salary of £118,000, some four times the average salary of a worker in my constituency, still did not allow him to continue in his ministerial job, although I suspect there will not be a huge outpouring of grief in that case.

More than 1 million households are expected this year to come to the end of cheaper mortgage deals, leading to an average increase in annual housing costs of about £1,800, according to the Resolution Foundation. Yesterday the leader of the Labour party, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), raised the case of an Iceland worker and was met with derision from many Members on the Government Benches. Dozens of similar cases have been raised with me over the past few months. Constituents who were stretched to afford their mortgage in the first place now find themselves in greater debt, with income no longer matching the mortgage payments that they could only just afford before.

Citizens Advice has done some research and found that, previously, mortgage holders on average had about £61 left after paying for essentials, but now, after the mortgage changes, they find themselves more than £100 at least in debt every month—there is a cumulative impact—and in some cases it is four, five or six times that amount.

Of course, part of the problem is the still rising cost of food. Although inflation overall may have come down, food inflation continues to be a huge problem for families. The overall price of food rose last year by 26%, which is a staggering figure. Of course, we also have the slightly more subtle version of inflation through companies simply reducing the product that they are selling, which puts even more pressure on families.

Energy bills have soared, with people struggling to heat their homes. As we have heard from other Members, a quarter of adults last year said that they were occasionally, hardly ever or never able to keep themselves comfortably warm, which is a basic that any of us should be able to expect. It was the case that 34% of adults said that they cut back on their heating, and 16% of adults said that they were worried that their food would run out and they could not afford more. That is a staggering statistic.

Many of us may have visited the Trussell Trust's event in Parliament yesterday. I spoke to a number of people who raised examples of families who were in work, in well paid, permanent jobs, but were still struggling to make ends meet. We know that more and more people in the economy are not in such work and so they are in an even worse position. Working-age adults are far more likely to turn to food banks, and almost half of

[*Michael Shanks*]

households experiencing food insecurity are dealing with disability—an issue to which I want to return. This is a picture of a country with so many people teetering on the brink of poverty and now living such a precarious life that even work is not lifting them out of poverty.

A number of Members have raised the intergenerational nature of poverty—the challenge of a generation growing up now without any of the expectations that a previous generation had. Before I was elected to this place, I was a high school teacher and saw many of those young adults. They were very well qualified, intelligent and capable, but they were leaving school and going off to university or work with none of the expectations about being able to get a permanent job and afford a home. That just does not exist for many of them now. The fact that so many of them have resigned themselves to that fact is in itself depressing.

In the midst of all this, we have a Government—I am hoping that the Minister will correct me—who seem to suggest that everything is fine and there is nothing to see here. The fact is that the economy is not working for working people across this country. We have now had 14 years of a Conservative Government, and people are certainly no better off than they were before. People have higher taxes and higher mortgage payments, and prices are still rising at the shops. There have been 25 tax rises in this Parliament alone, with households paying on average £4,000 more in tax each year. The Conservatives have become the party of high tax because they are the party of low growth.

The same is true in Scotland: we see tax rises in Scotland to cover for fiscal mismanagement and a £1.5 billion black hole, but also for a lack of growth, which I attribute to both Scotland's Governments. We need to get some basic economic competence back so that we can boost wages, bring down bills and make working people in all parts of our country better off.

**Patricia Gibson:** *rose*—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** *rose*—

**Michael Shanks:** I knew that would prompt something. I give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow South first.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is talking about economic competence. When the Scottish Labour leader described removing the cap on bankers' bonuses as economically incompetent—he went further than that, saying that it was “economically illiterate and morally bankrupt”—was he right or wrong?

**Michael Shanks:** The leader of the Scottish Labour party—my good friend, Anas Sarwar—is always right. Of course, we opposed lifting the cap at the time. Since then, we have outlined that this is not the moment to bring it back, but we have very clearly said that bankers should be on notice that, if we see the behaviour that led to the cap in the first place, it would be very easy to implement it again.

**Patricia Gibson:** Does the hon. Member accept the independent evidence of the OBR that shows that—I have the evidence and can share it with the hon. Member,

if he wishes—the majority of people in Scotland pay less tax, including council tax, than they would if they lived in England? His remarks about tax make me wonder whether he no longer supports what was on his leaflets during the by-election: that council tax should be frozen.

**Michael Shanks:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for her dedication in checking my leaflets and retaining that information; I think that is what we call “cut-through” in the political world. I accept the interesting point that she makes. She has questioned the Government on that point on a number of occasions. I think that there is an issue when somebody on £28,500 is paying more tax—those are not wealthy people. In the midst of what we have all been talking about in this debate, that is an increase in the cost of living.

On the subject of the council tax—I feel like I am relitigating a by-election that I thought was behind me for now—I opposed the proposal of a 25% increase, which was in the consultation carried out by the Scottish Government. There is a world of difference between opposing a 25% increase and announcing a council tax freeze, which will hammer communities all across Scotland. Of course, the hon. Member may be very aware of my leaflets, but I am not sure that any of her party were aware that the First Minister was going to announce that policy before he announced it, which shows just how little thought went into it.

I will get back to Labour's new deal for working people, which is what I thought the interventions were going to be about. We have made it very clear that, in the first 100 days of a Labour Government, we want to introduce the strongest commitment to improving the lives of workers in a generation: raising wages, improving working conditions, bringing stability back to employment and enshrining workers' rights from day one. That would undo the damage of much of the anti-worker legislation we have seen over the past 14 years.

We have also set out how we will bring down energy bills by building cheaper and cleaner power across the country, through the creation of GB Energy, a publicly owned clean energy generation company headquartered in Scotland—something that I am sure my colleagues from Scotland will warmly welcome. We will also look to reform things like work capability processes—I have raised that on a number of occasions in this Parliament—so that people entitled to benefits are not locked out of them by bureaucracy that simply does not work.

I return to the comments that the hon. Members for Glasgow South, for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Dover made about the intergenerational question, which is incredibly important. I spoke about being a teacher. Before that, I worked for a charity that worked with young people involved in gangs and offending. The route out of that involvement was often through giving people something to aspire to: a sense of hope that their future would be better than the poverty and destitution that they found themselves in. It seems to me that we are increasingly turning our backs on a generation of young people who have done nothing to cause any of the crises that they face, but who are going to pay the price of them for a long time to come.

I will briefly address the issue of disability. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a trustee of two disability

charities. Disabled people face higher costs of living across the board. Scope found that disability-related costs represent the equivalent of 63% of a disabled person's income. Just by having a disability, you are already at a financial disadvantage, and the cost of living crisis has exacerbated that hugely.

I want to mention a woman who I met just before Christmas. She was forced out of her home because she could not afford to heat it any more. She had spent the past three months in the living room. She had a hospital bed where she ate her meals, had her personal care and spent most of the day because it was the only room in her home that she could heat properly. The downside was that the rest of her house became damp and infected with mould because she could not turn the heating on. She had been failed by the benefits system, cuts to her care package and rising energy and food bills. She also lost the opportunity to continue in her employment programme, which was what gave her opportunities in life.

There are countless such examples. I am sure that every one of us could recount an example from our constituents. We should be ashamed that in 2024, in a country as rich as ours, people have such a standard of living.

I want to close by saying what the hon. Member for Glasgow South started by saying: the fall in living standards is a huge crisis facing our country. It affects mental and physical health, education, family wellbeing, housing, employment—a whole range of issues. It is not going away. It has not declined. It is not getting better. It will stalk families for years to come, possibly for a generation. Debt is piling up to eye-watering levels and with it comes the impact on families. The Government have failed in basic economic tests, and working people, as always, pay the price.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South for securing this important debate. I look forward to hearing what the Minister will do in the few weeks that the Government have left to change the situation for families across the country.

**David Mundell (in the Chair):** I call the Minister. My only request is that we leave a few minutes for Mr McDonald to conclude the debate. It must end at 3 o'clock, so there is ample time for the Minister to respond.

2.21 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami):** It is a pleasure to spend time with you and serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I want Members to be clear: I have heard the strength of feeling today. I am grateful for all the contributions. I want to start by saying that the issue is complex. Those who know me in the House know that I always try to take things seriously and think carefully about the issues. I hope to do so in my response.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing today's debate. I am pleased to have this opportunity to set out the measures that the Government are taking to support people across the United Kingdom during this difficult time and to respond to the points raised.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks), speaks with the confidence of someone who has been here for years rather than months, so I commend him on his speech. I say to him gently that economic competence and credibility are key for any Government of any political colour in this country. When he talks about economic competence, he has to address the fact that the whole growth plan of the Labour party is a £28 billion green growth plan. That is a legitimate thing for any party to suggest, but, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South made clear, when a party has its entire economic strategy bound up in such a plan and then seems to flip-flop from one day to another about whether it is doing the plan—whether it is an ambition or a commitment, and when the money is going to be spent—what that says to investors, households and businesses all over the country and abroad is that there will not be economic competence if his party is in government. I ask him to reflect on that point.

I think that all of us in this place recognise the difficult times through which the people of this country and people across the world have lived. Putin's illegal war in Ukraine caused an energy shock that was the kickstarter for inflation across the globe and created a perfect storm for vulnerable people. The Government have consistently fought back against covid alongside our Ukrainian friends and, critically from a Treasury perspective, against the economic headwinds that resulted from those external shocks. Over the past two years, the Government have provided one of the largest support packages in Europe.

I was struck by a remark from my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), who, if I may say so, is a fantastic Member of Parliament. If I recall, she mentioned that it was important that the Government were able to explain clearly to members of the public what support has been given in what different ways. She talked about utilities and various other important things across the economy. I agree with my hon. Friend that one of the things that, as the Government, we always have to work on—I will continue to do so, and I am sure that my colleagues will—is much more clearly demonstrating and explaining the support that is out there: the support that is being given. I will take that away and reflect on it very seriously.

This financial year alone, more than 8 million UK households on eligible means-tested benefits, 8 million pensioner households and 6 million people on eligible disability benefits received cost of living payments. That came on top of the significant universal support made available by the Government, as all households were eligible for the energy price guarantee, the £400 energy bills support scheme, the £150 council tax rebate, and fuel and alcohol duty cuts. Energy support alone has paid for almost half of the typical family's energy bill from October 2022 to June 2023. Almost half—that is considerable support. It is in part thanks to those measures, and strong labour markets delivering robust wage growth, that growth and real incomes have been stronger than expected in the year before.

I know that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, the shadow Minister, talked about growth and wages, and I want to address him precisely on this point. Aggregate real incomes have outperformed expectations, both from the OBR and independent forecasters, and are now 1.4% above pre-pandemic levels.



[*Bim Afolami*]

In per capita terms, between 2010 and 2022, real incomes—so after inflation—have increased more in the UK than in certain major European economies, our competitors, such as both France and Italy.

Wages now are rising at a level ahead of inflation, contrary to what the hon. Member for Glasgow South said. Although we have been through a very tough time, and I do not minimise the difficulties that have occurred—indeed, I will talk about more of those throughout the rest of my speech—we are now at a point where the economy is turning a corner and wages are now growing at a rate faster than that of inflation.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I do not know where the Minister gets his figures from, but he should look at the research that came out last week from the Centre for Cities. If we take my home city of Glasgow, if wages had gone up at the rate they went up between 1998 and 2010, the average wage in Glasgow would be £23,500 higher than it is today. Why is that so? Why has it not gone up?

**Bim Afolami:** I thank the hon. Member for that point. I have not seen the report, but, to take what he has said as read, the reason why, since the financial crisis in 2008-09, economic growth—trend growth—in all the western world, particularly in Europe, is down on where it was before the financial crisis, is due to the financial crisis. Indeed, it was this Government who had to spend years from 2010 clearing up the mess left by the Labour party when they were in office. That is the core explanation for the difference that the hon. Member describes.

Thanks to the efforts of the Bank of England, supported by the Chancellor, inflation is less than half of its peak, falling to 3.9% in November 2023—the lowest rate in more than two years.

But I do not deny that the outlook remains challenging. Nor do the Government. That is why we announced further action in the autumn statement in November to support the most vulnerable. In April, we will raise local housing allowance rates to the 30th percentile of local market rents. That will make 1.6 million low-income households better off, with an average gain of £800 in the 2024-25 financial year.

We will also uprate all working-age benefits in full for 2024-25 by the September 2023 consumer prices index figure of 6.7%. Now, why am I being so precise about that? Because that is three percentage points higher than forecast earnings for '24-25. This will help to support the most vulnerable while inflation continues to fall; 5.5 million households on universal credit will gain an average of £470—almost £500—in the '24-25 financial year.

We are maintaining the triple lock, too, to support our pensioners, whose hard work helped to build this country. They are on fixed incomes and need to be looked after. The basic state pension, new state pension and pension credit standard minimum guarantee—we need to find a better description of that because it is very wordy—will be uprated in April 2024 in line with wage growth of 8.5% in the usual reference period. Let me give a sense of what that means in cash terms: in the coming financial year of '24-25, the full yearly amount of the basic state pension will be £3,750 higher

than in 2010. To put it more simply, that is about £1,000 more than if it had been uprated in line with prices alone. For individuals needing further support, local authorities in England continue to provide it through the household support fund, which is backed by £1 billion of funding. That means that, from 2022 until 2025, total support to help households with the cost of living will be over £100 billion, which is roughly an average of £3,700 per household.

What is the principle here, because I know that I have just given the House a blizzard of figures? The principle is that this Government believe that the people of this country deserve to keep more of their hard-earned money and that, where we can, we should reduce their burdens, as long as it is fiscally responsible to do so and as long as we are supporting public services as we need to. This is not ideological; it is because it will reduce the cost of living and help to grow our economy. That is why, from the end of January 2024—it is 1 February—millions of employees across the country will see their main national insurance contribution rate cut from 12% to 10%. That means that the average worker on £35,400 will receive an annual tax cut of over £450 a year, and we are also cutting national insurance rates for the self-employed. This tax cut is worth over £9 billion a year, which is the largest ever national insurance cut to employees and the self-employed. I repeat: this helps with the cost of living and helps to grow the economy.

We are also delivering on our commitment to end low hourly pay. Although they may not have agreed with everything I have said, I am sure that Members across the House will support that. From 1 April, the national living wage will increase by almost 10% to £11.44, with the age threshold also lowered from 23 to 21 years old. That represents an increase of over £1,800 to the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage, and is expected to benefit more than 2.7 million low-paid workers.

These actions must be underpinned by a robust and growing economy. Only a healthy economy can spread jobs and opportunities through the country. Only a healthy economy allows the Government to make the long-term decisions needed to strengthen it. Growth is generated by providing individuals with the freedom to learn, the freedom to innovate and the freedom to succeed. That is why it matters so much to create the right environment for the private sector to thrive. That means prioritising the strengths of the UK and focusing on the biggest opportunities for growth.

How have we done that? We did that in the autumn statement, in which the Government set out plans to drive growth and productivity that the independent OBR has estimated will have increased business investment by £20 billion a year in a decade's time. The OBR also estimated that the autumn statement would increase real GDP by 0.3%. That is one fiscal event! Key elements of the package include a new £2.5 billion “Back To Work Plan”. In combination with measures from the spring Budget last year, the OBR thinks that will add around 200,000 people to the labour market.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South made an interesting point about immigration and numbers and people and population. What I would say to him is that although one can always have a debate about the right level of migration—to some degree, it depends on the nature of an economy and what gaps need filling in the

workforce—I think we can all agree that the primary aim of any Government should be to improve the prosperity of the people in the country by strengthening the economy. However, what we should not do is adopt the ideological position that it is inherently good to have high levels of migration, because we need to make sure that we have the right level for what our economy actually needs. Indeed, that should be the focus of our debate.

Making full expensing permanent represents a tax cut of over £10 billion a year for companies, meaning that they can invest for less—something that more than 200 businesses and trade bodies have called transformational for business investment. That is another example of the Government taking a long-term approach. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West playfully suggested that there are only weeks left of this Parliament, but we still have almost a year to go. I would not pre-judge the timing of any election, but I do think his suggestion may be a little premature. What I will say is that politicians often get accused of doing things for the short term—indeed, sometimes they do—but nobody can accuse this Chancellor and this Government of acting in that way.

Full expensing, a tax cut for businesses to improve their productivity over the long term, is worth about £10 billion a year. This is one of the most transformational long-term measures that will improve our country's potential growth rate. That is a very good example of the measures I have been talking about. It underpins a strong, growing, robust economy, which allows us to provide the support for the vulnerable that I described at the start of my speech. Indeed, we have provided over £4.5 billion in funding for the UK's strategic manufacturing sectors.

It is important to note that we are talking about the entire United Kingdom, not just London and the south-east. That is why we used a combination of local growth policy and national economic policy, taking into account the inequalities that exist at all levels of decision making—I do not deny that—to underpin our approach to tackling them. According to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the UK Government provided a package of cost of living measures worth £7 billion in Scotland, more than £3.5 billion in Wales and more than £2 billion in Northern Ireland to help households and businesses weather the impact of soaring energy prices between 2022 and 2024.

I am reminded of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover that a single Government Department should be responsible for housing and household costs. I do not think that we will do another reorganisation of government, but Ministers and my officials in the Treasury work very closely with DLUHC. I am happy to hear any ideas from her about how we can do that more effectively, but it is important that we do not spend too much time working out how to reorganise Departments, and that we focus on the issues at hand.

**Mrs Elphicke:** I am grateful to the Minister for addressing that issue directly, but does he acknowledge that the timeframes for the investment and spending settlements are not within the control of the Treasury, but within the control of the regulatory frameworks that are in place? The ability for either DLUHC or, indeed, the

Treasury to bring them all together in a meaningful way is currently limited. It was in that spirit that I hoped he would reflect on the impact of all these things on households, and on how they build up for the individual household purse.

**Bim Afolami:** I thank my hon. Friend for that remark. I am very happy to think about and consider more deeply how we make sure that—whether it is a regulatory impact, is at national policy level or is legislation made in this House—we focus on achieving the right outcomes for the right people at the right time. I can give her that commitment today.

All households in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England were provided with support, but the poorest households gained the most. The average level of support was most generous in the devolved nations, compared with the UK average. Alongside that, we have announced a comprehensive levelling-up strategy that not only addresses the immediate challenges but lays the groundwork for sustained prosperity. As part of that, we are continuing to support local growth through funds such as the £2.6 billion UK shared prosperity fund and the £3.2 billion towns fund. The shared prosperity fund empowers local leaders who know their areas best to take the action that best meets the needs of their local labour markets. In addition, the refocused investment zones programme will catalyse high-potential knowledge-intensive growth clusters across the UK in our key future sectors, bringing investment into areas that have traditionally underperformed economically.

The three watchwords of the hon. Member for Glasgow South were prosperity, fairness and resilience. He expressed uncharacteristic pessimism about the idea that they would be addressed by this Government or in the coming weeks and months of this Parliament, but I want to make the case for why we are doing that. On prosperity, I mentioned full expensing, tax cuts in national insurance and various other measures that support all regions of the UK. They are designed to build long-term prosperity in our economy. They deal with our economic weaknesses and build on our strengths.

On fairness, I think I have comprehensively set out today the support that is being given to the most vulnerable—indeed, to a majority of households. That is done in order to be fair.

I should not stray out of scope and go into other policy areas, but the fundamentals for resilience are having a robust, sustainable economic growth strategy that, over time, increases the growth rate of our economy. Upon that foundation everything else is based.

In conclusion, these measures are a clear demonstration of the Government's unwavering commitment to promote living standards and support households up and down the country. We firmly believe that the key to a prosperous future lies in creating opportunities for everybody. The boost to the national living wage and the historic reduction in national insurance are powerful tools in driving employment and improving living standards. By putting more money into the pockets of hard-working people, we are not just bolstering their financial wellbeing but fuelling economic growth.

As always, we need to balance support for households with fiscal sustainability. As I have said, the economic position remains challenging. Inflation has more than

[*Bim Afolami*]

halved, but it remains too high: it is not at our 2% target. We are not complacent about that, which is why the Government remain steadfast in our support for the Bank of England as it acts to reduce inflation.

Our long-term objectives are crystal clear—increasing prosperity, improving the long-term growth rate of our country, improving our resilience, levelling up every corner of this country and fostering sustained economic growth. It is through these robust economic policies that we lift communities, create opportunities and enhance the quality of life of all our citizens.

Our commitment to growth is not about numbers in a spreadsheet. It is not for the short term; it is for the long-term, tangible improvements in living standards that result from a thriving economy. We continue to keep all options under review as we take tough decisions to drive down debt and inflation and increase our prosperity. These complex issues affect all our constituents, wherever we call home. I thank all Members for their constructive contributions.

2.44 pm

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I will be brief—that is normally followed by a long speech. I am grateful to the hon. Members who came here today, to the hon. Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke) for her co-sponsorship, and to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who granted the debate as a member of the Backbench Business Committee.

It has been a useful debate. I recall the Minister's maiden speech, which I was in the Chamber for; I knew that he would be a star of his parliamentary group. The speech he just gave was so good that I think he even believed some of that glowing assessment of the Government's record on these affairs. Although we have some disagreements about the rather glowing assessment that he adumbrated so eloquently, some of what he had to say was agreeable. I know that the whole issue of intergenerational fairness is close to his heart, for example. I read some of the publications that he puts out, and we are starting to see the new shoots of a consensus that this subject requires urgent and less partisan attention. In the debate, we can see the confluence of domestic and foreign policy come alive on the issue of living standards, which touch every single part of our constituencies.

I am grateful to my friend—and he is a friend—the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks). It is good to see him in his place, and I look forward to us winning back his seat at the upcoming general election. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, who always gives a stout defence of the record of the Scottish Government in Edinburgh.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered living standards.

2.46 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Coastal and Rural Communities: Employment

3 pm

**Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the employment of people living in rural and coastal communities.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me a debate on this important subject, the employment of people living in rural and coastal communities. I am grateful to the Minister for being present to respond on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. Before the debate, there was some discussion about which Department should respond, because there is a strong argument that this is not just—perhaps not even—a DWP matter. Arguably, it is for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, because the problems with employment in rural and coastal areas are entrenched in long-term social and economic patterns. It could be a matter for the Department for Transport, because one of the greatest barriers to employment in rural and coastal areas is physical connectivity—roads, rail and public transport. Or we could have put to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology our questions about the barriers to employment caused by poor digital connectivity in rural and coastal communities. How about the Department for Business and Trade? There are issues to tackle in nurturing supply chains and implementing enterprise zones to enable businesses to thrive.

In places such as my constituency of Ynys Môn, I would add the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to the list and ask when that Department will act on bringing new nuclear to Wylfa, because that would be a game changer for our local employment market. Similarly, I could ask the Wales Office to liaise with colleagues in Cardiff about the impact that decisions made by the Welsh Labour Government are having on employment in my constituency—decisions such as the 20 mph blanket speed limit, which has shredded our public transport timetables; cancelling road building and leaving us with no hope of a much-needed third Menai crossing; and increasing business rates, putting local employers at risk. I am sure that many of my colleagues representing English constituencies would want to include the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care in the list.

In no way do I wish to put my hon. Friend the Minister under any pressure, but in this debate on employment in rural and coastal communities, there is a huge amount to unpick and a clear case for some joined-up Government and intergovernmental action. I will take Ynys Môn as my basis for explaining the unique issues that such communities face—issues that, in the cut and thrust of London, can be very easy to forget. London is just over twice the size of my constituency and has 73 MPs fighting for it; Ynys Môn has just one—me.

Ynys Môn is a coastal, rural and island community as far in the north-west of Wales as one can get, and is joined to the mainland by not one but two bridges. Over the past 20 years, it has lost 2,400 jobs as a direct result of local employers closing. Hundreds of jobs went when Wylfa nuclear power station was decommissioned,



500 when Anglesey Aluminium closed, 100 when the Octel plant shut down, and 700 only last year, when 2 Sisters closed its poultry-processing factory in Llangefni. That is a lot of jobs, a lot of skilled people and a lot of opportunities for our island's youngsters. We are not alone in facing that problem: between 2009 and 2018, 50% of coastal towns had a decline in employment, compared with 37% of non-coastal towns.

The large-scale employers have not been replaced. The island's largest employer is now Isle of Anglesey County Council. Our largest employment sector is tourism and hospitality, with more than 33% of local people employed in retail, accommodation and food-related businesses, compared with a 22% average across the UK. It is a sector renowned for offering seasonal, insecure and often low-paid jobs. It was also the first sector to be hit by covid and the last to recover.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Is it not the case, however, that this problem has two sides? There is lack of employment in some areas, but in other areas there are unfilled vacancies. For example, in my coastal town of Bridlington, we cannot get NHS dentists to fill the vacancies. Does she agree with me that we hope the Government will address this problem when they release their dental plan shortly?

**Virginia Crosbie:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the intervention. We on Anglesey also have a dramatic problem with dentists and getting dental appointments, because of the Welsh Labour Government's approach to dentistry.

Only 9.5% of people on Anglesey work in traditionally higher paid sectors, such as IT, finance, technical, professional and administration, compared with 25.8% across the UK. When I announced this debate, one of my constituents, Kevin McDonnell, contacted me to say that in his household of three working people, the one working closest to home is working in Portsmouth. When people have to commute 330 miles just to get a decent job, we know there is a problem. That may go some way to explaining why the average salary on Anglesey is £27,000, a good £5,000 less than the UK average.

When we relate lower salaries to the additional costs of living in rural and coastal communities, the inequalities become even more stark. Research shows that people in rural communities spend 10% to 20% more than their urban counterparts on everyday items such as fuel. That is hardly surprising, when we consider the context. For someone who lives in Llanrhyddlad, a quick pop to the shops takes 40 minutes driving time, costing £6 in fuel. Some 5,000 households on Anglesey are considered to be in fuel poverty; that is 17% of all households, compared with 12% in England. An estimated 52% of our properties are off the gas grid, compared with a UK average of 15%. We are reliant on alternative fuels such as liquefied petroleum gas, which costs around twice as much as gas.

Interestingly, an internet search on the cost of living in coastal communities does not return that information but instead gives details of how affordable it is to buy property by the sea. Herein lies another problem for our native young people. Ynys Môn has one of the highest rates of holiday home users in England and Wales, with

63.3 users per 1,000 usual residents. Some 2,236 properties on Ynys Môn—an island with a population of just under 70,000—are registered as second homes. That activity pushes house prices up. The average home on Anglesey costs £250,000. With average salaries at £27,000, local homes are clearly becoming more unaffordable for local people.

There is another long-term consideration in relation to holiday homes. There is a correlation between second-home ownership and retirement, and 19.1% of the island's population is retired, compared with 12.7% across the UK. Therein lies another challenge: in Wales, there are 64 dependent persons for every 100 people of working age; on Anglesey, there are 77. When we also take into account the fact that 6% of our 16 to 64-year-olds are economically inactive due to long-term sickness, compared with 4.5% in inland constituencies, the inequalities start to stack up. A glance at the population data for Ynys Môn shows that we have a pretty average percentage of births and under-18s, but drop significantly below average between the ages of 18 and 50, then rise steeply to above average over the age of 50.

The data is clear. People of working age on Anglesey leave the island to find decent employment and affordable homes. That decimates our communities and leaves behind people earning poor salaries who need to support an above-average elderly and economically inactive population. It is no wonder that Anglesey Council struggles to make its books balance.

I have worked hard along with Anglesey Council and Stena Line to get freeport status for Anglesey and I continue to work hard to establish new nuclear operations at Wylfa. It is a challenge, though. I have personally taken dozens of companies around Anglesey to look at Wylfa and our freeport sites like Prosperity Park in Holyhead. They ask me questions such as, "What is the local workforce like?", to which the honest answer is that we haemorrhage our local workforce every year because there is no work here for them. "What is the local transport infrastructure like?" Well, it is fine, unless someone wants to cross the Britannia bridge in the summer holidays, when the queues back up for miles, or at rush hour, when people leave the island to go to work, or when the bridge is closed due to high winds. As for, "What is the internet connectivity like?" let us just not go there.

Businesses face real practical challenges, such as how to make their products affordable and competitive when Ynys Môn is so far removed from supply chains and large consumer markets. I stress to them how great the opportunities are in Ynys Môn but also talk to them about how important our unique heritage and culture is to us. I explain how supportive and enthusiastic our local population is, but also how concerned they are that they will be overlooked for new jobs and so pushed further and further away from their communities. I explain that Welsh is the first language of many local people and that these people are fearful that it will be side-lined if new businesses come here.

I explain the challenges around aspiration, skills and education for our young people, as well as our local workforce, and I ask businesses to sign up to my "Local jobs for local people" campaign, which means that they commit to ensuring that, where possible, jobs will be prioritised for local people, they will respect and use the

[Virginia Crosbie]

Welsh language, and they will work with schools and training providers, such as Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, WOW Training and Môn CF, to give local people the skills they will need to take available jobs. This is just one approach to ensure that potential new employers understand and work to address the issues we face.

I know that my hon. Friends in other rural and coastal communities will have similar challenges and stories. This problem needs a systemic, whole-Government and inter-Government approach. How do we attract high-quality employers to an area where the workforce has left and the infrastructure frankly is not up to scratch? How do we teach young people the science, technology, engineering and maths skills they will need if those employers come, when all that they see ahead of them currently is working in the summer season cleaning rooms? How do we convince a community that bringing in new employers will not mean that local people get further pushed out by “outsiders”?

In short, how can this Government give Ynys Môn and other rural, coastal and island communities the special support that they desperately need to facilitate new, sustainable and high-quality local employment? Will the Minister will work with me to ensure that employers who want to move to Ynys Môn receive every possible form of support to do so? Diolch yn fawr.

3.11 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure, Dr Huq, to serve with you in the Chair.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing this debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Also, it is great to see the Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—here in Westminster Hall today, as well as the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who represents the Opposition, and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), who represents the Scottish National party. I have to confess that I was not really expecting to see them, which probably indicates the problem that we have, in that there is some uncertainty as to where the issue we are discussing—employment in rural and coastal areas—best fits. Actually, it is an issue for the whole of Government, and one of the points that I will hopefully make today is the systemic approach that we need, because there is always a danger that if we leave this issue to one Department, even though it relates to a whole host of Departments, nothing actually happens.

I believe there is enormous potential for job creation in rural and coastal communities. There are the obstacles that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn outlined, but there are also tremendously exciting opportunities, and if we do not adopt that overall approach that I mentioned, we are in danger of not taking them.

The focus of my contribution today will be on the coast in my area, centred on Lowestoft, which is the principal town in the Waveney constituency, and the village of Corton in the north and the villages of Pakefield and Kessingland to the south.

In its October 2020 analysis of coastal communities, the Office for National Statistics split towns on the coast into two categories: first, seaside towns, with a tourist beach and visitor attractions; and, secondly, coastal towns, focused on ports and related industrial activities. I was about to say that the Lowestoft area is unique, in that we fall into both of those categories, but so does Ynys Môn, as my hon. Friend so greatly articulated.

In Lowestoft, we have a port founded on fishing and with a current focus on low-carbon energy, and a magnificent sandy beach. Lowestoft is also the gateway to the Norfolk and Suffolk broads, and to two of the most popular visitor attractions in the east of England: Pleasurewood Hills; and Africa Alive.

Like most coastal communities, we have challenges to overcome, but as I have already said there are also some great opportunities, which, with the right policies and the right seedcorn investment, we can unlock, primarily for the benefit of local people but also for the benefit of the whole of the UK.

I specifically highlight the opportunities presented by the UK’s transition to low-carbon and renewable energy sources, which puts Lowestoft and the whole of the East Anglian coast in the vanguard of the UK’s energy supply system. In 2022, East Anglia’s renewable and low-carbon energy portfolio powered the equivalent of 32% of UK homes. It is estimated that by 2035, that figure could rise to 90%. That dramatic transformation presents both the Suffolk coast and Lowestoft with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to drive inward investment, to create exciting and enduring careers, and to play a major role in delivering the UK’s net zero goals.

These are great opportunities not just in Lowestoft but all around coastal Britain, but, as I have mentioned, there are significant obstacles to overcome. Coastal towns are more likely to have high levels of deprivation, and I am afraid that is the case in Lowestoft. Many of the jobs are seasonal, leading to fluctuations in employment opportunities throughout the year. Limited infrastructure and poor connectivity hinders job creation; coastal communities are invariably at the end of the line. Climate change, floods and coastal erosion can have a devastating impact on communities and businesses, particularly in the tourism sector. That has been experienced in recent weeks all along the Suffolk and Norfolk coast, and I shall return to that subject in a few minutes.

The seedcorn investment made by Government in the Lowestoft area over the past decade or so makes an impressive list, and it will help sustain and create new jobs. The Gull Wing bridge over Lake Lothing in the middle of the town is nearing completion. The Beccles loop on the East Suffolk railway line has facilitated the reintroduction of an hourly service from Lowestoft to Ipswich. The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—the Government marine scientist agency—has new offices and a refurbished laboratory in the town. There is the energy skills centre at East Coast College. There are two heritage action zones, one focused on the High Street and the other on London Road South. In Lowestoft itself, CityFibre has installed a full-fibre broadband network. The Jubilee Parade seafront is to be redeveloped, and work is starting on the various projects in the £25 million towns deal, which will help regenerate the town centre and its surrounding area.

Private sector investment and job creation is following the seedcorn funding, with projects such as the ScottishPower Renewables operations and maintenance base in the Hamilton dock, and the Associated British Ports Lowestoft eastern energy facility. That investment is welcome, and will bring enduring and positive benefits. However, I will make a general observation on the enormous opportunity to create jobs in coastal Britain. Although there are a number of funds to support regeneration—and they are well listed—I sense that there has been a lack of strategic overview. More specifically, we have not realised the full benefit of two initiatives.

First, one of the enterprise zones set up in 2012 was the Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft enterprise zone. It has been incredibly successful in that it has created more than 2,000 skilled jobs and secured over £245,000 million-worth of inward investment. However, in Lowestoft, it is in need of some relatively minor adjustments to remove land that is not coming forward for development and replace it with land around the port that is ready for redevelopment. Unfortunately, the Government have been reluctant to sanction that change, which may well be because their focus is now on freeports and investment zones. I am due to have a meeting in the next few weeks with the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), who I think is the Minister with responsibility for enterprise zones, but I urge the Minister here today to reinforce that message and take it back to him.

Secondly, I go back to the coastal communities fund, which ran from 2012 to 2019. It was a great idea, but it was not set up on the right basis and has been discarded too soon. My criticism is that it provided relatively small grants scattered around the UK coast, whereas it should have focused on a smaller number of strategic regeneration projects. It was also wrong to close down the fund in 2019 and subsume it into other funds. A significant part of the income from the fund derives from the Crown Estate's marine activities, which—in particular, the development of offshore wind farms—are providing opportunities for many coastal communities. The funds generated should be used to help the people in those areas, many of which face deprivation challenges, to realise the most of these opportunities, such as investment in skills and infrastructure.

Turning to skills, investment in education and training is vital if we are to make the most of the job opportunities that are emerging in coastal Britain. In the Waveney area, school performance has generally improved over the last decade. East Coast College is playing a vital role in enabling young and older people to acquire the skills needed in new emerging industries, and the University of East Anglia and the University of Suffolk are fully focused on the needs of local communities and the opportunities and challenges that the region faces. Challenges remain in raising overall attainment, improving special educational needs provision, and recruiting and retaining staff and teachers to work in what can be regarded as a periphery location—we come back to the problem of coastal communities being at the end of the line. An institute of technology would have provided a focus for meeting this skills challenge. It was disappointing that the local bid was not successful, and it is hoped that that omission can be corrected in the relatively near future.

In recent weeks, the threat of coastal erosion along the whole of the Suffolk and the Norfolk coast has come to the fore. It is starkly illustrated in the Lowestoft area, where the construction of the tidal barrage in the outer harbour is now on hold. The innovative Kessingland and Benacre flood defences scheme also has a funding gap, and the rapid erosion of the cliffs at Pakefield threatens not only nearby homes but Park Holidays UK's adjoining holiday park. Proper coastal defences are vital to provide the private sector with the confidence to invest in new facilities, whether in the tourism, energy, fishing or maritime sectors.

It is not just a question of money; we need to speed up and simplify the process for assessing and approving coastal erosion and flood defence schemes. The floods budget for the six-year period from 2021 to 2027 has been doubled over the previous period to £5.2 billion. We are nearly halfway through this period; the money needs to be out of the door, and work needs to start on projects including the three I have mentioned. That will in turn leverage in the private, job-creating investment that we need.

As I mentioned, a lot of good work is taking place, but I sense that there is a need in Government for a change of mindset to view coastal areas as a great opportunity that, with the right policies and seedcorn investment, can create many well-paid and exciting jobs. Some good initiatives are being pursued, but to maximise their benefit there is a need for a strategic overview of the coast right from the heart of Government. Finally, we need proper investment in coastal defences.

3.25 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) for securing this important debate, because it gives me the opportunity to address an incredibly concerning issue for the people of Scotland.

A depopulation crisis is gripping our valued rural and coastal communities. Scotland's agricultural industry is the linchpin of the rural communities in Scotland and the economy. Those communities are hard-working. They are full of hard-working individuals who show great resilience to sustain their families and the dinner tables of many more families across these four nations. Scotland's agricultural sector employs more than 67,000 people, making it the key employer in rural Scotland. Scottish farmers and crofters support thousands of supply chain businesses, estimated at more than 130,000 jobs, and generate a gross output of £3.3 billion annually for the Exchequer in the UK. Despite that resilience and input, our rural and coastal communities face challenges that threaten their very existence. From the decline in traditional industries to the encroachment of large corporations, the forces arrayed against them at times seem formidable. However, we need to be clear: the people of those communities are not defeated, nor will they ever be defeated. They possess a real spirit of resilience, and it is our duty to support and empower them in every way that we possibly can.

Depopulation is not merely a statistical anomaly: it is a profound threat to our economic prosperity, our cultural heritage and the social fabric of such communities. The numbers are stark. Although Scotland has seen



[Steven Bonnar]

modest population growth, the highlands and the Western Isles face alarming declines. Between 2011 and 2022, the population growth in the highlands was a mere 1.4%—less than half the national average. Projections paint a grim picture for the Western Isles as well, where a decline of 6% is anticipated by 2028. Behind those figures lies the harsh reality of an ageing population, with the number of over-75s in the highlands at 60% over that same 10-year period.

That demographic shift is compounded by economic challenges, particularly in sectors vital to rural and coastal livelihoods. We must make no mistake: the aftermath of Brexit has rocked industries such as agriculture, fisheries and food and drink production. It is exacerbating labour shortages and disrupting supply chains. That is the reality of Brexit being faced by people in rural communities across Scotland. Reports from the East of Scotland Growers, for instance, highlight losses of 3.5 million heads of broccoli and 1.5 million heads of cauliflower; due to labour shortages, they were left to rot in the ground. In the seafood processing sector, which relies heavily on migrant labour, up to 92% of the workforce in certain facilities across Scotland comes from eastern Europe. Those are not just figures: that is the harsh reality caused by broken Brexit Britain.

Wherever we can, the Scottish Government have been resolute in their efforts to address those undoubted challenges. The Scottish rural visa pilot scheme that we championed recognises the urgent need for immigration policies that support the economic and social viability of rural and remote communities. The solution to depopulation probably extends way beyond the insular immigration policies of this place. Investment in rural infrastructure and connectivity is vital to attract businesses, create job opportunities and retain the talent that coastal towns require. Although broadband remains reserved to this place, the Scottish Government, led by the SNP, have taken proactive steps to bridge the digital divide through initiatives such as R100 and the Digital Scotland superfast broadband programme. Those efforts, coupled with the commitment to future-proof digital infrastructure, are crucial to drive inclusive economic growth and ensure that no community is left behind.

Supporting sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy and hospitality and tourism not only fosters economic growth but preserves our cultural heritage and our way of life in those community settings. The Scottish food and drink industry contributes more than £15 billion to the economy annually, and it relies heavily on rural and island communities for its workforce. It demands urgent action and bold leadership, but we do not see them coming from this place. That is why the SNP has already shown that it can be done, using the limited powers at our disposal, but the sector's future ultimately lies with the UK Government unless we remove the shackles and ensure that the decisions are made by those who are most impacted by them—the people of Scotland—and that we can manage our affairs in full.

3.31 pm

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia

Crosbie) on securing this debate. For fear of pronouncing her constituency wrongly, after she spoke to me earlier about it, I will perhaps not try to do so again.

I was interested to hear the hon. Lady outline her concerns about employment in her area and in similar rural and coastal constituencies. She has campaigned for a long time to bring more jobs and investment to the area. She made really good points about the need for more cross-departmental working, which I feel very passionate about. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) rightly outlined where this debate should lie and pointed out the challenges that arise when this issue is not prioritised.

This debate has made it clear that people living in rural and coastal communities face a unique set of challenges. Economic inactivity, which Members are keen to tackle, is highest in those areas. This debate has primarily focused on employment, but that is only one part of the picture. Almost 14 years of Tory austerity, coupled with the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, have left many of these communities broken. Coastal communities face higher levels of deprivation, inward migration of older people and outward migration of young people, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn—see, I went for a second go. They also have higher levels of physical isolation and poor quality housing, and they often have a seasonal economy.

As shadow Minister for disabled people, I find it particularly noteworthy that economic inactivity due to long-term sickness is highest in coastal communities. The shadow Work and Pensions team is keen to investigate that further and work with colleagues in the Health team to tackle it.

Rural communities face issues including poor transport links, a lack of digital infrastructure and challenges around social activities and related isolation. I am sure that I need not remind anyone who represents a rural constituency that the delay to the Government's plan to roll out gigabit-speed broadband to every home in Britain by 2025 felt like a kick in the teeth to those struggling with their current speeds. People who live in areas that are both rural and coastal are hit by a double whammy of inequality.

Earlier this month, the Government published a statement on their levelling-up missions, which outlined their

“objectives to reduce geographical disparities”.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that none of those 12 missions is targeted specifically at rural or coastal areas. The levelling-up White Paper at least acknowledges the specific problems faced by rural and coastal areas. However, there has so far been little evidence of any meaningful action to reverse the growing disconnect between urban areas and their rural and coastal counterparts.

A future Labour Government will breathe life back into our rural and coastal communities and break down the barriers to opportunity that they face. We will address the challenges, disconnection and disparities that we have heard about today through improved cross-Government working. To thrive, communities need good jobs and affordable homes. More than a quarter of a million people in rural England are on a housing waiting list, yet the Government are on course to miss their targets on new rural affordable homes. Labour will

work with local councils to ensure that their voice has traction in delivering what is needed for rural and coastal communities.

I want to finish with some comments from conversations that I had with Keir Cozens, Labour's candidate in Great Yarmouth, who is leading a campaign to prioritise good-quality, year-round, local jobs in the industries of tomorrow. With it having an unemployment rate of more than 6%, 14 years of an absent MP and Tory Government failure have squandered Great Yarmouth's potential. With the right investment and a full-time MP in its corner, Great Yarmouth could power Great Britain through the quadrupling of offshore wind, energy bills coming down, thousands of new green industrial jobs and apprenticeships with quality training locally. That is just one of the ways in which Labour will give our coastal communities their future back. With that, I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who I am absolutely certain is an expert on this issue.

3.37 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard):** It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dr Huq. Congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on securing the debate and to the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it to take place. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), is right: I am an expert on this issue, not least as an MP for Blackpool—how much more seaside can you get than Blackpool?

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) set out in great detail how the issue impacts every single Department. Not a single one was missed off their list, apart from, perhaps, the Attorney General's Office. I am sure that if they had been that bit more creative, they could have found a way to connect the issue to it.

The word "employment" in the title of today's debate perhaps explains why I am here, or rather, why the Department that I represent is here today through me. But as a Blackpool MP, I know full well that when we say "employment", we are really talking about public health matters, transport, and housing above all else. The root of every social evil always seems to come back to housing in some way, shape or form, particularly in seaside towns, which have older, more dense populations. There is a heritage of mass tourism—that has now passed away, sadly—and often, that is about housing as well. As a Department, we are very aware that we have to spread opportunity, unlock the economic potential across every corner of the country and recognise the unique opportunities and challenges, including employment, that our rural and coastal areas experience.

As for Ynys Môn, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn set out in great detail all the different opportunities and concerns and the potential that is out there and that her district needs. Yet it is also clear that however picturesque or beautiful an area is, beauty alone does not pay the bills. We can gaze at the beautiful Lake district, the hills, from Blackpool. That does not fill the pockets of my local hotels or hospitality sector, which have gone through a very turbulent time in recent years.

The Department is working to support employment across the country, including our rural and coastal geographies. We want everyone who can work to be able to find a job, progress in work and thrive in the labour market. We know that transport can be a significant barrier to accessing work and training opportunities, and individuals on low incomes are especially affected by that. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney was right; many coastal towns are indeed at the end of the line. I think there was a Conservative report entitled that when we were in opposition and a Labour report entitled that when it was in opposition—it is almost a cliché. But it is not true of Blackpool. We are the end of two lines—one line stops at Blackpool North and one at Blackpool South. But we are still the end of lines, and he is right to make that point.

Our rural and coastal communities also face more limited digital connectivity. Frequently, there is a high dependency on a single local industry for employment, and there are immense challenges around seasonal work. Rural and coastal populations are also disproportionately older, with implications for health and social care needs, and there are difficulties recruiting health professionals. It is always abundantly clear to me, when I speak to any public sector employers in my town, that they have a recruitment problem merely because of geography, because half of their hinterland is the sea and no one lives in the sea, to state the obvious. They immediately have a much harder task recruiting people.

Our rural and coastal areas are also rich in economic potential, home to strong communities and businesses, natural environment and heritage. Although productivity and earnings are, on average, lower in rural and coastal areas, rural areas also have a higher employment rate than urban areas. Employment rates in rural and coastal areas have increased since 2010.

The Department for Work and Pensions offers a national programme of welfare and employment support, with a strong place-based presence through our Jobcentre Plus network in 37 districts across Britain. The core jobcentre offer includes face-to-face meetings with work coaches and tailored support for different groups, including claimants aged 16 to 24, 50-plus claimants, disabled people and people with health conditions, and those in work and on low pay.

The Government are committed to supporting individuals who are in low-paid work to progress, increase their earnings and move into better-paid, quality jobs. For working universal credit claimants, we have introduced the in-work progression offer to give claimants additional access to work coaches focused on removing barriers to progression and considering skills gaps and training opportunities. However, we want to go further to see even more people fulfil their potential. We have made significant investments in the past year with an ambitious package of employment support, with more help for those over 50 and for disabled people and those with long-term ill health needs, including in rural and coastal areas.

Through jobcentres, we offer additional work coach time for eligible 50-plus jobseekers on universal credit to provide more intensive, tailored support during the first nine months of their claim. We have dedicated 50PLUS champions working out of every jobcentre across Great Britain. Those champions support and upskill work coaches and engage with employer-facing

[Paul Maynard]

staff to tailor provision and recruitment, and to develop opportunities for those aged 50-plus to take up roles in key local sectors such as care and housing.

The Government have an ambitious programme of initiatives to support disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay and succeed in work. The programme includes increased work coach support and disability employment advisers in jobcentres; the Work and Health programme and intensive personalised employment support; Access to Work grants; Disability Confident; the information and advice service; employment advice in NHS talking therapies—the list is endless.

We announced even more support targeted at that group at both the spring Budget and the autumn statement last year. That includes: expanding the existing additional work coach support programme; introducing universal support, a new supported employment programme for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions in England and Wales, matching participants with open-market jobs and funding support and training; launching WorkWell, which will bring together the NHS, local authorities and other partners in collaboration with jobcentres; expanding access to mental health services, increasing the number of people accessing NHS talking therapies and individual placement and support; and introducing employment advisers to musculoskeletal condition services in England.

Although individuals and businesses across rural and coastal geographies will benefit from all those measures, the DWP also offers a place-based, targeted approach to ensure that support is available and relevant to those who need it, wherever they live. The DWP has local teams that specialise in working in partnership with local authorities, creating links to local communities to understand their needs and tailor their provision to the local labour market.

For example, to mitigate the local transport challenges that we have heard mentioned, the Jobcentre Plus travel discount card is available to DWP customers, giving a 50% discount on the majority of train journeys. Many bus operators also accept the card for discounts.

Our flexible support fund can cover the first three months' travel costs for claimants starting work to support them in the early stages of employment. The fund can also be used to purchase a pedal or electric bike where there are restricted levels of public transport available and the claimant does not drive. Of course, there is also the Access to Work grant, which is available to customers with a disability who are starting a job or are in employment. That can pay for help getting to and from work as well.

The Department is also working with colleagues across Government to further minimise transport barriers to labour market participation. Close collaboration between local jobcentres, DFT and local transport authorities ensured that the development of local bus service improvement plans was informed by DWP insights into which key employment opportunities are limited by transport barriers.

Jobcentres also run sector-based work academy programmes, working in partnership with local employers and training providers to offer people valuable training,

work experience and a guaranteed interview for genuine vacancies. This place-based approach enables jobcentres to connect local people and businesses, providing a pipeline of skilled labour that is relevant to the needs of local sectors. We work closely with businesses across an array of different sectors, including traditional rural and coastal industries such as farming and tourism. For example, DWP is supporting DEFRA to develop and deliver a long-term recruitment strategy for the agricultural sector that will help domestic workers into both seasonal and long-term roles.

More widely, the Government have supported coastal communities to level up through dedicated funding under the coastal communities fund and the coastal revival fund, and additional funding under the welcome back fund. The levelling-up fund has provided around £1 billion to projects in coastal areas, and over £400 million has come through the UK shared prosperity fund to local authorities within or serving coastal areas of England. However, it is not just about the funds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 11 out of our 12 freeports are in coastal areas, but seven out of the 20 current levelling-up partnerships are also in coastal areas, demonstrating our deep commitment to unlocking the economic potential of coastal communities.

The Government are committed to levelling up employment across all parts of the country, including our vital rural and coastal areas. We want everyone to access opportunities to better their lives, wherever they live. We will continue to deliver extensive employment support that we know works in supporting people to enter and progress in the labour market, including tailored help from jobcentres to meet the needs of individuals and businesses in each area.

I look forward to working with all colleagues across the House—as does the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill)—to continue to support people across our communities so that they can prosper. I want to thank again my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn for securing this debate, and I thank all those who have participated.

3.47 pm

**Virginia Crosbie:** I thank all Members who spoke in this important debate on the employment of people living in rural and coastal communities. We had representation from all parts of the UK, and I particularly thank the Minister, who certainly rose to the challenge.

The debate highlighted how much rural and coastal communities have to offer, as well as the challenges they face. I am particularly pleased that the Minister highlighted how important it is that we have intergovernmental co-ordination so that my constituents, like Kevin McDonnell, do not have to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles for good-quality employment. That is important for my Ynys Môn community, for our Welsh Heritage and for our Welsh language. *Diolch yn fawr.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the employment of people living in rural and coastal communities.

3.48 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 1 February 2024

## DEFENCE

### Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy

**The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heappey):** I would like to update the House on developments relating to the Afghan Relocations And Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme and the Ministry of Defence's progress in processing applications to the scheme from former members of Afghan specialist units.

We owe a debt of gratitude to these brave individuals who served for, with or alongside our armed forces in support of the UK mission in Afghanistan. Defence is determined to honour the commitments we have made under the ARAP scheme. That is why we have robust checks in place and regularly review our processes and procedures.

While many former members of Afghan specialist units, including former members of CF333 and ATF444, have been found eligible under ARAP and safely relocated to the UK with their families, a recent review of processes around eligibility decisions demonstrated instances of inconsistent application of ARAP criteria in certain cases.

In light of this, we are taking necessary steps to ensure that the ARAP criteria are applied consistently. As such, I can confirm that the MOD has decided to undertake a reassessment of all eligibility decisions made on ineligible applications with credible claims of links to Afghan specialist units. This reassessment will be done by independent staff within the MOD, who have not previously worked on these applications. They will review each application thoroughly on a case-by-case basis.

ARAP applications from this cohort present a unique set of challenges in assessing their eligibility. It is the case that such units reported directly into the Government of Afghanistan, meaning HMG does not hold employment records or comprehensive information, in the same way that we do for many other applicants.

Understanding the depth of feeling ARAP evokes across this place and beyond, we thank Members for their ongoing advocacy and support for ARAP. We have that same depth of feeling in the MOD and in Government, and we will now work quickly to deliver it.

[HCWS233]

## FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

### BBC World Service Objectives, Priorities and Targets

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):** My noble Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Lord Cameron, has today made the following statement:

The BBC chairman and I have agreed the "objectives, priorities and targets" (OPTs) for the BBC World Service licence. These have been set until the end of the current spending review period in 2025. The licence can be found on the BBC website.

The BBC World Service is the world's largest international news provider, globally broadcasting news, documentaries and discussions in 42 languages. It remains the world's most trusted broadcaster and is instrumental in helping to promote the UK and its values across the globe through high-quality, accurate and impartial reporting.

At a time when global media freedoms are under threat from malign state actors, this role cannot be underestimated. As such, I was pleased the Government were able to announce in March 2023 an uplift of £20 million to the World Service over the next two years, protecting all 42 language services, in recognition of its crucial role in supporting UK soft power, projecting UK culture and values overseas, and in countering harmful disinformation.

The objectives for the World Service contribute to the fulfilment of the mission and the promotion of the BBC's public purposes, including providing high-quality news coverage; current affairs; and factual programming to international audiences, which is firmly based on British values of accuracy, impartiality, and fairness. The objectives focus on four key areas:

- maximising the editorial impact and influence of the World Service for UK and global audiences, including through building valued reach;

- protecting the World Service's position as the most trusted provider of accurate and independent international news and current affairs;

- reflecting the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world through providing accurate, impartial and independent news that allows audiences to engage in democratic processes as informed citizens and better resist disinformation,

- demonstrating value for money and transparency, seeking alternative sources of funding where appropriate.

The BBC chairman and I have also agreed ambitious global audience targets for the World Service of 303 million for 2023/24 and 306 million for 2024/25.

The BBC will report annually against the objectives, priorities and targets I have agreed with the BBC board, including an assessment of progress against quantitative targets. I will meet the BBC chair (or their nominated representatives) annually to discuss the services, review the performance report, and consider any adjustments that need to be made, including targets. If the BBC chair and I agree, we may also consider adjustments to services outside this timing, in response to significant changes in market conditions or world events.

[HCWS236]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Home Office Funding 2023-24

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly):** The Home Office net cash requirement for the year exceeds that provided by the main estimate 2023-24. The supplementary estimate has not yet received Royal Assent.

The Contingencies Fund advance is required to meet commitments until the supplementary estimate receives Royal Assent, at which point the Home Office will be able to draw down the cash from the Consolidated Fund in the usual way, to repay the Contingencies Fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £2,600,000,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for Home Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £2,600,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS235]

## JUSTICE

### Video-witnessing Wills

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer):** My hon. Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Lord Bellamy, has made the following statement:

The Government are announcing today that they are not extending the legislation they introduced as a special measure during the covid-19 pandemic to permit remote (video) witnessing of wills.

The legislation was originally introduced in September 2020, amending the Wills Act 1837 so the normal requirement that two people must witness the testator signing to make their will in person could be extended to include remote witnessing by video-link. The Government and professional bodies published guidance on the steps that should be taken where wills were video-witnessed.

This temporary legislation was a response to the practical difficulties of having wills witnessed while restrictions on movement to limit the spread of the virus were in force, and at a time when more people wanted to make wills. The Government have always provided guidance that video-witnessing wills should be regarded as a last resort due to increased risks of formalities not being properly followed or risk of undue influence.

The Government decided to extend the temporary legislation for a further two years in February 2022. At the time the United Kingdom had only recently ended a further set of restrictions and there were concerns about further strains of the virus.

However, the special circumstances which applied when this measure was put in place no longer apply. In-person witnessing of wills is no longer subject to restrictions. As such we have decided not to extend the temporary legislation beyond 31 January 2024.

[HCWS234]

# Petition

*Thursday 1 February 2024*

## OBSERVATIONS

### WORK AND PENSIONS

#### Unpaid carers

*The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,*

Declares that unpaid carers continue to face significant financial challenges in this cost of living crisis; further that carers, including those in receipt of Carers Allowance, are extremely vulnerable to high costs due to their limited ability to earn an income and because of additional caring costs that they face; and notes that recent research from Carers UK found that thousands of unpaid carers are being forced into poverty, with many cutting back on essentials including food and heating.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider how the benefits system could better support unpaid carers of both working and state pension age, and to review Carers Allowance eligibility, so that carers can live a life beyond their unpaid caring responsibilities and continue to care safely as well.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, *Official Report*, 5 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 315.]

[P002879]

*Observations from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies):*

The Scottish Parliament already has considerable devolved powers to provide support for unpaid carers, including specifically through carer's allowance.

Financial support is also available through reserved means-tested benefits, where unpaid carers can receive an additional £2,200 per year in universal credit, pension credit, and other legacy benefits. Unpaid carers in these circumstances are also receiving additional financial support to meet higher costs of living.





# Ministerial Corrections

*Thursday 1 February 2024*

## WALES

### Protecting Steel in the UK

*The following are extracts from the Opposition day debate on Protecting Steel in the UK on 23 January 2024.*

**David T. C. Davies:**... No, the Government are paying £500 million to save 5,000 jobs, because they will be saved, as well as around 12,500 jobs in the supply chain...

The reality is that Tata told us that it was looking to pull out completely from the United Kingdom. If the loss of 3,000 jobs is devastating—it certainly is—how much more devastating would 5,000 be, and 12,500 jobs in the supply chain? It was a simple choice for the Government—not a good one—between seeing 3,000 people lose their jobs or around 17,500 people lose their jobs, and possibly even more. That is why the Government committed to pay £500 million towards an arc furnace. Let me make one other thing clear: the Government will not pay a penny to Tata until that arc furnace is built.

*[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 265.]*

**David T. C. Davies:**... That is what it has said to us as a Government and that is why we find ourselves in the difficult, unpleasant and awful situation of having to choose between 3,000 people losing their jobs and 17,500 people losing their jobs.

*[Official Report, 23 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 266.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies):*

Errors have been identified in my response to the debate on Protecting Steel in the UK. My response should have been:

**David T. C. Davies:**... No, the Government are paying £500 million to save **8,000** jobs, because they will be saved, as well as **thousands more** in the supply chain...

The reality is that Tata told us that it was looking to pull out completely from the United Kingdom. If the loss of 3,000 jobs is devastating—it certainly is—how much more devastating would **8,000** be, and **thousands more** in the supply chain? It was a simple choice for the Government—not a good one—between seeing 3,000 people lose their jobs or **many thousands more than that**. That is why the Government committed to pay £500 million towards an arc furnace. Let me make one other thing clear: the Government will not pay a penny to Tata **until it formally commits to building the arc furnace**.

**David T. C. Davies:**... That is what it has said to us as a Government and that is why we find ourselves in the difficult, unpleasant and awful situation of having to choose between 3,000 people losing their jobs or **many thousands more than that**.

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Type 2 Diabetes: Availability of Drugs

*The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Type 2 Diabetes: Availability of Drugs on 30 January 2024.*

**Andrew Stephenson:** There are around 1,400 medicines licensed in the UK, most of which are in good supply.

*[Official Report, 30 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 280WH.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, the right hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson):*

An error has been identified in the response given to the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) in the debate on Type 2 Diabetes: Availability of Drugs.

The correct response should have been:

**Andrew Stephenson:** There are around **14,000** medicines licensed in the UK, most of which are in good supply.





# ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 1 February 2024

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Thursday 8 February 2024**

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