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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 February 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Seafaring Support: Red Sea

1. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support seafarers working in the Red sea. [901406]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Let me first take this opportunity to offer my support and best wishes to His Majesty the King for a swift and full recovery. I look forward to seeing him out and about again on his public-facing duties.

This is a challenging time for seafarers. Their welfare is central to our concerns during the Red sea crisis. Their bravery has ensured the continued supply of vital goods to the UK. We have engaged with organisations that represent seafarers, working closely with the International Maritime Organisation—I have met its new secretary-general twice this year. We will not hesitate to take action to protect innocent lives and preserve freedom of navigation. In response to the Red sea crisis, the RAF has engaged in three waves of proportionate and targeted strikes against Houthi military targets with the United States and other allies. My Department continues to work closely with industry to provide the best possible advice and support.

David Duguid: I associate myself, and the people of Banff and Buchan, with my right hon. Friend's remarks wishing His Majesty the fullest of recoveries. Could he set out in more detail precisely what engagement the Government have had with British companies across the UK on not just the attacks but the threats of attacks in the Red sea?

Mr Harper: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we have been engaging regularly with shipping companies to ensure that they have as much advice and support as possible, so that they can take informed commercial decisions about vessel movements based on a full consideration of recent events. We provide security advisory notices and convene meetings with the sector at both official and ministerial level. I have met sector leaders to discuss these critical developments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that positive response. It is clear that the Government are taking the right steps to broadly address the issue, but what is being done to ensure that individual seafaring companies with responsibility for crews have access to up-to-date advice? I would go so far as to suggest protective measures to enable them to keep their routes open—perhaps protective staff on boats, or helicopters or planes overhead.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is right to put the safety of ships and seafarers at the centre of the issue, as we and the IMO do. We work very closely with the sector to ensure that it has the best possible information, both at policy level and in the region. We are taking further steps to ensure that the best advice is available on the ground, so that individual captains as well as their companies can make the best decisions commercially and, importantly, for the safety of their crews.

Transport Connectivity: North-west England

2. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase transport connectivity between towns and cities in the north-west. [901407]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Network North will see a further £19.8 billion-worth of investment in the north of England following the redirection of funding from High Speed 2. That is in addition to what has already been committed through the £3.5 billion to northern city regions from the first round of the city region sustainable transport settlements; the development of Northern Powerhouse Rail, which will transform rail connectivity between the north of England's key economic centres; and £11 billion for the trans-Pennine route upgrade.

Damien Moore: In the light of the Government's commitment to level up through Network North, will my hon. Friend commit to a meeting with me and other key stakeholders to discuss reinstating the Burscough curves rail link, which would connect Southport to Preston and the wider north of England, fulfilling our economic potential and helping us welcome another million visitors a year to Southport?

Mr Speaker: You could meet in Chorley, at Coppull station.

Huw Merriman: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to his doughty campaigning on the reopening of the Burscough curves. It is for local transport authorities to consider whether such projects are the best way to meet local transport needs and, if so, whether they wish to develop the schemes from the significant new transport budgets that the Government will shortly be allocating from HS2 savings.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): When the Prime Minister made the decision to scrap HS2, the Department for Transport said that the plan would "lead to increased capacity on the west coast mainline." That is not correct, is it? I have a leaked document from the Minister's own officials that proves it. In it, they

admit that the decision will mean fewer seats than today, with Glasgow and Manchester badly hit, and because HS2 trains cannot tilt, they will be even slower than current trains. Does he not owe it to the north finally to admit that? Does he accept that he will be the high-speed rail Minister who left behind slower trains and fewer seats?

Huw Merriman: Obviously, we do not comment on documents that may or may not have been leaked. What I can say is that the HS2 train design has always had capacity for 500 seats; if the trains had doubled up to 400 metres in length, the capacity would, of course, be 1,000 seats. The Network North document committed half a billion pounds to look at unlocking further capacity. Let us be quite clear that the 140 miles of HS2 being built to Birmingham will reduce the journey times not only to Birmingham, but to Manchester by another 27 minutes, and to Liverpool by 26 minutes. As far as the tilting is concerned, as the Department made clear to the Public Accounts Committee, we are looking at where those speeds can still be achieved on the west coast main line without the need to tilt.

Taxi Licensing

3. **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure consistent standards of taxi licensing across local authorities. [901408]

9. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure consistent standards of taxi licensing across local authorities. [901418]

16. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure consistent standards of taxi licensing across local authorities. [901427]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): The Department for Transport issues guidance to licensing authorities in England to help them regulate the sector, including the statutory taxi and private hire vehicle standards and the best practice guidance, updated in November 2023. Last year the Government enacted legislation requiring licensing authorities in England to use a national database to share information, in order to prevent drivers who have lost their licence from applying to other authorities that would not know about their previous wrongdoing.

Stephanie Peacock: Local taxi drivers in Barnsley are having their prices undermined by cross-border taxi drivers who do not have to abide by the same regulatory measures. Local councils have no jurisdiction over out-of-borough hires, and concerns have been raised about differences in the training and safety precautions required. The Labour party has committed to action. When will the Government do the same?

Guy Opperman: There is already a database and already a duty on local authorities to share information. Licences can be taken away in the particular circumstances the hon. Lady identifies.

Mr Betts: Taxis and private hire vehicles are a very personal service, and it is important for customers that both the vehicles and the drivers have proper safety

checks, so that if things go wrong they can take a complaint to the licensing authority. The problem is that when that authority is 100 miles away in Wolverhampton, the system simply does not work. When will the Minister legislate to ensure that journeys can be made in a licensed vehicle only when they either take place or finish in the licensing authority area?

Guy Opperman: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, we have already brought in changes to the rules that mean that individual authorities can take action against an individual operating in another authority, which is something I think he should welcome.

Daniel Zeichner: As we have heard from colleagues, the cross-border issue remains a real problem right across the country. We have the additional problem of the potentially changed relationship between operators and drivers, which is highlighted by the press campaigns about the possible imposition of VAT on private hire journeys. Does all this not show that the Department should have modernised taxi and private hire legislation ages ago, rather than waiting for companies such as Uber to drive a coach and horses through regulations that were, frankly, written in the time of coaches and horses?

Guy Opperman: I would not refer to regulations written in 2020 and updated in 2023 as written in the time of coaches and horses—perhaps the hon. Gentleman should check his history. On the Uber case that he rightly identifies, that is clearly a court case that the Government have to address and will therefore consult on thereafter.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's best wishes to His Majesty the King.

During my time in this House, I have worked alongside victims and survivors of the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal. Following the scandal, Rotherham council set very high standards for its taxi drivers, including installing CCTV in cabs and requiring national vocational qualification level 3 on child safeguarding. Those standards are being undercut by the Government's deregulation of taxi standards, and nothing the Minister has set out this morning will stop that. Does he not agree that the Government's position is putting the safety of women and girls at risk? Is it not time for robust legislation and national minimum standards to protect them?

Guy Opperman: With respect, on 27 April 2023 a new law came into force that requires licensing authorities in England to use a database to record refusals, suspensions and revocations made on safeguarding or road safety grounds. The new requirements mean that individuals who are not fit and proper to hold a taxi or private hire vehicle licence will be unable to apply for a licence with other authorities without that authority being made aware of past safety concerns. That change will help to protect passengers, including women and girls, as well as the reputation of the majority of drivers, from those who are unfit to hold that office.

Bus Services

4. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of bus services. [901409]

8. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of bus service levels in England. [901417]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): The Government are providing the largest public investment in buses for a generation, providing more than £4.5 billion-worth of services in England outside London since 2020, as we rebuilt post covid.

Rachel Hopkins: My constituents are deeply concerned about the proposed cuts to the 78, 79 and 200 bus routes linking villages and towns in Bedfordshire. That is in the context of the Government's own latest bus statistics, which show that in the last decade the bus sector in England outside London lost 15,000 workers and had around 600 million fewer annual bus passenger journeys. The Government's bus strategy, published in 2020, is not reversing that decline. Will they commit to reversing the ideological ban on municipal bus companies and ensure that all local authorities get sufficient funding to deliver the bus services our communities need?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady seems to have forgotten the covid pandemic. The number of local bus passenger journeys in England increased by half a billion—that is 19%—in the financial year ending March 2023. Her local authority received extra BSIP-plus—bus service improvement plans—funding of £19 million. I urge her bus operators to sign up to the £2 bus fare, which has been transformational across the country in raising bus numbers.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Would the Minister be as surprised as I was to learn that, of the £3.722 million long-term BSIP Government cash given to Blackburn with Darwen Council, only £180,000—less than 5% of the entire budget—is being spent in the town of Darwen? It is all very well for the Minister to give money to councils such as Blackburn with Darwen, but will he ensure that it is spent fairly among the populations they represent?

Guy Opperman: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is money that the Government give to ensure that communities across a particular constituency receive support. It should not be solely focused on one area. I will take up that point and write to the local authority myself.

Liz Twist: Bus mileage has dropped by just 5% in London since 2010, yet astonishingly it has fallen by more than 30% in the north-east, as the Minister will know. Kim McGuinness, Labour's candidate for North East Mayor, is keen to fix that as a priority, if elected in May. Is it not beyond time to let local communities have power and control of their own local bus services?

Guy Opperman: Clearly, that we are to have a regional Mayor for the North East is good news, but I did not think the hon. Lady would be celebrating the fact that

she has a disastrous police and crime commissioner as her candidate and that the previously Labour Metro Mayor of North of Tyne is now running as an independent against the Labour party. However, it is without a shadow of a doubt the

“best-funded devolution deal in the country.”

Those are not my words, but those of the previously Labour Mayor. I genuinely believe we are building back better post covid, with enhanced bus company usage in circumstances where the £2 bus fare is making a huge difference.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Recent statistics show that the Bee Network is already making a daily difference for bus passengers across Greater Manchester, with an 8% rise in patronage in the first month of franchising alone and more bus services running on time than before. Liverpool and West Yorkshire are now following in Greater Manchester's footsteps and exploring their own franchising plans to revolutionise local transport for thousands of residents. Does the Minister agree with Labour's plan to give every local authority, not just Metro Mayors, the same freedom to take back control of their own bus services? If not, what does he say to the millions of people whose bus routes are being so badly cut back under this tired Tory Government? Does it not prove that while the Conservatives dither, Labour delivers?

Guy Opperman: With respect, the number of bus journeys in England increased by half a billion to 3.4 billion in the financial year ending March 2023, and that happened because of massive Government funding, which has effectively doubled since 2009. The hon. Gentleman is actually lauding something that is funded by this Government. It is unquestionably the case that we have allowed certain local authorities and Mayors to engage in franchising—something we introduced—but there has to be a way of paying for it, and it has been demonstrated repeatedly that when Labour organisations are challenged on this, they struggle to find out how they are going to deal with the funding, because, quite simply, they do not have a plan.

Speed Limits

5. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What discussions he has had with local authorities on 20 mph speed limits on roads. [901411]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): In England, this is primarily a matter for local authorities. The 20 mph limits work in the right places, such as outside schools, and following the right consultation with the public. They do not work as blanket measures. We do not want them to be set indiscriminately on all roads, without due regard for the safety case and without local support.

Theresa Villiers: The 20 mph limits can work in quiet, narrow residential side streets where there is local consent, but London's Labour Mayor and boroughs are increasingly inflicting them on wide roads and main roads where they are not justified. Now Barnet Council wants to introduce a big 20 mph zone in Whetstone without

adequate consultation. Will the Secretary of State intervene to ensure that these speed limits are introduced only in appropriate circumstances, and only when they have strong local support?

Mr Harper: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Imposing blanket 20 mph zones without local support—which is what Labour has done across Wales and in London—is bad for drivers, but it also risks reducing the specific protection for vulnerable road users which operates, for example, near schools. As our policy paper “Plan for drivers” explains, we will be providing stronger guidance to ensure that blanket 20 mph zones are restricted, and we will consider further action against councils that do not comply with it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): On one hand the Secretary of State acknowledges the ability of local authorities to deliver their own local transport strategies such as low-traffic neighbourhoods and 20 mph zones where they fit, but on the other hand this “Plan for drivers” weaponises such policies. Will he stop weaponising them, and consider those who are not in vehicles but are using our roads and the safety measures from their local authorities? Will he recognise that we are all road users, whether or not we are in a vehicle?

Mr Harper: I think that question had the disadvantage of being written before the hon. Lady had listened to my answer. I said very clearly that I supported 20 mph zones in areas where they make sense. Outside a school, for instance, they make perfect sense. What does not make sense is imposing blanket policies that bear no relation to the circumstances, which, as I have said, is what Labour has done in Wales. It has implemented blanket policies that are very unpopular, do not carry public support, and damage the acceptance of 20 mph zones in places where they do make sense—

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): He is peddling conspiracy theories again.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman, from a sedentary position, refers to conspiracies. My constituency is next door to Wales, and I can tell the House that that is not a conspiracy; the 20 mph zones are incredibly unpopular in Wales. This is a blanket policy that makes no sense and is not supported by the public.

Sustainable Aviation Fuel

6. **Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to improve the allocation of resources between the production of sustainable aviation fuel and other uses of biomass. [901415]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): In developing the biomass strategy and our forthcoming low-carbon fuel strategy, my Department has worked closely with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, whose policy paper on the biomass strategy was published last year. Sectors that are harder to decarbonise, including aviation, should be priority uses for biomass. We are continuing to work

across Government, and with industry experts, to ensure that policies that increase the supply of sustainable aviation fuels deliver on our climate change commitments.

Dr Whitehead: As the Minister will know, the sustainable aviation fuel mandate will come into force in 2025, but meanwhile the Government have not yet responded to consultations on how it will work, and there is no real-world fuel sourcing analysis or plan that would take account of the changing nature of municipal waste arising from the already allocated uses of municipal and agricultural feedstock for purposes other than the production of SAF. What steps is the Minister taking to develop a realistic plan for feedstock availability and use?

Anthony Browne: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s question. As I have just said, we will shortly publish the low-carbon fuel strategy, which will set out the different sources of low-carbon fuels. We will publish our response to the SAF mandate by the spring. A great deal of detailed analysis and work is being done in relation to different fuel sources. We will also publish a revenue certainty mechanism to ensure that we have a UK SAF industry. We engage regularly with the industry on this, and it is very confident about and supportive of the Government’s policies. We do have a detailed plan, and I want to commiserate with the hon. Gentleman, because I am sure that as Energy Minister he too had a plan, but the Opposition’s plans seem to have been U-turned today.

Rail Fares

7. **Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the impact of the rise in rail fares on passenger numbers since 2010. [901416]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Since 2010, regulated fares across Great Britain have decreased by around 7% compared with the retail prices index. The Government continue to intervene to keep fares affordable, and to encourage travel, by capping increases below inflation and delivering initiatives such as the second great British rail sale. We have to strike a balance between encouraging passengers to use our rail network and supporting the rail industry to get back on a good financial footing as it continues to deal with a revenue shortfall following the pandemic.

Andrew Western: For a period last year, Urmston train station in my constituency was one of the country’s 10 worst performing train stations for service reliability. Given the level of service experienced by my constituents who use Urmston and other stations on the line, why are they set to face an inflation-busting fare increase in March?

Huw Merriman: If we take the current year’s fares as an example, we delivered the biggest Government intervention on rail fares since privatisation by capping fare increases at 5.9%, which was 6.4 percentage points below the July RPI. It is all about striking a balance, and I believe that balance is a fair one.

In the last three years, the UK taxpayer has contributed £45.9 billion to keep the railways going. This year’s figure of 4.9% is, again, below inflation. It cannot be

that bad, because Labour-run Wales has done exactly the same. It is better than Scotland, where the SNP has put up fares by 8.7%.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If a person were to get a train from Market Rasen to London later this morning, not only would they be hit by a hefty rail fare, as we all know, but, worse, it would take them over three hours and two changes. My hon. Friend has repeatedly promised me and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) that he will give us a through train to London. I understand that he has now approved that—he can confirm it today—but it is held up on the desk of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We do not want some bean counter in the Treasury stopping our train.

Huw Merriman: I fear a career-limiting response. My right hon. Friend's campaign is strong, and he is absolutely right that it has this team's support; I am sure that it will have support across Government. It is currently being looked at, and I hope to be able to give him and his colleagues good news.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I apologise for the disruption to normal service: my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) is on Committee business, so the House will have to put up with a spokesperson replacement service this morning.

Last October, peak fares were scrapped across Scotland's railways for six months. That has been extended to nine months, until the end of June. As a result, ScotRail services are 4% busier and demand has shifted across the service day. Meanwhile, Department for Transport-owned London North Eastern Railway has pushed up prices for thousands of tickets in the name of simplification, in some cases costing passengers going to and from Scotland hundreds of pounds extra. Will the Minister look to the lessons that Scotland has learned from scrapping peak fares, and apply that policy across Anglo-Scottish services?

Huw Merriman: I am delighted to talk about things that are being scrapped, because perhaps we can shift towards rail freight. The SNP budget has just been set. Mode shift revenue support has always been given to rail freight, to move freight from road to rail, but the SNP Scottish Government have just announced that they are axing that subsidy. Not only that, but for the year to come, the cross-border subsidy between Scotland and the rest of Great Britain is being scrapped, too. We stand by the rail freight subsidy, so we will fund the Scottish element.

What are the Scottish Government doing? They talk about decarbonisation while shifting more freight on to the roads, because they refuse to support rail freight. That is an absolute shocker. That, along with the 8.7% increase in fares and the £80 million cut to ScotRail, means that the hon. Gentleman is in no place to lecture anyone when it comes to rail.

Road Resurfacing

10. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What funding his Department is providing for road resurfacing. [901419]

15. **Darren Henry** (Broxtowe) (Con): What funding his Department is providing for road resurfacing. [901426]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): As part of the Network North plan, the Government are providing a record funding increase of £8.3 billion for local highway maintenance in England over the next decade to enable local highways authorities to resurface roads up and down the country. Over that period, Nottinghamshire will get £138.44 million of additional funding over and above what it would have received. In the current financial year, most highways authorities in England will get 30% more funding than they did in the previous year.

Tom Randall: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer, and for the billions that have been redirected to the midlands for road repairs from HS2. Conservative-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council, in difficult financial circumstances, is endeavouring to spend millions, beyond its regular highways budget, on road repairs. May I impress on him that this remains perhaps the top issue raised with me in my inbox? Will he bear that in mind, particularly when he has his conversations with the Treasury? Will he join me in my campaign to carry on fixing Gedling's roads?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue, and for pointing out how effective Nottinghamshire County Council is in spending the £2.3 million that it is getting this year and will get next year; this is revolutionary long-term funding. Interestingly, this is happening because we have a plan, not just for delivering better roads, but for paying for that. Having a plan for delivering and paying for things is important, as the Labour party is finding out today; it has no plan and no way to pay.

Darren Henry: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks wishing His Majesty the King a speedy recovery?

Potholes in Broxtowe are incredibly bad; my constituents raise this issue all the time. The ongoing situation has been compounded by multiple recent flooding events in Nottinghamshire, which have resulted in five times more damage to our roads than has occurred in other years. My office gets calls and emails constantly about this plight, from constituents in Beeston, Stapleford, Strelley, Nuthall and Kimberley, to name a few of the areas I am contacted about. This week, I met my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), the leader of Nottinghamshire County Council, to raise this issue. What more are the Government doing to work with local councils to tackle potholes in Broxtowe?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) raised the issue of flood damage with me as well, and we are looking at what we can do. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) raised the issue of the importance of funding for improving local roads. We made a big decision on that, and improving the road network over time and allowing local authorities to spend that money shows an important sense of priorities. We are also making sure that reporting requirements are in place, so that

highways authorities have to set out to the people to whom they are accountable what they are spending the money on.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The pothole situation is a metaphor for what the Government have been doing with public investment in the past 14 years. The roads have got worse and worse, with the Automobile Association describing October as the worst month for pothole breakdowns on our roads. If the Government were really concerned about this issue, they would not have starved local authorities of the resources to deal with the problem. Is that not correct?

Mr Harper: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman on that at all. We have given local authorities more than £5 billion of funding for local road maintenance. The £8.3 billion in the Network North plan is over and above that. I would have thought he would welcome the fact that when we announced the money for local road maintenance, I decided that in London, 95% of that extra funding would go to London councils, rather than Transport for London, so that it gets spent on fixing the roads, rather than being wasted by the Mayor of London.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State seems to have forgotten the extensive cuts to the road repair budget that his Government have presided over. Let us consider the example of Northamptonshire, where the Government have cut £16 million from highways maintenance since 2020 alone. That is leaving 330,000 potholes unfilled. He knows that the Network North announcement will give Northamptonshire back only £2.5 million of that £16 million over the next two years. As for Wellingborough, the last time Peter Bone mentioned road repairs was in 2015. After 14 years of neglect by the Conservative Government and their former Conservative MP, is not the best advice for people in Wellingborough who want action on potholes to vote for Labour's Gen Kitchen next Thursday?

Mr Harper: It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to hear that I do not agree with him at all. Before the Network North announcement, the Government were already investing over £5.5 billion of capital funding in highways maintenance between 2021 and 2024-25, and in the Budget last year, the Chancellor found an extra £200 million for eligible highways authorities. The £8.3 billion is on top of that, so I would urge voters in Wellingborough to vote for our fantastic candidate, Helen Harrison, who will make a fantastic Member of Parliament to serve on the Government side of the House.

Road Safety

11. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help ensure the safety of vulnerable road users. [901420]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): In January 2022, the Government updated the highway code to improve road safety for people walking, cycling and riding. The changes aimed to make a positive shift in road-user behaviour, by

making road users aware of their responsibility to use roads safely and to reduce the dangers they may pose to others. The Government's flagship multimillion-pound road safety campaign, THINK!, also plays a crucial part in reducing the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads.

Mr Sheerman: Are the Minister and his team aware that our country, once known to be one of the best places in the world for road safety, is now, after 14 years of neglect, no targets—in fact, there is a hatred of targets—and little enforcement, a very dangerous place to be a vulnerable road user? When will this Government wake up and start doing something about that?

Guy Opperman: With no disrespect to the hon. Gentleman, who I like as a person, he is simply wrong. In the last year, ending June 2023, there was a decline of 9% in fatalities compared to the year ending June 2022. Look at the specific measures taken: we have toughened up the driving test, made the highway code more robust and introduced tougher criminal sentences. Those are the actions of a Government who are listening and taking action.

Unused Rail Capacity

12. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Whether the Office of Rail Regulation has identified unused rail network capacity for open-access services. [901421]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): The Office of Rail and Road has been working with Network Rail and the Department for Transport to identify unused access rights. That work will support the release of under-used capacity on the rail network, which may then be used by potential operators in the development of open-access proposals.

John Penrose: It is great to hear that there is work under way, but I notice that my hon. Friend did not say how far it had got. I know that he understands that this is a huge opportunity to improve our over-subsidised, post-pandemic railways, so that passengers can get a better deal, but if we do not move faster it will slip through our fingers. The only people who are happy with the status quo are middle-aged men who want to carry on playing with trains at the expense of taxpayers, and the Labour party, which wants to run rail for the benefit of rail unions rather than passengers, so please can we get on with this a lot faster?

Huw Merriman: I thought he was referring to me with that "middle-aged man" point, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working at pace. Since we met in November with the team, which included my hon. Friend, to see what further we could do, we have written to operators to clarify that unused access rights should be released. With regard to Department for Transport operators, we have hundreds of unused access rights that we have identified for release. We also talked about speeding up the entire decision-making process, and the ORR and Network Rail now have a draft service level agreement to do that. I will write to him with more detail, but a lot has happened in the last month.

Transport for London: Funding

13. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions he has had with Transport for London on its use of Government funding. [901423]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor of London. Since 2020, the Government have given TfL £6.6 billion of funding to support transport services. It is the responsibility of the Greater London Authority to hold the Mayor and Transport for London to account. The Department is in regular contact with TfL and monitors its finances in accordance with the terms of our funding settlement letters.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the £6.6 billion to subsidise TfL came with strings attached, including raising fares in line with the rest of England. No sooner did the last instalment of the money arrive than the Mayor managed to find £30 million to pay off the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, which threatened strike action, storing up problems for the next negotiations. He then found £120 million so that he does not have to raise fares in line with the rest of England. He has now come up with a crazy policy of reduced fares on Fridays, without having talked to anyone before introducing it. Will my right hon. Friend have a meeting with the Labour Mayor of London and ensure the money provided by the Department is used for the benefit of Londoners?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is right: it is important that the money is used for the benefit of Londoners. We have provided very significant support, as I have set out, but it has not stopped the Mayor of London from putting up taxes on the poorest motorists, with the extension of his ultra low emission zone scheme to outer London. Rather than my having a meeting with him, the best way to hold the Mayor of London to account is for voters in London to vote for Susan Hall and kick him out.

Transport Connectivity: North Yorkshire

14. **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase transport connectivity across north Yorkshire. [901425]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): Because of the Prime Minister's decision, Network North will see £19.8 billion of extra transport investment in the north of England, including a brand new £2.5 billion fund to transform local transport in 14 rural counties, smaller cities and towns in every part of the north outside the big city regions. This is in addition to what has already been committed through the integrated rail plan and the £11 billion TransPennine route upgrade.

Julian Sturdy: I thank the Minister for visiting my constituency back in January. Following that visit, he became aware of the important economic impact of the A64 on York and North Yorkshire. May I stress to him again how important the upgrade is to safety on the road? A few days following his visit, the road was again closed due to a serious accident. Sadly, that followed another fatal accident on the road in December. This is

becoming an ever more frequent occurrence, so when he looks at the upgrade of the A64, will he ensure that the safety impact plays an important role?

Guy Opperman: It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and meet him and other parliamentary colleagues who were so passionately concerned about the improvement of the A64 and its safety issues. I take the point he raises on board. I know that National Highways is developing options to address the concerns that he, local people and businesses have identified with the road. We will look at them very closely. I welcome the fact that he continues to champion this important matter.

Support for Motorists

17. **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): What steps he is taking to support low-income motorists. [901428]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): The Government are helping low-income motorists by keeping down the cost of motoring. There has been no increase in fuel duty since January 2011, 13 years ago. Furthermore, recognising the fuel price volatility after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, we cut 5p from fuel duty in March 2022. This was extended for another year in March 2023. This cut, along with the inflation freeze, has saved the average car driver around £100 this year.

Steve Tuckwell: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. Months after the Mayor of London's ULEZ expansion came into effect, some of Uxbridge and South Ruislip's most hard-working and least well-off residents continue to be penalised by it. As part of the Government's work to help motorists, will he commit to continuing to work with me and colleagues from across outer London to ensure that we are doing all we can to lessen the financial burden on all motorists?

Anthony Browne: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter. I am very sorry to hear about the burden that the Mayor of London has forced on the poorest motorists in London, particularly when we hear that his scrappage scheme is underfunded and slow to process payments. This is a direct consequence of a Labour Mayor who did not keep his word to Londoners. The only remedy for Londoners is to vote him out and vote in Susan Hall in May.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We need to incentivise people from all incomes to participate in the green transition. However, electric vehicles are totally out of reach for most car owners, especially those on low incomes. In addition, people who rely on public charging points are still paying a lot more than those who can charge from home. Will the Government close this gap to ensure that everybody is getting a fair deal, including those on low incomes, to make sure that we get to net zero? Those on low incomes also want to help the country get to net zero.

Anthony Browne: I thank the hon. Member for her question. It is my responsibility to help roll out electric vehicles. We introduced the zero emission vehicle mandate

to ensure that 22% of vehicle sales this year are zero emission. I should say that, throughout the life cycle of an electric vehicle, they are cheaper than petrol or diesel cars to drive. This Government have given £2 billion-worth of support to owners of electric vehicles and to charge point companies to help smooth that introduction. The specific question that she raises is about VAT, and that is a matter for the Treasury.

Rail Connectivity: Cambridge and Norwich

18. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase rail connectivity between Cambridge and Norwich. [901430]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): Greater Anglia currently operates an hourly direct rail service between Norwich and Cambridge using its new rolling stock, with a journey time of around 80 minutes. It is also possible to travel between Norwich and Cambridge at other times by changing trains at Ely station. When the Ely area capacity enhancement scheme is delivered, it could create improved regional journeys for passengers across East Anglia.

Jerome Mayhew: Costs are rising for growing a business in Cambridge, yet Norwich, a finer city, is just down the road and, more importantly, just down the railway. We need a greater frequency of trains, and faster trains, to make the Norwich-Cambridge tech corridor a greater reality. It is being held back by the delays in getting the Ely junction fixed. How soon will that be sorted out by the Department?

Huw Merriman: I welcome my hon. Friend's campaign for the Ely junction capacity enhancement scheme, which is one of the schemes referenced in the Prime Minister's Network North plan. Network Rail has developed the scheme to outline business case stage, and next steps will involve further investment case development and delivery planning. I am keen to see it delivered, because it will deliver for rail freight.

Topical Questions

T1. [901431] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): This week, the Government showed once again that we are on the side of Britain's drivers. New measures from our plan for drivers will make it simpler to charge electric cars, with schools and colleges receiving grants to boost charging and the release of the first payments from our £381 million levy fund. We are also consulting on speeding up charge point installation.

We have a plan to decarbonise transport that is working. The Labour party is in disarray. Its leader, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), would ditch Labour's flagship spending promise, despite only committing to it on Tuesday. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) must feel uncomfortable, having said weeks ago that it was very important. It is not the first time that she has been in that position. She said a month ago that cancelling phase two of HS2 would make transport worse; the

very same day, the leader of the Labour party overruled her and agreed with the Prime Minister's plan. Labour has no plan, no direction, no clue—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just a second, Secretary of State. You know that you have no responsibility for the Opposition, and I am sure that you would not want to take it on as part of your portfolio. I need to get through topical questions.

Tim Loughton: I am pleased to hear about the Secretary of State's plans, but does he have a plan to deal with some of the apparent traffic jams in responding to consultations on private Members' legislation in his Department? In 2020, the consultation on pavement parking closed. Pavement parking causes huge problems for guide dogs, wheelchair users and everybody else. When will we have a response to that? On the Parking (Code of Practice) Act 2019, introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), when will we see the plans to cut down on cowboy parking enforcement companies? When will that traffic jam be eased?

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those issues. We will come out with a response on pavement parking very shortly. I cannot give him a specific date. On roadworks generally, we will consult on plans to improve the measures that stop utility companies causing roadworks to overrun, putting more pressure on them to ensure that our roads can keep moving, to support drivers.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What does the Secretary of State think that it says about the performance standards in the contracts that he signed with failing operators that senior executives at Avanti, whose cancellations now run at 17%, could boast about the "free money" from the taxpayer that is "too good to be true"?

Mr Harper: Two things: first, Avanti does not have any money under the performance regime, because it has not delivered appropriate enough quality, demonstrating that we pay only for good performance. On the specific issue that the hon. Lady raises, the Rail Minister and I raised that with Avanti. Senior executives at FirstGroup agreed with us that those comments were appalling, and they are taking steps to deal with that issue within the company.

Louise Haigh: They were disgraceful comments from Avanti, but the problem goes to the contracts that the Secretary of State is signing with such failing operators. Last year, Govia Thameslink failed on every single performance measure at its stations, but rather than enforcing the standards in the contract and demanding better, he lowered them so that Govia would still potentially receive its bonus and performance fee, at a potential cost of millions to the taxpayer. Is that not the perfect symbol of the Conservatives' broken rail network: failure rewarded, and passengers and taxpayers paying the price?

Mr Harper: It absolutely is not. The hon. Lady referred to Avanti West Coast, I gave her the answer to the question on Avanti and then she just repeated

something that simply was not the case. According to the service quality regime under which Avanti West Coast operates, it has not received any payments, because it has not been hitting the quality targets—*[Interruption.]* If she would listen to my answer, Avanti has not hit the quality targets, so that is exactly the performance regime working.

T2. [901433] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): The Cumbrian Coast railway is vital to the energy coast, for both passengers and freight. I welcome the extra funding and services that Network North will bring, but could the Rail Minister update me on the latest progress?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I would be delighted to update my hon. Friend. She will know that the upgrade of the energy coast line was one of the commitments in the Network North document. The Department is now working closely with Network Rail and local stakeholders to revisit the scope of the interventions, which were presented in the 2022 outline business case, and we expect that work to conclude later this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The A701 relief road realignment is a key regional infrastructure project with knock-on national benefits, not to mention the major improvements it would make in Midlothian. So-called levelling up round 3 did not even allow the project to bid for funding, and I know that the leader of Midlothian Council and the leaders of all the councils in the Edinburgh and South East Scotland city region deal have written to the Levelling Up Secretary to express their disappointment. Will this Secretary of State add his voice to theirs in calling for that critical infrastructure to be supported?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman will know that the primary responsibility for delivering road transport in Scotland is the responsibility of the SNP Government, because it is devolved. I am pleased that he has welcomed the levelling-up bids that have been delivered in Scotland—this Government delivering for the people of Scotland where his Government have failed. On the specific issue he raises, I will of course draw his remarks to the attention of the Secretary of State.

T3. [901434] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Fraserburgh-based Gray & Adams is the UK's pre-eminent manufacturer of refrigerated trailers—I am told they were involved in the design of regulations in the early days of refrigerated transport. Will the Minister meet me and Gray & Adams's management and engineers to see what can be done to ensure that regulations are updated at a pace that keeps up with the ongoing innovations made by that great example of British manufacturing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): My hon. Friend has been a fantastic champion for Fraserburgh and for that business in particular. I know very well the issue in respect of longer semi-trailers and compliance with the regulations. I would be delighted to meet him and the company,

and I assure both the company and the wider industry that we are working to find a way forward on this question, because it matters and we want to support that business.

T4. [901435] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): His Majesty the King is well known and much loved in my constituency, and on behalf of my constituents I wish him a full recovery.

Do the Government agree that the sustainability of transport links, particularly air links, between Scottish airports and the rest of the UK are very important? For example, flights in and out of Wick John O'Groats airport are crucial to the economic development of the far north.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Anthony Browne): Indeed; aviation is important for economic development across the entirety of the UK, including links between Scotland and England. However, the hon. Gentleman's question was about Wick John O'Groats airport, and the public service obligations for that airport lie entirely within Scotland and are a matter for the Scottish Government.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The roads Minister will recall a meeting I had with him, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) and for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), about resurfacing the A180 and removing the concrete surface. I have had many meetings with roads Ministers over the years who have promised that. Will he be the one who can deliver it?

Guy Opperman: I sincerely hope so.

T5. [901438] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): One SME owner in my constituency told me that, if he has meetings in London, he now often travels down the night before, because he cannot rely on Avanti's train service. Even if the trains are not cancelled, as we learned recently, Avanti is Britain's least punctual train operator. Given that terrible service, does the Secretary of State now regret his premature decision to extend the contract for the west coast main line?

Huw Merriman: The decision to extend the Avanti contract was taken because its performance had improved dramatically. At that time, its self-induced cancellation rates were at 1.5%, down from 13%. Avanti is in the process of hiring 70 drivers per year. I have spoken to Avanti about matters that have been raised in the Chamber today, and about its recent service. We know that it needs to do better, and we are holding it to account to ensure that it does so.

Mr Speaker: It is an appalling service.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The proposed west London orbital network could enable trains to run from Hendon to Hounslow and take millions of passengers off the underground, and will be a boon to all people in west London. Has my hon. Friend had a look at the proposal, and will he give it the green light?

Huw Merriman: We have had a presentation on the plan, and I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to update him. It is a matter of interest, and I like to see

such proposals brought forward—although, of course, we have to balance them with ensuring that the taxpayer is not at extra risk.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The dualling of the A47 at Blofield was fully funded and ready to go a year ago. Since then, a former Green party parliamentary candidate has bogged it down in a series of legal challenges. Once they have been overcome, will the Department be right behind that much-needed dualling scheme?

Guy Opperman: The Government are utterly committed to the A47. The court case to which my hon. Friend refers is also linked to the A57. We are passionately committed to both roads. We await the judgment, which we believe will come within the next month or so.

T6.[901439]**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Bedford borough could become the home of the only Universal Studios theme park in Europe, bringing enormous prosperity and many jobs to my constituency and the eastern region. Although road infrastructure funding has already been allocated until 2025, will the Government commit to supporting that exciting project by funding the substantial road improvements that will be necessary for the plan to go ahead?

Mr Harper: I am familiar with that scheme, on which I have been briefed, and I know that the Chancellor has been involved in it as well. The Government will look carefully at the proposals that are brought forward and will want to do what we can to ensure that that exciting proposal comes to fruition.

Steve Tuckwell (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on what measures are being taken to reduce the amount of litter and debris blighting many central reservations and grass verges on our major highways?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. It is absolutely vital that the great British public stop throwing litter—that would be the first and most important thing. I can assure him that National Highways is utterly committed on this matter, and gave evidence to the Transport Committee about the dozens and dozens of people it has clearing up the litter every single day. However, it is fundamentally up to the public to stop littering.

T7. [901440] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Heathrow airport saw a significant increase in noise complaints last year. Residents in my constituency are regularly woken up in the middle of the night by the roar of jet engines overhead, and there are well-documented impacts on their physical and mental health. Will the Secretary of State finally commit to banning night flights between 11 pm and 6 am?

Anthony Browne: On noise, it is important to strike a balance between the negative impacts of aviation on local communities who live close to the airport and the economic benefits of flights around the UK. We will shortly publish the results of a consultation on night flights, and the hon. Member should wait for it.¹

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Vehicles parked on pavements continue to have a negative impact on disabled people, especially those who are blind or partially sighted like myself. It has been four years since the Government's consultation on that, yet still no action has been taken. The Minister said that they were going to respond to that consultation soon. "Soon" is not good enough. When will they bring forward a plan to ban pavement parking?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will understand that there are already provisions in place permitting action by local authorities. We intend to publish the Government review very shortly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the ministerial team seen the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety's recent report on the growing number of accidents involving e-scooters, and if not, will they look at it? Not only are e-scooters an increasing danger to all our constituents, there is a lack of police follow-up when accidents happen.

Anthony Browne: The use of private e-scooters on public land—on roads and pavements—is illegal in the UK, and it is up to the police to enforce that law. We have 23 different legal trials of rental e-scooters around the country.¹ We recently announced the extension of those trials, and we are using that data to learn more about the dangers or otherwise of e-scooters, which will inform the policy for the future regulation of e-scooters.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Mayor of London has frozen fares for five out of the eight years he has been in office, meaning that they are 14% below national fare increases. Should I take it from the Secretary of State's earlier answer to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that he is opposed to those fare freezes, and that he expects a Conservative Mayor to put fares up if elected?

Mr Harper: No. What I find surprising is that the London Mayor spends an awful lot of time pretending that he does not have any money, so he puts up taxes on hard-working motorists in outer London, and then just before an election, he finds a secret war chest that enables him to do popular things. Everyone knows that if he were to win, he would put up taxes again on the poorest motorists as sure as night follows day, which is why they should vote for Susan Hall.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank Ministers for all their answers. Regarding accessibility for disabled passengers, being ever mindful that we are in an age of equality and that disabled people deserve the same opportunities as everyone else, has consideration been given to ensuring that taxi firms have an obligation to provide vehicles for disabled people in every shift pattern?

Guy Opperman: It is always good to have the hon. Gentleman winding up proceedings. I will take away that point and have a very detailed look at it, and get officials to give me a detailed answer that I will provide in writing.

1. [Official Report, 19 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 7MC.] (Correction)

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Business of the House

10.31 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 19 February will include:

MONDAY 19 FEBRUARY—Second reading of the Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 20 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill.

WEDNESDAY 21 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (5th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 22 FEBRUARY—A debate on the civil nuclear road map, followed by a general debate on premature deaths from heart and circulatory diseases. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 23 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 26 February includes:

MONDAY 26 FEBRUARY—General debate, subject to be confirmed.

TUESDAY 27 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill.

WEDNESDAY 28 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Pedicabs (London) Bill [*Lords*].

THURSDAY 29 FEBRUARY—A debate on a motion on language in politics on International Women's Day, followed by a general debate on Welsh affairs. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 1 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

Lucy Powell: I start by offering my best wishes to His Majesty the King and all the royal family at this difficult time. I wish him a speedy recovery.

I thank the Leader of the House for the business, but yet again, there are a few things missing that we have long been promised. I was glad that the motion on risk-based exclusion of Members was laid before the House last week, but when will the Leader of the House schedule a debate and a vote? Once again, there is no motion on the Procedure Committee's recommendations on holding Secretaries of State in the Lords to account. Report stage of the Renters (Reform) Bill was promised by early February, but it is nowhere to be seen, and the football regulator long promised to clubs and their communities is still not in the upcoming business. The Leader of the House said a few weeks ago that that legislation would be brought forward "very soon".

Will she also confirm that the Government will make a statement as soon we are back on progress in exonerating victims of the Post Office Horizon scandal, and that it is still the intention of the Government to bring forward legislation to exonerate victims? We are getting a written ministerial statement today on infected blood, yet time and again she has promised oral statements to update the House. The business she has announced is not exactly going to fill all the days, so surely she can find time for these important matters.

This week, we saw the launch of the Popular Conservatives, who apparently have not heard of irony or oxymorons. They are headed by the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), the least popular Prime Minister in the history of British polling. I know the Leader of the House is a fan, but in the six weeks she was in office she managed to totally crash the economy. Who exactly do they think they are popular with: mortgage holders coming out of fixed rates and now paying hundreds of pounds more a month, shoppers seeing the prices of food and essentials soar, or renters seeing massive hikes? Let us be honest: poll after poll shows there is absolutely nothing popular about the current Conservative party, although I did notice that the Leader of the House herself ranks as the most popular Conservative with voters. So maybe she could offer the Popular Conservatives some advice: show some contrition for the economic mess they have caused and stay off the airwaves.

Perhaps more sombrely, the Prime Minister has this week made some serious misjudgments. On Monday, he shook hands on a bet to deport migrants to Rwanda before the next general election. Betting on people's lives was grim to watch, and the ease with which the Prime Minister agreed to a £1,000 bet when so many are suffering through the Conservative cost of living crisis was a gross spectacle. Does the Leader of the House think betting about the plight of desperate people is a good advert for her Government?

In that interview, the Prime Minister also inferred that the Leader of the Opposition was a terrorist sympathiser. Actually, when he was the Director of Public Prosecutions, my right hon. and learned Friend oversaw the first convictions of senior members of al-Qaeda, the jailing of the airline liquid bomb plotters and the deportation of countless terrorists. All the while, the Prime Minister was making money as a hedge funder in the City during the global financial crisis, as ordinary people paid the price. I know who I would rather have in charge. Only last week, we agreed in here that civility, respect, decency and truth in politics matter, so will the Leader of the House distance herself from such malicious mud-slinging?

This week, in Prime Minister's Question Time, we hit a new low. In the week of the first anniversary of the murder of Brianna Ghey and while her mother was in the Public Gallery, the Prime Minister tried to score cheap political points at the expense of trans people, which Brianna's father condemned as "absolutely dehumanising". Many of us found it deeply offensive and distasteful, including many Government Members. The Prime Minister has been given plenty of opportunity to apologise to Esther Ghey and her family, and has refused, while the Minister for Women and Equalities, whose job it is to stand up for the marginalised, doubled down and dismissed the cries of the family. The Leader of the House has a better record than many in her party on this issue, and I know she will be appalled, too. So will she take this opportunity to apologise on the Prime Minister's behalf, and call out using minorities as a political punchbag?

Penny Mordaunt: We are about to go into recess, and I think it is restorative to spend time with our constituents, and to escape the Westminster and social media bubble.

Since Parliament returned this year, we have witnessed the nation rally behind a group of people mightily wronged, who took on those in powerful positions to

[Penny Mordaunt]

fight to get justice for themselves and others. The hon. Lady mentioned the Post Office Horizon scandal. She will know that there is a debate this afternoon, and I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), will take the opportunity to update the House on progress made towards that legislation. I confirm that that is still our intent. I also know that the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), is working at pace with regard to infected blood. I understand he had a meeting with the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) about that earlier this week.

We have also seen the crew of the Prince of Wales aircraft carrier cancel plans, leave, and time with their loved ones to do their duty. We have learned that thanks to the graft and grit of the British people and businesses, our economy has turned a corner. We have seen our monarch respond to his cancer diagnosis, as many other Brits have, with courage, duty and cheerfulness, and with family rallying around, and I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks and good wishes, as well as all Members and the British public who have sent their best wishes to His Majesty.

We have also seen a mother meeting the brutal murder of her child with the most profound grace and compassion, turning her anguish into positive action to protect other children. And we have seen a father speak about how the love for his child enabled him to overcome his worries about them being trans. Those are the things that our nation is made of: compassion, fairness, tolerance, responsibility, service, and love. We see those things every day in the people who sent us here, and we look on them with pride. Sometimes that pride is reciprocated, as I am sure it was for my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) in what he said yesterday. Sometimes that pride is not reciprocated. Whatever the rough and tumble of this place, and whatever the pressures and mistakes that are made in the heat of political combat, we owe it to the people who sent us here to strive every day to make them proud of us and this place.

The Prime Minister is a good and caring man. I am sure that he has reflected on things, and I understand that he will say something later today or perhaps even during these questions. It is not just about Mr and Mrs Ghey that he should reflect on; I am sure he is also reflecting on people who are trans or who have trans loved ones and family, some of whom sit on these green Benches. I hope the Leader of the Opposition will also reflect on his actions. This Government have been right to protect the safety and dignity of women, and at each stage of doing so they have sought to bring certainty and assurance to trans people. This Government are also right to hold the Opposition to account for their multiple inconsistencies and U-turns on their policy platform.

Today supposition has ended, and reality has landed about the Schrödinger £28 billion—a policy that for months and months has been both alive and dead, and is now confirmed as dead, at least for now. There will be questions over whether the shadow Energy Secretary's tenure in that role is also alive or dead. "Politically, it's strategically incompetent" as the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) called this sorry saga, and that

description could also apply to Labour's costings on its insulation programme and its council tax policy and modelling. It is more confirmation that not only does Labour not have a plan, it has no hope of arriving at one either.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) asked me about risk-based exclusion, and we have tabled that motion on future business. She knows that we will bring forward a debate and vote on that after recess, but I want Members of the House to have time to make themselves aware of the issue and to ask me, and other members of the House of Commons Commission, questions about it.

Regarding scrutiny of the Foreign Secretary, I am in touch with the Leader of the House of Lords about that matter and I hope to update the House soon.

Finally, today marks the start of marriage and family week, and it is appropriate that we send a big thank you to all those who support us in this place and who quite often put up with a great deal. Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the House knows that I am a member of the programme board on restoration and renewal, and she is the responsible Minister. There is a debate due on the business case, and she might now tell the House when that will happen. It is imminent. We will also have a debate on whether we will have a decant, but not until 2025, and even if we do decant, that will not be until 2031, and I doubt I will personally live to see it, although I wish Members well with that project.

I do not want to get involved with whether we decant, but ask a specific question. This matter has now dragged on since 2015 and could drag on until 2031. Meanwhile, the building is decaying around us. Three options were delivered to the Speaker's Commission on this matter, and one is planned maintenance around us. We have successfully done good work on parts of the building, and I urge the Leader of the House now—she might make an announcement on this—to press ahead with proper planned maintenance, so that we can repair the building and make it good for future generations.

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend and other colleagues for all the work they have done on the programme board? The new governance structure—I hope Mr Speaker would concur—has enabled us to make good progress on getting a proper grip of what needs to happen to this building and the activity and costs associated with that. We will bring forward further news to the House shortly on where we are with the plans and the programme, but that should not get in the way of concurrent activity. He will know there are some early projects that we think we can get on with that are perfectly within the boundaries of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019, and we should get on and do them. I hope that the House will welcome a more pragmatic approach to taking care of this important UNESCO heritage site.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I associate myself with the shadow Leader of the House's comments about Brianna Ghey and her remarkable parents?

Last week, I asked the Leader of the House about the cost of the Tories' secret and highly sensitive report to Cabinet on the state of the Union. *Hansard* records that not one word of her answer reflected my question—not one syllable. Instead, she read out to the Chamber a video script about bingo and made a joke about monkeys. The week before, I asked the Leader of the House about the Electoral Commission's concerns over Tory voter ID plans. Again, there was not one word in *Hansard* about Tory voter ID—not a peep. Instead, she read her prepared script attacking the SNP. In fact, *Hansard* reveals that week after week, not only do my questions go unanswered, but they are completely ignored. Week after week, we get a clickbait video for her personal YouTube channel. Surely that behaviour demeans her office and disrespects this House. She is here to answer questions from Members.

Returning to that state of the Union report to Cabinet in July 2020, it aimed to undermine the Scottish Government and the Scottish independence cause, which were apparently a Tory top priority at the height of the pandemic. It came to light last week, and no wonder the Leader of the House's Government wanted to keep it under wraps. It contains more grim news for any remaining supporters of the Union. My questions again are: how much did it cost taxpayers, what was its purpose, and what strategy was it asking the Cabinet to endorse? Do the Union strategy and operations committees still exist? While she is at it, I would be pleased to know the details of the "highly professional attack dogs", as described by one journalist, who were employed around that time in an attempt to counter independence support. Unlike the Prime Minister, I am not a betting woman, but I would wager £1,000 that I will not get answers to those today, either.

I will be writing to the Leader of the House with all the questions she has ignored just this year for starters. My question today, though, just needs a simple yes or no, and I challenge her then to sit back down and resist the video script. Will she at the very least attempt to find answers to my questions when she receives them in writing, as she refuses to do so here? Can we have a debate on the role and function of the Leader of the House?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady can have a debate on the role and function of the Leader of the House every Thursday at approximately 10.30 am. I hope it is colleagues' experience that when they ask me questions, I either furnish them with answers if it is about the business of the House or I follow up with Departments and write to them. I am afraid that, as *Hansard* will show, her questions to me and to various Departments are sometimes hard to fathom.

The hon. Lady asked me about a particular piece of polling. I can certainly write to the Cabinet Office, although she indicated that she may kindly save me the trouble; in that case, I will just send her letter to the Cabinet Office for it to respond to her. But it comes in a week when the Scottish Government's own costs for polling have been exposed.

I hope that hon. Members disagree with the hon. Lady's assessment that I demean my office, although that is high praise indeed from the Scottish National party—I think my party has some way to go before we reach 22 live police investigations. While it may be true

that those who live in Labour areas are 40% more likely to be a victim of crime, I think SNP politicians are probably 40% more likely to be investigated for one.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I do not need to join the new organisation pointed out by the shadow Leader of the House because, as my friends the hon. Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) know, I am already popular and conservative.

Will the Leader of the House organise a statement on pernicious political correctness? Mr Speaker, you will be as surprised as I was to note that the Environment Agency has removed the words "mother" and "father" from all its documents because it believes they should be non-gendered. My dear mother, looking down from a greater place, will be spinning in her grave to have been designated non-gender. Can we have a debate on that? It sounds like nonsense, but it is actually much more sinister. Free speech is at stake.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that important question. While our legislation and the things that arm's length bodies use need to be legally accurate, it is important that people can use language and words such as "mother" and "father". Actually, that is not only the right thing to do but what the guidance they operate under says they should do. May I ask him to let my office have the details of that case? In addition to perhaps having a debate—he will know how to apply for one in the usual way—I could follow that up for him with relevant arm's length body.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing two full weeks' business. That is welcome.

Last week, we had to pull a debate due to shortage of time. That was understandable, given the importance of the Government business tabled for that day, but the sad point from our perspective is that unless we are allocated time other than on Thursdays for Back-Bench debates, we will probably have no further time to allocate in the Chamber before the Easter recess. Monday 26 February might fit the bill, since a general debate has been announced for that day. We are of course open for applications, particularly for business in Westminster Hall.

I know this has been mentioned, but could the Leader of the House give an indication of the progress made on bringing forward legislation for the appointment of the football regulator? I have a particular interest in that. Television's impact on travelling football fans is worsening, with Newcastle United fans alone—I am one of them—having had inconvenient and almost unworkable away-game fixtures imposed on them no fewer than eight times this season. We have had away kick-off times of 8 pm on new year's day, 5.30 pm in Brighton and Bournemouth—this is when travelling from the north-east of England—and Saturday night kick-offs in London at 8 pm on two occasions and 7 pm on one occasion. Those times makes it unworkable for people to get back from those fixtures on public transport, and it is happening on a

[*Ian Mearns*]

much more regular basis. The football regulator is much needed, and I am sure that is something that it would like to focus on.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his work on the Backbench Business Committee and for welcoming two weeks of business—nothing makes me happier than to come to the House and announce that. He knows that I take very seriously our obligations to provide the Backbench Business Committee with time to have its debates on the Floor of the House. I hope to update him shortly on when we can give him some additional time.

The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point about football, and I find it amazing that it has been allowed to endure for some time. It is probably very unfair on not just the players but the travelling public. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard his concerns, and he will know that the next Culture, Media and Sport questions are on 22 February.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Collecting food waste from domestic properties is an expensive service both to set up and to carry out. Every local authority in west London has had the service for a long time—certainly before March 2023. In west London, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is providing £230,000 in funding for Hounslow, £201,000 for Brent, £406,000 for Ealing and a massive £606,000 for Hillingdon. In my borough of Harrow we have had zero, yet we provide food waste collection to 4,136 flats, and the borough wants to roll out the service to over 18,000 more flats. It is clearly unfair that Harrow has been singled out. It is not getting the funding it deserves, and has not for many years. Could right hon. Friend arrange for the DEFRA Secretary of State or a Minister to make a statement on the Floor of the House on how that funding is allocated, and why Harrow does not receive its fair share?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for giving me advance notice of it—It is helpful and diligent of Members to do that. I have uncovered an administrative saga that I will not bore the House with, but I will update my hon. Friend. The fact that he has put the situation on record will help it to be resolved. I have received some reassuring news from the Department.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Further to a question at last week's business questions from a Conservative Member about SSB Law, I have at least 10 constituents affected by this issue. What can only be described as cowboy outfits offered constituents cavity wall insulation, and put it into homes where it should not have been, resulting in mould, damp and damage to properties. Those constituents were then approached by SSB Law, which took on those claims in a no win, no fee basis. When it went under, my constituents received enforcement notices telling them that they owed up to £19,000. It is a scandal on top of the scandal.

I wrote to the Justice Secretary as a matter of urgency back in December, but I have not had a response. Can the Leader of the House help me to find ways in

Parliament to co-ordinate all those across the north who have been affected—we expect there are hundreds, if not thousands—and to get a response so that we can look after those people, some of whom are among the most vulnerable and have received extortionate bills telling them that they owe thousands of pounds?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about this ongoing situation. From memory, I wrote to the Department last week about this issue, and I will make sure that the hon. Lady is cited in the reply. I will also raise it again with the Justice Secretary, and chase up the hon. Lady's correspondence. My office stands ready to assist her in getting this matter resolved for her constituents.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is both intolerable and heartbreaking that hostages remain in captivity in Gaza after more than 100 days. Who knows what horrors are being inflicted on them as we sit here today? Can a Minister come to the House to make an urgent statement on what the Government are doing to get the hostages home?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for what she has just said and for her ongoing work to keep our eyes focused on those individuals. Yesterday marked four months that they have been in captivity.

This week, I met Annabel, who is helping the Sharabi family, who lost multiple members of their family in the 7 October attack. Very sadly, the family recently confirmed that another relative, Yossi, who was taken hostage, has been murdered. Yossi was described as a pillar of their family; he was also a football fan, and a supporter of Manchester United. The family are hoping that Eli Sharabi, who was also taken hostage, will be returned to them, and that eventually Yossi's body will be returned to them so that they can bury him. Sadly, Eli's ordeal will not end there, as his wife and two daughters were among those murdered in the attack, which I do not think he will know yet.

I thank all those working to bring the hostages home, and all Members working to keep the spotlight on these individuals and to resolve the tragedy continuing to unfold in Gaza. I will ensure that the Foreign Office has heard what my right hon. Friend has said today and that this House is kept informed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I also wish His Majesty the King a speedy recovery? He was brave to share his health news—he has shown his own vulnerability and humanity, and I am sure people across the nation will thank him for that.

The household support fund provides grants to households struggling to make ends meet, but local authorities still do not know whether funding will continue past the end of March. More than 100 organisations have warned that there will be devastating consequences if the fund is not extended. Can we have a statement to clarify the future of the household support fund?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her words about His Majesty the King. Many Members will know the merits of the household support fund, which was given to local authorities to provide them with the flexibility to respond to particular situations where

people have fallen through the cracks for other types of support. That is why we have provided the fund. It is still in operation, and I know the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Treasury will want to ensure that Members are given good notice about what will follow. I shall ensure that both those Departments have heard what the hon. Lady has said today.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Local plans are the foundation on which planning authorities make their decisions. Despite the fact that they shape our villages and towns across the country, few people take part in the consultations that take place ahead of their production. Can we have a debate in which to exchange ideas about how we might involve more people in the formation of those plans?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter and for all the work he does to empower his community to get more involved with shaping their local plans. He will know that our revised national planning policy framework addresses some of those concerns and the weaknesses in the planning system. The next questions to the Secretary of State will be on 4 March, where my hon. Friend can raise this matter directly with the Minister himself.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The life expectancy for the less well-off in south-east Northumberland barely scrapes 70 years of age, due to the industrial heritage and legacy in my region, like many others. Right-wing think-tanks are mooted the idea of increasing the pension age to 71, which would basically mean that people in my constituency and other constituencies would pay in all our life and get absolutely nothing from the pot. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the huge discrepancies in life expectancy and the potential for people to receive no pension for a lifetime of contributions?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. There are clearly legacy issues in certain parts of the country because of the industries that were there. People in certain professions in the modern workplace, such as shift workers, are also at a disadvantage in terms of their health. All of that needs to be fed in when policy is made, which is why it is important that we have evidence-based policy and a system across Government so that every Department is involved in the formulation of policy. Given that the question session to the relevant Department is not for some time, I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has heard the hon. Gentleman's point today.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Since being elected, I and many colleagues have spent much time raising issues that affect men and boys. However, this House has barely raised the importance of dads and the challenges they face. They play a vital role in bringing up their children, supporting their family and supporting our country. Too many are blocked unfairly from seeing their children after a divorce and too often their role in bringing up children is not seen as important, yet we all know families need their fathers, daughters need their dads, and lads need their dads. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have a debate on the vital role dads play and the challenges they face?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the campaign he has been running on this issue and his diligence in holding all Departments to account for what they are doing to recognise the vital contribution fathers make, not just to their families but to wider society. That would be an excellent topic for debate and he will know how to apply for one. He will also know that he can continue to raise this issue directly with Ministers at Question Time. It is highly appropriate that he has spoken about this issue; as I said in my opening, we are starting a celebration week of the family. We know that when families have strong father figures and role models, they are strengthened.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): The Leader of the House promised that she would table a motion on risk-based exclusions for Members. It was published last week, the future business is light and there is plenty of parliamentary time available, so will she tell us why she has not scheduled the debate yet and why there is no sense of urgency in ensuring that Parliament is a safe workplace and its reputation is restored?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the shadow Leader of the House. I think that if she were to ask colleagues about their awareness of the motion and the detail within it, many will not have registered it. What I and other members of the Commission are doing is talking to colleagues about it. I have had meetings with colleagues who still have some concerns about aspects of it. I want to bring it to the House and for it to be understood when the House makes a decision on it. I will do that very shortly after recess, but I do want to allow right hon. and hon. Members the time to study the motion and understand what the scheme is. I think it stands a better chance of gaining maximum support in the House if that is the case. I will keep the hon. Lady updated.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Farmers in my constituency are in uproar and my Welsh Conservative colleagues across Wales tell me that they are hearing the same thing. The source of farmers' distress is the new proposals from the Welsh Government for a new farming subsidy scheme to be introduced in 2025. An independent economic assessment published with the proposals says that the scheme will result in a 10.8% reduction in livestock and an 11% reduction in labour—a number that the National Farmers Union in Wales says is equivalent to about 5,500 jobs. I know how important farming is where I am, even if the Welsh Government do not seem to appreciate how important it is in Wales. Given the close ties within the farming community across the UK, and given the fact that we enjoy a single UK labour market, will my right hon. Friend consider providing time for a debate on the vital contribution of farming to the UK economy when the House returns?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he continues to do not just to champion the interests of farming communities in Wales, but to highlight their critical importance to our resilience as a nation. When we study the potential job losses and the potential reduction in livestock numbers, the assessment of the NFU in Wales—that the plans are “catastrophic”—is right on the money. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard my hon. Friend's concerns.

[Penny Mordaunt]

I encourage him to keep campaigning against the plans. He will know that the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions are on 14 March.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I respect the Leader of the House, and I note that there is a written ministerial statement today, but what the House needs is an oral statement from the Cabinet Office Minister so that we can ask questions about what the Government are doing.

I also want to raise a separate issue: the devolution deal that is being consulted on in my area of East Yorkshire and Hull. Apparently, we are to receive an extra £13.3 million a year over 30 years, shared between the two councils in the area. Constituents have pointed out to me that the Government's economic development deal with Rwanda averages about £54 million a year over five years. They are wondering why the Government are putting that amount of money into Rwanda, given that they were elected in 2019 on the basis of a policy of levelling up, and why my area is receiving so much less.

Penny Mordaunt: Let me first thank the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks about me, and say to her that the feeling is entirely mutual. She will know that I keep in close contact with the Paymaster General regarding infected blood, and I will ensure that he has heard what she has said today. I understand that he met her this week, and I know that the whole House will want to be kept informed and updated about the progress that he is making.

I will also ensure that those at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have heard what the right hon. Lady has said about the devolution deal. Such deals are a vital tool, along with the many other sources of funding that we are putting into communities that need it and will do something good with it. However, as she will know, the devolution deal is not the only source of the funds that her constituents will receive: they will be getting many more streams of funding in many other areas and from many other Departments.

However, the Government have a finite amount of money, and it is important that we are directing it to where we want to spend it and alleviating pressures on public services that we do not want to see. Where we have porous borders and people—for example, economic migrants who are not fleeing persecution—are for understandable reasons abusing our asylum system, we need to close those loopholes. The Rwanda scheme is designed to be a deterrent, and if it is stood up and successful it will benefit the right hon. Lady's constituents.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): For some time I have noticed a growing sense of frustration among Members who ask a question and are given an answer that bears no relation to it. It is as if Ministers are applying some sort of Jedi mind trick to suggest that this is not the question they were looking to ask. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made on what steps the Government will take to ensure that Ministers actually answer the questions that they are asked?

Penny Mordaunt: I think that when one is presented with a question like that, it is quite hard to answer it. If the hon. Gentleman would like to furnish me with some examples—any examples—of where that is happening, I will of course respond to them. This is business questions, so his question is in order, but I would point out to him that it is actually quite difficult to answer.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to my constituent Loyd, who is in the Public Gallery this morning. He is a remarkable young man. Every time the Ellesmere Port Wombles have a litter-pick he is there, come rain or shine. I also want to record my appreciation of another young constituent, Heidi, who is nine years old and who, on Sunday, will complete her cycle ride—the equivalent of London to Paris—to raise funds for Alzheimer's Research UK and Macmillan Cancer Support. She has already raised nearly £6,000, which is a fantastic achievement.

There are so many other young people in my constituency and, I am sure, every other Member's constituency who do fantastic things for their communities and for good causes. May we please have a debate to celebrate the great work that our young people do?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for affording me, and the whole House, the opportunity to join him in praising Loyd and Heidi and congratulating them on all that they are doing. Young people in this country sometimes get a bad press, so it would be very good to have time on the Floor of the House or in Westminster Hall to celebrate all that they do.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): A recent report by London Councils found that Wandsworth is one of the boroughs worst affected by falling pupil roll numbers, with a 12% drop in demand for reception places. Many parents in Battersea have shared with me their concerns about their children's education. It is vital that the Government ensure that every local area has excellent, financially viable schools. May we have a statement on how they will address the fall in pupil roll numbers?

Penny Mordaunt: I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Education has heard what the hon. Lady says, and I will draw her attention to that report. I think that is how I can best serve the hon. Lady today.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): In the midst of a cost of living crisis of his own making, the Prime Minister this week placed a £1,000 bet with a TV presenter. What message does that send to our constituents, many of whom are struggling to pay their bills?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady accuses the Prime Minister of causing a cost of living crisis. She knows that the pandemic had knock-on effects because of the spending we had to do, including on the furlough scheme, which the Prime Minister designed when he was Chancellor. That scheme kept people, families and businesses going throughout that period and enabled us to make a swifter economic recovery than many comparable nations. The Prime Minister is not responsible for the war in Ukraine or any of the other geopolitical and global shocks we have to endure, which are causing

financial pressure on the nation and on households. During this time, we felt it right to stand up an enormous package of support for households to alleviate the cost of living. More than £100 billion, and growing, has gone towards supporting people, which shows that this Government understand what they are going through and will do everything we can to support them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House may not know this, but when I first received my cancer diagnosis just after the last election, I thought it was the end of the world; that I would be unable to carry on my job of representing the people of Huddersfield, and doing all the stuff I love about being an active parliamentarian. May we have a debate in the House on how cancer treatment has changed dramatically because of science, technology and the wonderful care from the NHS, including the wonderful team at Guy's and St Thomas's? Whether it is immunotherapy or robotic surgery, which I had, the world is now much brighter than it had been for people diagnosed with cancer.

In a way, I want to send a message to His Majesty that it is not the end of the world. I have had a very active life since my diagnosis, and I can still make myself a real pain to Mr Speaker and my colleagues in the House of Commons. May we have a debate on how things have changed? Let us give a little good news to His Majesty.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sending such a positive and thoughtful message not only to His Majesty the King, which I am sure is very welcome, but to all Brits who are living with cancer. There is a huge amount to celebrate, including treatments, our amazing research base and our fantastic third sector organisations. It is not just about the treatments, the drugs and the healthcare professionals; it is also about the financial advice and moral support that are often provided by our fantastic cancer charities. Of course, it is also about the people who work in the NHS and the agencies that support them. I think this would be a wonderful topic for a debate, and the hon. Gentleman will know how to apply.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): May we have a debate on the death of Opposition politics and the rise of the uniparty? The tired pantomime of this House is played out in this Chamber by second-rate actors, but behind the scenes there are elite directors and scriptwriters. And we know the script, Mr Speaker: uncontrolled immigration will be seen as inevitable; eye-watering taxes for the many but tax evasion for the few is just a fact of life; the religion of net zero was to be indulged, whatever the cost; the forever wars will be supported, even if we have to hand over our children and our treasure; and there is no appetite for an investigation into the excess deaths around the world, and woe betide anyone who points out the inconvenient truth that the excess deaths are being suffered only by nations that succumbed to the magic juice.

Penny Mordaunt: I am tempted to say, in response to that, that it takes one to know one. I say to the hon. Gentleman that our democracy is strong. No matter whether someone agrees or disagrees with people who

sit on these Benches, the views they have or the political party they represent, they are here because their constituents have sent them here. In the vast majority of cases, they are good people who are serving their constituents to the best of their ability, and they should not be tarnished with slurs against their character that they are working for some international Illuminati or that they do not care about people in their constituencies. Our democracy is the best in the world and it will remain so, not just because of the people on these Benches, but because of the people who sent them here.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I would like to add my best wishes to His Majesty the King.

This week, the Secretary of State for Education said that she was "confident" that 15 hours of free childcare would be delivered by April, but she then refused to guarantee it would be in place on time. Nurseries in Barnsley have raised their concerns about how they will deliver the policy, and this is creating yet more uncertainty. So may we have a statement on the delivery of the Government's childcare policy?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question on an important matter. This Government are undertaking the largest expansion of childcare entitlements and support to the people of this country. This matter is of great interest to Members in all parts of the House. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Lady has said, and she will know that the next Education questions is on 11 March.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I add my call for a statement from the Paymaster General about the contaminated blood scandal on the day we get back after the recess? I am delighted that the Leader of the House has announced two weeks of business for when we return the week after next, but we have been promised that the football Bill is imminent and it does not appear in the business for those two weeks, and there is also no sign of the Third Reading of the Renters (Reform) Bill. Will the Leader of the House explain what is going on with those two Bills?

Penny Mordaunt: Those Bills are being worked on and are making progress. I fully appreciate that both are eagerly anticipated and I hope they will get support from Members in all parts of this House. The hon. Gentleman will know my particular interest in the football governance Bill, and I know that many Members met stakeholders in the past couple of weeks regarding that Bill. I hope to update the House on it shortly; I hope we will bring forth that legislation shortly, and I will announce future business in the usual way.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In an increasingly cashless society, access to cash from free-to-use ATMs is increasingly scarce. That is a particular issue in Old Trafford, in my constituency, where the main shopping parade on Ayres Road has no cash machine at all. May we therefore have a statement from the relevant Minister on how the Government will ensure that, as technology means we are increasingly cashless, people will continue to have access to their hard-earned money for free in their local communities?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point because access to cash is an absolute lifeline for particular people in our communities. He will know that the Government have issued the sector with guidance and expectations about making free-to-access cash machines available. That is monitored and mapped, and I will ensure that the relevant Secretaries of State in both Departments have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Last week, from across the Chamber, we heard unanimous expressions of deep disquiet at the prospect of a foreign state—and not a particularly friendly one—gaining control of *The Spectator* and *The Daily Telegraph*. I am unlikely to be a recipient of favourable coverage in either publication, but the Leader of the House just referred to us being the best democracy in the world, so it strikes me that freedom of speech, proper debate and a free press, not controlled by a foreign state, is part and parcel of that. May I respectfully request that we have a debate on the matter?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising awareness of that important point. I know that many Members have grave concerns about this situation. He is absolutely right that a free press and a competitive media sector are vital to our democracy; that should be a concern not just to everyone in the House, but to all our citizens. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has an obligation to intervene in media transactions where there is a public interest to do so. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman has put his views on the matter on the record today. There is a statutory judicial process underway, so it would not be right for me to comment further, but I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what he and many other hon. Members have said.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am sure that the Leader of the House is comforted and heartened to hear that where her party leads, the Labour party is sure to follow in major policy areas, such as the retention of tuition fees, Brexit, retaining the House of Lords and, of course, protecting bankers' bonuses, while maintaining the two-child cap and rejecting universal free school meals for children. I appreciate that she does not speak for the Labour party—although, in truth, in important policy areas she might as well—but will she make a statement setting out why she believes it is okay to cap support for the poorest and most vulnerable children in our society, but not for bankers?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady does not appear to have got the memo from her party's First Minister of the Scottish Government, because I think her party and the Labour party are planning to work together, perhaps to try to form a coalition in the not-too-distant future. An organisation that has conducted research into Scottish households with an income of less than £20,000 has said that 53% of those households feel they are not getting value for money from the Scottish Government. I would ask the hon. Lady to reflect on what the Auditor General said this week about the Scottish Government's performance, what they are doing with their budget and the value for money that the poorest in Scotland are getting.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a privilege to come to the House and ask a question of the Leader of the House because, as she says, this is the mother of Parliaments. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. This week we have been highlighting the rising persecution of those practising religion in Nicaragua, about which Lord Alton is admirably chairing an inquiry on behalf of the APPG, and working to develop a report on the conditions there, as religious leaders face arrest and religious groups face increased persecution by the Government. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning Nicaragua's actions against FORB, and ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to support Lord Alton's inquiry into such persecution and ensure that there is a Government response?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again raising these incredibly important matters, as he does diligently every single week. He will know that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) does great work in this important area as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, so I will make sure not only that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has heard what he has said today, but that my hon. Friend has as well, given her role. No one should experience discrimination for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will know that we take the matter very seriously, and we will work through the UN to promote those rights and raise his concerns on every occasion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for their participation this morning. Will Members leaving please do so quickly and quietly?

Protest Measures

11.31 am

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on new Government measures to tackle unacceptable behaviour at protests.

In the aftermath of the horrific attacks on 7 October, many people took to the streets to make their views heard. Many did so peacefully and respectfully. I had the great privilege of marching alongside many people, including some in this House, against antisemitism on the streets of both Manchester and London. Sadly, those protests do not tell the whole story.

Over the past few months, we have all seen disturbing and distressing examples of hateful abuse, of serious damage, and of law-abiding citizens being intimidated and prevented from going about their daily life. The right to protest is fundamental to our democracy, but when we see people hurling racist abuse, desecrating national memorials of great significance to our country, or taking flares to marches to cause disruption and fear, the only reasonable response is outrage and disgust. Tolerating these actions would be radicalising in itself. This Government will not stand by and allow a small minority to incite hatred and commit crimes, undermining our proud tradition of peaceful protest.

Today, the Government have announced a package of measures to put a stop to this criminality for good. Protesters have for too long been able to claim in law that protest is a “reasonable excuse” for criminal behaviour. Blocking roads, preventing ambulances from getting through and stopping people from getting to work or visiting loved ones are breathtakingly selfish acts. The British public certainly do not see an acceptable justification for that level of disruption to their life. That is why we are removing that defence for relevant crimes. Protesters will no longer be able to cite the right to protest as a reasonable excuse to get away with disruptive offences, such as blocking roads.

Through the package that we are announcing today, we will crack down on those who climb on war memorials. In recent months, we have seen cases where individuals have broken away from large protests and scaled national monuments. War memorials belong to all of us. They are the altars of our national grief, and it is clearly not acceptable to disrespect them in that way; it is an assault on the memory of so many who gave their life for our freedom and to defend our nation. Attacking our national memorials goes beyond the legitimate exercise of free speech. We must not give those who commit criminal acts at protests the ability to get away with it by simply hiding their identity.

Once the legislation comes into force, the police will have new powers to arrest protesters at certain protests who wear face coverings to conceal their identity. Those who shout racist abuse and extremist rhetoric will no longer be able to hide from justice. We are also protecting the public by putting an end to people bringing flares on marches. Flares have been used during large-scale protests, and have been fired at police officers, posing significant risk of injury. A new offence will ban the possession of flares, fireworks and any other pyrotechnics at protests. Anyone who flouts the new rules will face

serious consequences, including up to three months in jail and a £1,000 fine for those who climb on war memorials.

The changes that we have announced today build on the legislation that we introduced last year to help the police tackle disruption from protests. We criminalised interfering with key national infrastructure through section 7 of the Public Order Act 2023. Since we passed the Act last year, the Metropolitan police have made more than 600 arrests to minimise the disruption caused by Just Stop Oil. On Tuesday, the Home Secretary met policing leaders to thank them for their work, and to encourage the use of all existing powers at their disposal, as well as these new measures, to maintain order at protests. I am very grateful to frontline officers across the country for their efforts and successes in keeping the British people safe during an immensely challenging period. I know that policing these events on a regular basis is both complex and demanding. It takes officers away from crucial work preventing crime and protecting vulnerable people in our communities.

As I have made clear, freedom of expression is vital to our democracy, and this House champions it every day. People must be able to speak without fear, and have their right to peaceful protest protected, but those freedoms and rights are not absolute, for very good reason. There is no freedom to commit violence or intimidation, or to harass others. This country has laws against vocally supporting terror organisations for a very good reason, and last month, the Government proscribed Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organisation. That group actively celebrated the 7 October terrorist attacks in Israel that led to the rape and murder of many, many people. It is an organisation that has poisoned minds for far too long.

We must, and we will, continue to stand with communities who feel threatened, and ensure their safety wherever they live and work. The Government are sticking to the plan to give police the powers that they need to crack down on crime and keep our streets safe. We will never tolerate hateful, dangerous or intimidating behaviour. We will always put the decent, law-abiding majority first. We will do what is right and fair. I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.37 am

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for advance sight of it. The Labour party absolutely respects the fundamental freedom to make legitimate, peaceful protest, but when that freedom is abused to intimidate, harass and harm others, safeguards must be put in place to protect the public. It is essential that the police be able to maintain public order while safeguarding the right to legitimate, peaceful protest. We will therefore scrutinise the details of the proposals to ensure that any new measures are applied appropriately and proportionately.

I will respond to the measures that the Minister has outlined. First, there are the new powers for the police to arrest protesters using face coverings to conceal their identity. While we understand the genuine concern about protesters committing public order offences while wearing face coverings, we are also concerned that there might

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be, at times, legitimate reasons why some protesters would want to wear face coverings. Let me give an example. When dissidents protest outside foreign embassies—the Minister will know which ones I have in mind—they may well want to conceal their identity to protect their family back home. The UK is, and should always be, a safe haven for dissidents opposing oppressive regimes. Can the Minister provide more detail about how that new power will be applied appropriately?

Secondly, the Opposition welcome a ban on flares and fireworks, which have been used to fuel public disorder and intimidate police officers in recent months. However, the policing of large protests could pose a challenge to enforcing the ban effectively, so I would be grateful if the Minister outlined what guidance will be issued to police forces on enforcing that at large protests with thousands of people in attendance.

Thirdly, on measures to protect the sanctity of war memorials, I know that the Minister will agree—as will, I am sure, every right hon. and hon. Member in the House—that they are extremely important places. They are places to remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our country, and they must always be respected. During protest activity last year, a very small minority of protesters desecrated the sanctity of war memorials, which understandably sparked outrage right around the country.

Protest activity also raised the issue of what is defined as hateful extremism. Despite promises, the Government have not so far been forthcoming with their definition of hateful extremism, which would help the police forces to police protests better. Can the Minister say when that will be brought forward, and outline when the Government will bring forward an updated counter-extremism strategy? The current one is eight years out of date.

The right to peacefully protest is a fundamental freedom in our country. It must not be abused, but it must not be curbed unnecessarily, either. The Opposition will scrutinise these measures further to ensure that they strike the right balance between safeguarding the right to protest and the important duty to safeguard the public.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my hon. Friend—and he is my hon. Friend—for his support and comments. He is quite right that protecting peaceful protest and the right of free citizens to express their views on our streets is essential to the Government's mission, and it is one of our priorities. The points that he raises are fair; in some cases, I will have to write to him with more detail, but I will cover some of the areas that I think matter greatly.

On face coverings, my hon. Friend raises important questions about when there might be a legitimate reason for somebody to cover their face. The guidelines and the legislation that we are setting out will cover that, because police officers will have discretion to give an order requiring a face covering to be removed. Those commanding the policing of protests will therefore have discretion over when they ask for that instruction to be carried out.

Secondly, on pyrotechnics, the instruction is quite clear: the measure relates to those participating in the protest. If, particularly around Diwali or Guy Fawkes's day—not a day that I think anybody in this House

would ever celebrate—people who have bought fireworks happen to pass a protest, they will not be caught by the offence. It refers to participation in the protest.

On my hon. Friend's point about war memorials, he and I know far too many names that have been etched on to those stones. We also know that protests on war memorials can tear open extremely painful wounds that have long been closed. That is why I think the British people, quite rightly, saw the protests on war memorials as so offensive. That is why it is right that the Government act against the small minority desecrating such an important place in our hearts.

On my hon. Friend's question about counter-extremism, the work being done by Robin Simcox is hugely important, and we are doing an awful lot to tighten up various elements of our counter-extremism policy. Indeed, I hope very much that I will be leaving the Chamber very shortly to have a meeting on that subject. The reality is, however, that it is a very complex subject; the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is currently working on a definition of extremism alongside the Attorney General. There is an awful lot that we must do to ensure that groups that pose the danger of extremism are addressed in other ways. That is where cross-Government working has been so important in ensuring that groups are transparent in what they are doing, in who is funding them and in where they are targeting their attention.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who has just put a question to my right hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for Security.

Some demonstrations are perfectly acceptable. For example, in my early years as an MP, in order to get a relief road, I escorted mothers and their prams down a major road. We went at three and a half miles an hour, which was faster than the traffic would have gone had we not been there on a demo. It was a Friday evening and people were trying to leave London. We got the relief road.

I also led a march from Speakers' Corner to Trafalgar Square for the Cambridge Two—two social workers who were wrongly convicted and jailed for helping the homeless.

That is different from the kind of disaster that happens when there are crowd surges, especially if they are created by explosions, be they from firecrackers or other things. I was present at Óscar Romero's funeral, when 14 people died around me from crushing because explosives or fireworks went off.

I was present at the Heysel stadium in 1985 when 39 Italians were crushed to death. Being able to control demonstrations, which should be held by agreement and understanding with the authorities, is vital for them to be safe.

On a more minor scale, there was a flash protest outside my constituency office yesterday by good-natured people who care about the people in Gaza. Had there been one young worker in that place when suddenly a flashmob appeared around them, it would have been

discomfiting. I am sure that that would not be caught by these measures, and nor should it be, but I say to those doing such protests: “Think of others.”

I ask my right hon. Friend to remember a last point about disruption. When there was one of the Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion demonstrations, in which people were allowed to sit around in the streets here—for far too long in my view—I said to one person who had flown in from Vancouver to join the protest that flying halfway across a continent and an ocean to help Extinction Rebellion was odd. I said, “What about the ambulances?” They said, “We’ll let them through.” I replied, “The ambulances are stuck 2 miles away. You can’t let them through. You must let people go about their ordinary business to save lives and for the prosperity of the country.”

I back the Government’s measures, and I hope my right hon. Friend knows that he will have support from across the House and the country for what he has proposed.

Tom Tugendhat: First, I thank the Father of the House for his support for these important measures, and indeed for his entirely correct observation that protest is not only necessary but important across the country. Every day, many protests happen politely, courteously and in ways that make their point without causing the kind of societal harms that, sadly, some cause. His longevity in this place, and indeed outside it, is a blessing to the House. He remembers the funeral of the late St Óscar Romero, whose extraordinary work was an inspiration to millions around the world. My hon. Friend reminds us not only that crying “Fire!” in a crowded theatre is not an expression of freedom of speech, but that, in this context, making an explosion in a crowded area can lead to human tragedy beyond expectation. The co-operation between protesters and the police is incredibly important for the protection of the public.

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

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): We in the SNP oppose these measures to clamp down on people’s right to protest, just as we opposed the Public Order Act 2023 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. On issues such as the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, Iraq, and Israel and Gaza, people from Scotland travel to London, to Westminster, to make their voices heard. People feel helpless in the wake of the Gaza situation, which is unfolding 24/7 on our social media feeds. They donate what they can during a cost of living crisis, and they boycott and protest. How does Westminster respond? It responds by cutting cost of living support, banning public bodies from investing ethically, and clamping down on the right to protest through measures that will impact certain people in society, particularly those living with disabilities.

Human rights lawyer Baroness Shami Chakrabarti has called out today’s announcement as “more culture war nonsense”. She highlighted that individuals may have reasons other than criminality for covering their faces:

“Should rape victims or refugees peacefully protesting really be punished for covering their faces to protect their identities?”

Is this not just another example of the Government pandering to their far-right wing, rather than protecting the legitimate right to protest? This Government are

punishing the majority for a tiny minority’s actions, further fuelling their culture war. As for the detail the Minister outlined, a £1,000 fine is significant and unaffordable to people across these isles, but it is nothing to a Prime Minister who is willing to bet that exact amount on people’s lives.

Tom Tugendhat: I can honestly say that I am sorry, but not entirely surprised, that the SNP is choosing to make divisive politics out of what has been a moment of national unity. At many of these protests, we have seen extremely dignified individuals raising a point, whether about Gaza or antisemitism. We have heard courageous voices speaking out on all sides of these debates—individuals who have made their voices heard extremely clearly and in a dignified way—but sadly, some extremists have chosen this as the moment to spread hatred and fear and to stoke nationalism or division. I realise that that is something that the hon. Lady and I take different positions on, as after all, she represents a nationalist wing in our country. It is a great shame that she is choosing this moment to spread that hatred. I do wish that the Scottish nationalists would—*[Interruption.]* You are a nationalist party; therefore, you are Scottish nationalists.

Amy Callaghan: It is the Scottish National party.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order.

Tom Tugendhat: As the Scottish nationalists who are represented in Parliament today have chosen to make a point out of this issue, I will just say that many people have protested across the whole of the United Kingdom in many dignified ways. We are seeking to make sure that those across our country who quite rightly wish to exercise their right to protest can do so in a safe and dignified way.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): This is an important set of measures, and I welcome everything that my right hon. Friend has announced. Without seeking to interfere with the operational independence of the police, there should be a presumption of instant and immediate application of these new measures where offences occur. Too often in the protests we have seen since 7 October vile antisemitic posters have been displayed and banners have been carried unchallenged, only for the police—particularly the Metropolitan police—to put out appeals later asking, “Do you know this person?” That emboldens those who have these foul views to carry on, and it sends a much deeper and disturbing message, particularly to Jewish communities across the country, that the police are just letting those offences go by.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly why the Home Secretary has already been speaking with police chiefs in the United Kingdom about the powers that will be provided. The police chiefs themselves have asked for the powers. He is also absolutely right that the level of antisemitism we have seen on our streets is simply vile and completely unacceptable, and it is also true that some of the symbols that are being carried and some of the flags that are being displayed are themselves radicalising, so action against them is so important. It is quite noticeable how many of the symbols that people claim should be culturally

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normalised in the UK are absolutely not tolerated in Muslim countries across the world, for the very clear reason that they do not speak for Muslim people—either in the UK or around the world—but are trying to speak for a narrow Islamist fringe that is utterly hateful and has no place in our society.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am sure the Minister knows that the Home Affairs Select Committee has been carrying out an inquiry into the policing of protests after the horrific attacks of 7 October. I join both Front Benchers, the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) in thanking the police for the work they have done, keeping people safe on demonstrations and also upholding the law.

We on the Home Affairs Committee have taken evidence from the police, and although people should of course have the right to protest, we were very concerned about the effect that the number of protests is having on the number of rest days that are being cancelled for police officers in the Met, for example. More than 4,000 rest days have been cancelled, and the cost to the Met of policing those protests up to the end of December has been £18.9 million.

Will the Minister explain how these new laws will be supported with any additional resourcing that the police need? What more can be done to support the wellbeing of officers who are either deployed or abstracted to ensure that these protests can go ahead? In the light of Home Secretary's comments this week about neighbourhood policing and how important that is, can the Minister reassure the House that resources will not be taken away from neighbourhood policing to deal with the policing of protests?

Tom Tugendhat: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady's work on the policing of protests. Her Committee has already had some important evidence sessions, which I have listened to in part, not in whole—forgive me. We will no doubt be seeing the work she pulls together at the end of that inquiry, and I shall read it with great interest.

It is worth saying that the pressure on policing across the United Kingdom from these protests has been significant. We recognise that, and we have been looking to support police forces, where appropriate, in whatever way is appropriate. It is certainly true that many police forces have been able to manage only because of the uplift in police numbers they have seen in recent years. Sadly, London, as the right hon. Lady knows, has not managed to use that uplift, which is a great shame. Frankly, I am sure that that is something the people of London will consider in the polls in May. Sadly, in Scotland as well, police numbers have fallen, whereas in the rest of the United Kingdom they have by and large risen. These are areas in which I know she will encourage people to make decisions according to how they have been governed, not just policed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Since the atrocities on 7 October, the regular hate marches that have taken place in London have forced Jewish Londoners to remove their kippahs, remove their Star of David necklaces and, in some cases, even vacate their homes because

they are scared—and they are certainly scared to travel to central London when one of these hate marches is taking place. Only 16% of British Jews believe that the police treat antisemitism as equivalent to other forms of hate crime, and two thirds of British Jews believe that the police have double standards on these crimes. When these measures are introduced, will my right hon. Friend make sure that they are actually targeted at the people expressing hatred towards British Jews, and that those people are arrested and taken to court to answer for the charges that are made?

Tom Tugendhat: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and he is absolutely right that the level of antisemitism we have seen has been utterly unacceptable and the fear that has been spread, sadly, among the Jewish community in the United Kingdom has been utterly vile. It is simply intolerable to have parts of our community feeling unsafe to walk, shop or do whatever they choose on the streets of our capital. It is completely wrong.

The powers in this instruction or ruling will be for the police to deploy as operationally appropriate. However, I am sure that police officers and police chiefs around the United Kingdom will have heard my hon. Friend's point and will have recognised it. I should point out that, since the 7 October protests began, more than 600 arrests have been made in relation to those protests. The police take this extremely seriously, and about 30 of those arrests have been related to TACT—Terrorism Act 2000—offences. That should, I hope, reassure all communities across this country that this Government and these police officers take these offences extremely seriously, and they will be using all the powers at their disposal to protect everyone in the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am someone who knows the politics and lifestyle of Northern Ireland and who lived through the troubles, and we protested on many occasions, but the one thing we never did was wear a mask. I therefore very much welcome the legislation coming forward today. The right to protest is an important right in a democratic society and country, but I firmly believe that things should be done decently and in order, which means people having the courage of their convictions and having their face uncovered. People wearing a mask at a protest, whether they be pro-Hamas protesters or hunt saboteurs, are breaking the law, and I would be very pleased to see them jailed and fined for the activity of wearing a mask. Will the Minister outline how soon changes can be put in place, and whether discussions are ongoing with the Northern Ireland Assembly—it is back on its feet again, and Ministers are in place—to ensure that the legislation initiated here can apply across all of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Tom Tugendhat: I greatly welcome the hon. Member's comments, but he will know that, perhaps not so often in Strangford, but some people did wear balaclavas in the protests that I saw in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I didn't.

Tom Tugendhat: I am sure the hon. Member was not one of them; there is absolutely no suggestion that he could ever be one of them. I think that would surprise quite literally everyone in this House. I am grateful for

his support. This measure will clearly need to be worked on, and we have already begun conversations with the Northern Ireland Office, but areas of work will be required across the United Kingdom. Police chiefs are already aware of this and have been asking for these powers, and that is why they are coming into place.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister's statement will be welcome to the vast majority of decent, law-abiding citizens up and down the country, particularly in respect of the protection of war memorials. Although the proposed three months' imprisonment or £1,000 fine might be suitable for some who are caught up in demonstrations, three months seems incredibly lenient for those who we can probably describe as "professional protesters". Of course the final decision rests with the courts, but could a heavier period of imprisonment be available to them?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. Sadly, as is quite frequently the case, on the more serious occasions it would not be just one offence that was brought. I think this level of punishment represents, rightly, the offence that such actions cause, and the penalty is, I think, appropriate to that. It is of course possible that other charges will be brought alongside that.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I support the reference to protecting war memorials. As the son of someone who served in the second world war and as someone who grew up knowing people who lost comrades in the war, those memorials are often the only place where those people are commemorated, because they have no grave of their own, and such memorials should be protected in the way the Minister suggests. None the less, the detail of the proposals will require a great deal of scrutiny, so could he say a little more about where we will get that opportunity? The Criminal Justice Bill is now on Report. Are the measures an amendment to that? Will they be statutory instruments? When will we get the opportunity to scrutinise the Government's proposals?

Tom Tugendhat: There will be amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill, which can be scrutinised on Report. I understand the hon. Member's comments. These are limited and minor amendments, as he knows. They are measures that the police have been asking for, and they enjoy the support of the House for exactly the reason he gave.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is expected—and even reasonable—that those who lose the democratic debate in this place will take their protest on to the

streets. However, we have seen a recent disturbing trend that the tactics of a minority now undermine and jeopardise the tradition of effective peaceful protest that we enjoy in this democracy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the measures the Government have taken, and the measures he proposes today, are a reasonable response to such tactics, and that the tactics of the minority that have been employed, and that these measures address, are distorting and abusing the hard-won freedoms of this country to gather, to speak, and to protest peacefully?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point and if I may, I will build on it in combination with an earlier point. There are many people who served our country in various different ways over two world wars and in conflicts since then, whose memorials are either lost and known only unto God or are many thousands of miles away from their families. Families who have come to share our lives in the United Kingdom may have left behind them the graves of family members who served in those conflicts. I am thinking in particular of the 140,000 or so Muslim servicemen who served and lost their lives in the last two wars, of the many Jewish ex-servicemen who march as well, and of many others from around the world—from Africa, South America and Asia—who served in the pursuit of liberty and the defence of freedom in our country. This is their home now; those memorials remember their relatives and loved ones, and it is absolutely right that, for all communities in this country, we defend those moments of national memorial and the altars to liberty that they represent.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): These measures may impact on those of my constituents who wish to protest outside this place or elsewhere over the border. The Minister says that enforcement actions will be taken by police officers at their discretion. How will the Government ensure that these measures will be applied uniformly, proportionately and appropriately across all of England's police forces?

Tom Tugendhat: These are police powers, so the enforcement or application of them is operationally independent and down to the discretion of officers and chief constables as appropriate. That is how policing traditionally works. We do not have a national police force through which we can order police officers to arrest or not arrest individuals. We allow individual police officers to apply the law according to the guidelines that chief constables set out, and that is exactly what will happen in this circumstance.

Backbench Business

National HIV Testing Week

12.6 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered National HIV testing week.

I am the understudy today for the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who secured this debate. It has been 42 years since the untimely death of Terrence Higgins, who was not only the first recorded British person to die of HIV/AIDS, but a Commons *Hansard* reporter. Since then, we have made huge progress in the testing, diagnosis and treatment of HIV. Today, people living with HIV can continue to live very normal lives. It is essential to remember, however, that HIV remains a critical global health issue, with millions of people living with the virus and many more at risk of infection.

Early diagnosis and treatment of HIV is essential in reducing the spread of the virus, improving health outcomes and reducing the stigma associated with the disease. I thank charities such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust, the George House Trust and others that have worked tirelessly to lead the fight against HIV. They have done and continue to do phenomenal work to help those living with HIV and to achieve the goal of no new HIV transmissions by 2030. I take the time on behalf of all the members of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS to thank the outgoing chief executive of the National AIDS Trust, Deborah Gold, for her hard work and dedication to the charity for the past 10 years, and for her immense contribution to the fight against HIV. I am sure that everyone will join me in wishing her the best of luck in her new chapter.

As Members will be aware, HIV weakens a person's immune system and their ability to fight everyday infections and disease. HIV is passed from human to human and, if left untreated, can progress through a series of stages leading to acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Though there is currently no cure for HIV, treatments are available that enable a person to live a long and healthy life. A person living with HIV has a similar life expectancy to a HIV-negative person, provided that they are tested and diagnosed in good time. In 2022, the Government introduced the national HIV action plan. It had the clear aim of reducing new infections by 80% by 2025 and, crucially, ending infections and deaths from HIV by 2030. That goal can be achieved only if the plan is properly financed and implemented.

In November, at the event to honour Sir Elton John organised by the APPG on HIV and AIDS and hosted by Mr Speaker, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care outlined that the UK Government would be expanding the hugely successful NHS opt-out virus testing programme for HIV and hepatitis to 46 new emergency departments across England. Expansion of the programme from the current 33 sites to every high-prevalence area could identify a significant proportion of the estimated 4,500 people living with undiagnosed HIV, prevent new transmissions and save more lives.

As hon. Members will know, we have been marking National HIV Testing Week with events across the country, including on the parliamentary estate, to raise

awareness of HIV testing. This annual campaign aims to raise awareness of the importance of regular testing to reduce the number of people living with undiagnosed HIV and those diagnosed late, and the campaign's strapline "I test" is in its second year. I urge everyone to take advantage of the services available during National HIV Testing Week and throughout the year to get tested and know their status.

Recent UK Health Security Agency data highlights that while HIV diagnoses among white gay and bisexual men are falling, inequalities are deepening. HIV transmissions have increased in the last year among heterosexual men and women, as well as gay and bisexual men of other ethnicities. Persistent inequalities must be overcome. At the same time, the experience of people living with HIV is not equal or equitable. Worrying numbers of people living with HIV are afraid to visit healthcare settings, with women and people of black African ethnicity more likely to be afraid than men or people of white ethnicity. Those inequalities are mirrored in the experience of people offered an HIV test: 40% of women eligible for a test were not offered one when attending a sexual health service. I urge the Minister to do everything she can to tackle the inequalities in the HIV response in order to deliver the Government's action plan and end new transmissions by 2030.

Along with tackling inequalities, we need to tackle the growing number of people previously diagnosed with HIV who are not accessing the care they need. The UKHSA estimates that as many as 14,000 people living with HIV in England have not been seen by their HIV clinic for at least a year, often for complex social and stigma-related reasons. They are essentially lost from the health system. One in three of those testing positive for HIV through opt-out HIV testing in accident and emergency departments knew about their status but were not accessing care. Hospitals in London are now reporting that people lost to care have overtaken undiagnosed HIV as the leading cause of HIV-related hospitalisation and mortality. Those are entirely preventable incidents.

Pilot work in south London funded by the Elton John AIDS Foundation has shown that with case finding, focused follow-up and wraparound support, people can be successfully returned to care at an average cost of £3,000 a person. HIV clinics currently do not have the resources to do that work, but it is significantly cheaper than care costs when people develop serious illness. A national programme must be urgently introduced to find everyone lost to HIV care in England and ensure that they are getting the lifesaving treatment they need. Will the Minister confirm what action the Government are taking to find people living with HIV who have been lost to care?

Finally, we must tackle late diagnosis. Certain groups are more likely to be diagnosed late and therefore experience worse health outcomes. Last year, 44% of people diagnosed with HIV in England were diagnosed at a late stage, and late diagnosis rates are even higher for women, at 51%. The number of people living with HIV who know their status but are not in care could be higher than the number of people with undiagnosed HIV. That is a risk to their health, expensive for the NHS and threatens HIV elimination. People not in HIV care are disproportionately from underserved communities, including black communities, women and people who use drugs.

The impact of late diagnosis can be extremely damaging: as well as meaning that someone might unknowingly pass on the virus, if they receive a late diagnosis, their chance of dying in the first year after diagnosis is 10 times greater than if they had received an early diagnosis. Additionally, late diagnosis can have a detrimental impact on an effective response to treatment, which in turn leads to greater healthcare costs at a time when there are already financial strains on the NHS. Late diagnosis is particularly common among certain groups, with 54% of heterosexual British black Africans and 29% of gay and bisexual men diagnosed late. Opt-out testing has allowed us to identify that those are the groups most likely to be HIV-positive.

Although opt-out testing highlighted that those groups were most likely to have HIV, we need to encourage more people from them to get tested. A simple solution for that could be to use public message campaigns. Targeted messaging across radio, television and social media could be created to encourage people to come forward and get tested. It could also specify the importance of testing and tell people where their nearest local test centre is.

Ultimately, to address late diagnosis in both primary and secondary care services, HIV testing needs to become more prominent across the entire NHS primary and secondary estate. If we want to turn the UK into a science and health superpower, and if we want there to be no new cases of HIV transmission by 2030, it is essential that we address the issues that I am highlighting. In particular, it is vital that we rapidly increase testing levels in high and very high prevalence areas through opt-out testing. That will not only save the NHS money and reduce the backlog but enable patients to know quickly whether they have HIV.

My challenge to the Minister is to fight her corner and fight the inequalities in the HIV response, ensure that access to testing is increased and ensure that once testing has started in hospitals, funding for it will continue until we find the last person living with undiagnosed HIV in England. The opportunity to eliminate new cases of a long-term condition is rare, yet we have the tools to do just that now. We must grasp that opportunity and create a culture where failure to follow guidelines is considered wrong and HIV testing is considered routine.

I end on this note. It is crucial that HIV and AIDS remain firmly on the agenda of our Governments, both domestically and internationally. They must be held to their promise to reach zero new infections by 2030.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Father of the House.

12.17 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): At the conclusion of the debate, I am going to take an HIV test. I do not expect it to have a surprising result, but I think that unless people like me set an example, we cannot expect others to overcome what might be embarrassment or awkwardness. The same applies to things like giving blood, which I did again this morning, for over the 90th time. If people watched blood being taken, they would be less fearful about giving blood themselves, and if they knew that they could take HIV tests without embarrassment, they would do so.

Each year, about 3 million of us go to sexual health clinics, where there are a lot of acronyms—STIs, STDs, GUM, HIV and AIDS—that all follow from things like blood being given. The first person in my family to take an HIV test was my mother, who had had a number of blood units given to her after an operation and wondered whether she was infected and might infect others in the family. She was clear; many were not so fortunate.

On vectors—person-to-person transmissions—we ought to be far more open, because the only thing we cannot inherit from our parents is celibacy. Celibacy can be adopted or forced on someone, but sex is quite common for the rest of us. On that, I am glad that we now have a vaccination against genital warts, which is included in the cervical cancer vaccination and is now available to young men and boys as well. We will reach herd immunity much faster if both sexes are involved. That also gives protection to men who have sex with men.

I am not an expert on all these things, but we ought to be as careful about this as we are about ensuring that people's teeth are protected, as we discussed yesterday in the dentistry statement. We should be concerned that the chances of being involved in a conception that ends in a formal termination are about 50% in this country. There is a birth cohort of just over 600,000, and there are over 200,000 abortions a year—the maths is not complicated.

It takes two to tango. As the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) said in her remarkable, positive and important speech, we can end HIV transmission if, when people know that they have been exposed to it, they can get treatment for it.

There is no reason for a long debate, or even a long speech from someone like me. I simply say, in solidarity with the people we can protect, that we ought to know our own status, encourage others to find ways of discovering their status and make sure that help is available and offered.

It is odd that, often, when people come into contact with clinical services, they are not encouraged to discover their status in all kinds of ways. Modern treatments are available and they are effective. If we can overcome the embarrassment, we can get to a situation where people can be themselves and live as they choose, without being a risk to themselves or to others. I thank the hon. Lady again for her speech, and I hope that the whole country will pay attention.

12.21 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Father of the House, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for so clearly setting out the issues. I do not need to repeat them, as I want to speak briefly.

I represent a constituency that has had a high incidence of HIV infection for many years. It has a young, mobile and diverse population, and a very busy sexual health clinic at 10 Hammersmith Broadway, which I visited last summer. I pay tribute to all the staff there and at the other clinics around the country. They offer a fantastic service and they are engineering testing and comprehensive treatment under very difficult circumstances and with very limited resources. I also pay tribute to the Terrence Higgins Trust and the National AIDS Trust, and all the other charitable organisations that have done so much over the past few decades.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

We should pause in this debate to mark the successes and the transformation in both the prevention and the treatment of HIV and AIDS over the past few years. There has been great success. We know now that early diagnosis is important but, after diagnosis, those who are infected can live normal lives of normal duration. That would have been unthinkable even 20 years ago. There is very effective prevention through PrEP and other methods. To go from where the risk of infection was a few years ago to where we are now is extremely significant.

Given that testing and treatment are available—and prevention should be available—it is even more frustrating that we are in the situation that my hon. Friend outlined. First, the fact that 4,500 people are undiagnosed in the UK is entirely unnecessary. One of the solutions, which the Government are expanding, is opt-out testing in A&E and other locations. That needs to be embedded and extended. Until we get to the stage of preventing transmission altogether—for which there is an ambitious target—opt-out testing needs to be expanded and made more usual. In turn, that will help to eliminate the disparities in testing rates between different parts of the population—between men and women, and heterosexuals and men who have sex with men. This is not rocket science. This is about simply making sure that the proper remedies are available.

The other issue that has come up repeatedly over the past couple of years is the availability of PrEP and other preventive measures. That is partly down to the pressure on sexual health clinics, through an upsurge in other STIs such as gonorrhoea and syphilis, of which we have seen not quite epidemics but serious outbreaks. Last year we saw several episodes of monkeypox. Understandably, they have taken priority in sexual health clinics, but that means that less time is available for consultation, and there are fewer prescriptions of PrEP and other medications. The waiting times are still far too long, but at one stage they were being measured in months rather than weeks. It is clearly a missed opportunity if people are willing to be prescribed PrEP and understand its advantages, but are not receiving prescriptions because they simply cannot get an appointment at their local clinic, through no fault of the clinic or its staff.

These problems need to be tackled, and it would be relatively inexpensive to do so. The problems are relatively clear and straightforward. The drugs and products are safe and tried and tested, and the methods—whether postal testing or in A&E or outreach—are well known and proven to work. The only issue, which I hope the Minister will address, remains why it is not being done. Obviously, there were problems during covid, as there were in many health services, but that is no longer a good enough excuse. There is no reason why people should not be able to readily accept testing, medication and preventive measures.

I would like to hear a further commitment from the Minister today on opt-out testing, resources for sexual health clinics and the availability of PrEP. It has been suggested that, given the expansion in services now provided by pharmacies, PrEP could be added to them. I see no reason why that cannot be the case. It could be perfectly safe to prescribe it in that way. It would take the pressure off clinics and it would make the medication more accessible and easier for those who are not currently receiving prescriptions.

I ask the Minister and the Government to consider those points. They are not difficult and they will not take a long time, but they could have a significant effect on many hundreds and thousands of people who are unnecessarily at risk.

12.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I thank him for his contribution and his knowledge of his constituency. I also thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols). She led a debate yesterday on mindfulness, which I attended, and she led this debate on HIV testing exceptionally well.

I am the Democratic Unionist party's health spokesperson, so it is a pleasure for me to be here to make a contribution. I always like speak in such debates if possible. Once or twice I have missed them, but I am very pleased to be here today. We celebrate the fact that HIV is now a disease that people can live with, and can enjoy a better life with. That is something to celebrate.

National HIV Testing Week lasts from 5 to 11 February, and special recognition is deserved for reaching a decade since it started. We should look at what has been done in the last 10 years—how we have progressed and done better, and how people have a better quality of life today. It is important to mark this week in Parliament, as testing is the only way for people to know if they have HIV. The Father of the House said that he would go and get a test, even though he does not need one. He said that people should recognise that testing is important. The latest figures show that rate of HIV diagnosis is falling, but people of a heterosexual orientation are getting more HIV diagnoses, so there is a lot of work still to do. Testing is free, quick and easy, so it is imperative that people of all ages are aware of the services available to them and take advantage of them to prevent passing it on to others.

I would point the Minister, for whom I have great respect—I understand her deep interest in this subject and very much look forward to her response today—to the issue of PrEP, which the hon. Member for Hammersmith referred to. In Northern Ireland, we have had a very successful campaign on that for some time, which seeks to raise awareness, reduce sexual diseases and then, by its very nature, give people longer lives.

Some 69,000 HIV tests were carried out in Northern Ireland in 2020; from those, there were 52 new diagnoses, bringing the total number of people diagnosed with the disease in Northern Ireland to 1,123. With a population the size of ours, we might say that those figures are not bad—I do not think they are. It illustrates that testing and the use of PrEP, among other policies in Northern Ireland, have enabled us to reduce diagnoses and keep them at a manageable figure. That is a decline of 49% from 2015, which is a massive success story. There has been a declining trend in the annual number of diagnoses in people born in the UK. There is no doubt that we are doing our best to encourage people to partake in testing.

It is important to recognise how far we have come since the '70s and '80s, when there was a huge stigma around HIV diagnosis, testing and treatment. As I have said, I am my party's health spokesperson, so I try never to miss these debates. It is amazing to see how far we have advanced since then, both socially and medically,

and it is important to say how wonderful our NHS is, being capable of transforming what was once a much-feared virus into something that is now easily treated. That does not mean we become nonchalant in relation to it; it means we have to recognise what we have done, and then recognise what our policy will be for the next period, because people are now able to live long, healthy lives through treatment.

I look to the Minister for a commitment that we will dedicate more resources to educating young people on HIV and other viruses that can be passed on through infected bodily fluids. Many young people will not remember, or even be aware of, the years when HIV was a massive concern to so many. It is crucial that we keep on raising that awareness today, and that young people are encouraged to test, if necessary, and to have those conversations with family and friends, to ensure they do not have the disease and that they are safe, well and healthy.

Where we can do that most effectively is in schools and universities, which have a role to play in ensuring that young people feel comfortable and have a safe place where they can speak to someone privately. The Father of the House was absolutely right: these subjects are sometimes difficult to deal with, and those conversations may need to be private. Many universities already have sexual health clinics, which are fantastic services to offer young people.

So many organisations do incredibly hard work to provide support for other nations with a high prevalence of HIV. In National HIV Testing Week, I want to make a plea to the Minister. Ards Elim church in Newtownards, in my constituency, operates aid and missions out of the church and is incredibly active with missionaries in Africa, especially in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Every year, a group of young people come to our constituency, every one of whom is HIV-positive—their parents had it, and they have it—but they are living their life today because of the new medications that we have. I feel greatly encouraged when I see them and when I hear them singing in their heavenly voices. It reminds me that we in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have done magnificent work out in Swaziland, Zimbabwe and across Africa. I know it is not the Minister's responsibility, but could she perhaps give a hint or write a letter to myself and others on what can be done to continue the work on HIV in Swaziland and Zimbabwe? It is of great interest to my constituents who attend that church.

At one stage, 40% of the population of Swaziland were HIV-positive, but today, after receiving medications and doing testing campaigns, the rate there is manageable. If that is not a success story, I would like to know what is. As many will know, there is a high prevalence of HIV in certain parts of Africa, and the ministry is keen to secure help for young children and parents who are suffering. There is so much ambition to help others, as it has been proven that catching cases early through frequent testing hinders the spread and lessens the impact of HIV on an individual. Across the UK, we are successful with our figures. Can the Minister provide some clarity on whether we are able to help other countries in desperate need as well?

This week is another opportunity to encourage people to take advantage of services offered to combat HIV. There is fantastic potential to protect people from HIV and to prevent severe illness and even death. When

I think of the royal family, I often think of Princess Diana and the work she did when she was alive. She reached out and was one of those great motivators who tried to make sure that people across the world knew that HIV should not and would not be a death sentence.

To conclude, I thank the local health trusts in Northern Ireland, and indeed across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for providing these worthwhile facilities. I call on the Government and the Minister to ensure that we continue to provide sufficient testing services to all across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as testing has proven instrumental in saving lives. Why would we not celebrate an occasion like this, when across this great United Kingdom, many more people are alive today because of what we have done?

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

12.36 pm

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) on opening this debate. She was an excellent stand-in for the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), approaching the subject with nuance and good grace. I thank my constituents in East Dunbartonshire and people right across Scotland who contacted me in advance of the debate, which has helped me to shape my remarks. I also thank the Terrence Higgins Trust for its very helpful briefing.

Just prior to Christmas, I popped into Charlotte Tilbury, where I purchased myself a nice new lipstick, which I am wearing today. The money from the sales of this lipstick goes to the Rocket Fund, powered by the Elton John AIDS Foundation, which seeks to end AIDS everywhere. I must say that I was delighted to be doing my bit just by treating myself to a new lipstick, even prior to this debate.

National HIV Testing Week serves as a reminder to us all of the importance of knowing our status, and provides amplified opportunities for people who would otherwise never test to do so. The scientific advances in HIV treatment and prevention are some of the biggest we have seen in modern medicine. An HIV diagnosis has gone from being a near death sentence for sadly too many people to being a manageable condition, with people living with HIV enjoying a normal life expectancy. Even more incredibly, we can now say with absolute confidence that someone on effective HIV treatment cannot pass on the virus to their sexual partner—undetectable equals untransmittable.

One of the key interventions and milestones that contributed to this progress was the implementation of the NHS-delivered national HIV PrEP programme in 2017. I am proud to recognise here today that Scotland was the first nation in the UK to make PrEP available, free to anyone at risk, on our precious NHS. There are now approximately 6,000 people using PrEP in Scotland at any one time. An estimated 500 people are living with undiagnosed HIV in Scotland, and a further 961 people have been diagnosed with HIV but are no longer considered to be receiving specialist HIV care. Reaching those people will be vital if we are to succeed in ending new cases of HIV by 2030.

[Amy Callaghan]

Between 2010 and 2019, the most marked reductions in the annual number of first ever HIV diagnoses in Scotland were observed among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men. The reductions likely reflect a decline in the incidence and transmission of HIV infection in Scotland, associated with a range of public health measures over this period. However, that same progress is not happening across other groups, with slower reductions among women and minority communities. Other groups continue to be marginalised, such as sex workers and injecting drug users.

The number of people with undiagnosed HIV in Scotland is thought to be larger in heterosexual individuals, which emphasises the importance of considering HIV in people without identified current risk behaviours and the potential for greater impact of HIV-related stigma. Stigma still blights the lives of far too many. We must continue to fight the stigma still experienced by people living with HIV. Stigma and discrimination remain a reality for many people living with the condition. There is a need to increase awareness, fight prejudice and improve education about HIV.

That is why, on 1 December 2022, the Scottish Government published their report “Ending HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030”. To achieve the HIV transmission elimination goal in Scotland, a whole system and whole society approach will be required. The high-level activities required are primary prevention, detection and treatment. Indeed, National HIV Testing Week holds the opportunity to get tested. It can even be done at home, with a result in as little as 15 minutes. I am pleased to confirm to everyone here that I, as a heterosexual woman, have taken an HIV test. It is an important step that we as Members of Parliament can take for our constituents to show how important this matter is. The only HIV test to fear is the one you did not take. It is a privilege that so many in the '80s and '90s were never afforded.

Globally, thanks to the investment of countries such as the UK in aid through the UN Global Fund and research into vaccines through International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, millions more are receiving antiretroviral treatment and testing. In November 2020, the UK Government announced aid spending would fall from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI as a “temporary measure”, in response to the effects of the covid-19 pandemic on the UK’s public finances and economy. I would like to express my concern to the Government on their lack of recommitting to 0.7% GNI spending on overseas development aid. I echo the comments of the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), and reiterate her point on how the UK is failing on funding commitments and its ability to set or achieve meaningful targets on sexual and reproductive health. We have the tools to end HIV transmissions; we just need to use them, backed up by political will.

While advancements in medical science have transformed HIV, the persistent stigma, discrimination and lack of awareness surrounding HIV testing remain formidable barriers in our fight against it. National HIV Testing Week serves as a crucial reminder of the importance of early detection and diagnosis. So, as we commemorate National HIV Testing Week, let us reaffirm our commitment to ending the silence surrounding HIV, and to dismantling barriers to testing and saving lives.

I would like to see a recommitment by the UK Government to ending HIV as a public health threat. By working together, we can achieve our goal of ending new HIV cases by 2030.

12.42 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to speak for the Opposition in this debate to mark National HIV Testing Week. We have heard great contributions today from Members on both sides of the House, and it gives me hope that we can continue to make progress on this issue in the years ahead. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for making powerful speeches on the enormous progress made on HIV.

Incredible advances mean that people living with HIV on effective treatment can now enjoy normal life expectancy and are no longer at risk of passing on the virus. The reality of living with HIV in the 2020s is a world away from the 1980s. As colleagues have remarked today, we might just have the chance to be the generation to make Britain the first country in the world to end new cases of HIV for good. It is an enormous credit to a generation of activists, fantastic organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, many great campaigning MPs across the House and the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS that we have got to this point. More treatments have become available. Thousands of people are now living with HIV at levels undetectable or intransmissible to others, and the stigma and misinformation that the LGBT+ community suffered through the '80s is not what it was.

For Labour’s part, we are incredibly proud of our record on HIV. It was the last Labour Government who switched spending so people could get the new drugs as they became available after 1997. We passed the Equality Act in 2010 that gave legal protections to people living with HIV. Chris Smith became the first MP to talk about living with HIV in 2005, and in 2018 my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) was the first MP to talk about living with HIV here in the Commons. But there is much more to be done.

There are around 4,500 people in the UK living with HIV who are undiagnosed. The earlier those people can be found and linked to care, the better their health outcomes will be and the closer we will be to stopping new transmissions. Some 44% of people diagnosed with HIV in England last year were diagnosed at a late stage. Late diagnosis rates are even higher for women, at 51%, and that means some women are diagnosed so late they are already on their death beds.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am glad the hon. Lady is making the important point that women are particularly at risk of non-diagnosis. She rightly mentions some Labour people who made important contributions. We ought to remember Norman Fowler. I do not normally talk about my wife’s work, but if I may say so, when she was Secretary of State for Health, she got the insurance companies in and said, “Do not charge higher premiums, or refuse cover to, people who have taken an HIV test. That is not the way to move forward.”

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, which he has now put on the record.

There were 13% fewer people tested for HIV in 2022 than in 2019. That is why we have seen cross-party support today for National HIV Testing Week. Testing is free, quick and easy. You can even test from home, and you can order a free test online; I urge colleagues to share that information with their constituents.

Turning to what the Government can do to help eradicate new transmissions of HIV, I was very pleased to see the Government finally commit to rolling out opt-out testing to all 32 areas of high HIV prevalence in England. The pilots have been a resounding success, and Labour has fully supported bringing them to other high-risk communities across England. The shadow Health Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), was on the HIV Commission that first made the recommendations. Will the Minister provide an update on progress towards rolling out the programme to the 47 new hospitals? Can she provide reassurance that in the long term, opt-out testing in emergency departments will be embedded as a cornerstone of the UK's plan to end new HIV transmissions? Receiving an HIV diagnosis can be alarming, especially if you are not expecting it, so has she considered setting aside a portion of funding to ensure that people who are diagnosed through the scheme are given support to help them to come to terms with their diagnosis? Has she made an assessment of whether opt-out testing could be rolled out to other settings in primary care?

The Minister will know that the HIV action plan included several commitments on HIV testing, including the commitment that local authority commissioners would set the standard that sexual health services would achieve a 90% testing offer rate to first-time attendees. Two years on from the publication of the plan, there has been no reporting on its progress. Will the Minister say what progress the Government have made against commitments in the HIV action plan to increase the number of people tested in sexual health services?

Finally, I want to ask the Minister about the Government's commitment to the prevention agenda. Under the Government, we have widening health inequalities, life expectancy stalling, and a record high of 2.8 million people out of the workforce due to ill health. Any Government interested in supporting the NHS would put prevention front and centre of their agenda, but for 14 years, there has been no joined-up plan for health, and services and institutions that promote good health have been run down. This week we heard that England's national public health agency, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, has been "effectively dismantled". OHID leads on sexual and reproductive health and HIV, as well as a wide range of public health issues, ranging from tobacco to obesity and children's health. Will the Minister explain how the Government can be committed to the prevention agenda when they are dismantling our national public health function? Will she do us the courtesy of confirming how many full-time equivalent staff have been cut from OHID, and can she explain why the Government have not had the courtesy to make a statement to Parliament on what has been reported, which sounds like quite significant cuts?

The remarkable progress on HIV has been hard won, and it puts ending new cases of HIV within reach. We have only one Parliament left to do that by 2030. I want to put on record clearly that Labour is committed to

getting us over the line. That is why we would immediately get to work publishing a refreshed HIV action plan. It will not be easy, but we know what it will take. We owe it to everyone we have lost to the virus, everyone who has faced that stigma, and everyone who is living with HIV today to end new transmissions once and for all.

12.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) on securing this important debate. My right hon. Friend has been called away to his constituency today, but I am grateful to both him and the hon. Lady for their strong advocacy for National HIV Testing Week.

I pay tribute to all the other Members who have contributed today: my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). It is clear that there is cross-party consensus on the need to challenge ourselves to meet our ambition of no new HIV transmissions by 2030, and I am sure that we can do that if we stick together on this subject. I listened carefully to all Members' speeches, and I will try to answer all the questions that were asked.

Let me begin by saying how grateful I am to everyone who has taken part in National HIV Testing Week, especially all those who have been tested in Portcullis House thanks to the work of the excellent Terrence Higgins Trust. I also commend the work of other charities, including the National AIDS Trust, Tackle HIV, LGBT Foundation, George House Trust and many others supporting families up and down the country—and I salute the work of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS.

We should remember the way in which heroic NHS staff stepped up to care for people living and dying with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s, at a time when AIDS was a terrifying new disease that spared no one. It was to honour their legacy, and to complete the work that our NHS began 40 years ago, that this Government made a bold and ambitious commitment in 2019 to end new transmissions in England by 2030. To that end, we published the first, groundbreaking national HIV action plan just over two years ago. Testing is one of the plan's central pillars, and I am proud to say that we have been making huge strides, setting an example to the rest of the world to follow. Last year the UK ranked first in the European combined sexual and reproductive health rights ranking atlas 2020 to 2023, in front of 43 other countries, and the UK Health Security Agency has confirmed that for the third time in a row, England achieved or exceeded the UN's 95-95-95 targets. That means that 95% of people with HIV are being diagnosed, 98% of those diagnosed are being treated, and 98% of those receiving treatment are unable to pass on the condition.

However, while we have made excellent progress, we are not complacent, and we will not be satisfied until the number of transmissions is brought to zero. We have therefore put National HIV Testing Week at the heart of our efforts, year on year. We know that tailored and

[*Dame Andrea Leadsom*]

targeted campaigns are the most effective, so we have increased the number of tests and widened the scope of our campaign, ensuring that our messaging reflects and appeals to the different groups whom we are trying to reach. We are undertaking ever greater efforts to reach those who have been missed before and have become disengaged from the process. Last year we introduced the option of self-testing, with near-instant results at home, to give people more choice and more control over their testing, and this year we are partnering with local businesses to offer tests in places that regularly serve people from, for example, the black African community, who we know are less likely to want to go for a test.

These efforts have brought results. Since we launched the HIV action plan, we have sent out nearly 100,000 tests and received more than 300 reactive results, allowing us to immediately begin the process of getting vital treatment to those who need it. So far this year, the figures show that more than 4,000 self-sampling and self-testing kits have been ordered and nearly 500 results have been reported, nine of them reactive. Our campaign's message is simple: "I test"—not "eye test"! I am pleased to tell the House that, like the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, I tested this week, so I can say from experience that testing is quick, easy, confidential and free. I engaged in a good bit of banter with my fellow Health Ministers as we undertook our testing together, so ours was not very confidential, but it was done through choice, and we were demonstrating how easy it is to do. Everyone should test. It takes two minutes, so I say: please do it.

Our most recent figures show that although new HIV diagnosis rates are steadily decreasing, they sadly remain disproportionately higher among gay men, bisexual men and other men who have sex with men, as well as heterosexual people from the black African community. Similarly, disparity can be found in testing: despite huge progress and record testing rates among gay men, lower levels of testing persist among black African and heterosexual groups.

NHS England has invested £20 million to deliver opt-out HIV testing in emergency departments in areas of extremely high HIV prevalence to ensure that people who need it receive the right treatment as early as possible. Anyone having blood taken in A&E in those centres has been automatically—with the potential to opt out—tested for blood-borne viruses, which means that people who would not have been reached via any other testing route have been diagnosed. This saves the NHS millions of pounds, relieves pressure on the service, and helps to address inequalities in testing. In under two years, the programme has already proved value for money by diagnosing more than 4,000 people with blood-borne viruses including HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. The National Institute for Health and Care Research is investing an additional £20 million to find out how we might go further, faster, in tackling HIV rates in the additional 47 sites of high HIV prevalence across England.

Andy Slaughter: That may be a good initiative, but it is limited by time, geography, and the type of institution offering the test. Are the Government committed to going further, and spreading opt-out testing to other health facilities and other parts of the country?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I just mentioned, there is an additional £20 million for the National Institute for Health and Care Research. As well as delivering the opt-out testing in 47 centres, it will deliver a live dashboard showing the effectiveness of this type of testing. That is in addition to self-testing, which people can do at home or at a testing centre. It is particularly important to note that the public health grant is used in local authority areas, so that authorities can make their own attempts to reach out and identify those who should be tested.

Jim Shannon: We in the House may want to reach out further and bring about more testing. Has the Minister been able to explore the possibility of extending this programme to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales? This is something that we should all pursue vigorously, and we can do that better if we do it collectively.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree. We would like to see this being done around the world. The UK is, I believe, the third biggest donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which seeks to eradicate those diseases and to which we have donated £5.5 billion, so our interest is in eradicating those diseases throughout the world. Closer to home, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: that crucial part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, should also be supported and helped to roll out this testing, and that will be possible now that the Northern Ireland Assembly has been re-established, which I am delighted about.

Of course, there is still much more to be done to smash the stigma attached to HIV testing and treatment. I pay particular tribute to Becky from Sheffield and Akhona from Leeds for coming forward recently and telling their stories to the BBC. They are setting an example for people up and down the country who should come forward for testing or treatment, and we are backing their efforts to spread awareness by funding HIV Prevention England's HIV stigma symposium in March at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham. The event will bring together community experts, activists, healthcare professionals and affected people to discuss the impact of HIV stigma and look at effective stigma-reduction strategies. I am sure that it will generate promising stigma-reduction solutions, and I will listen carefully to its recommendations. I am pleased that HIV Prevention England is focusing its efforts on giving a platform to speakers from underserved areas.

Of course, HIV prevention goes beyond testing. The use of pre-exposure prophylaxis, commonly known as PrEP, is an important part of combination HIV prevention. It has been called a "miracle drug" that prevents HIV-negative people from acquiring the virus, and it is a vital tool in our battle to end new HIV transmissions by 2030. Oral PrEP has been routinely available in specialist sexual health services since 2020.

However, we recognise that certain groups have challenges in accessing the PrEP they need. That is why we have developed a PrEP road map with colleagues from Government, local authorities, professional bodies and the voluntary and community sectors, and it will be published on 15 February.

Andy Slaughter: At the moment, because it can be accessed only through sexual health clinics, the average wait to access PrEP is more than 12 weeks. Sexual

health clinics have seen about a 30% real-terms funding cut over the last few years, so will the Minister either increase the resources available to clinics or increase the number of outlets, such as pharmacies, from which PrEP can be obtained? That is where the logjam is occurring.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I have just said, we have developed a PrEP road map precisely to increase access to PrEP, and its report will be published in a few days' time. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at that report. I thank everyone who played their part in drafting the road map, working tirelessly towards our 2030 goal of zero new transmissions.

I also thank all our partners for supporting the promotion of HIV testing through National HIV Testing Week, our sexual health summer campaigns, the roll-out of PrEP throughout the country, the introduction of opt-out testing, the development of a PrEP access and equity road map; and so much else besides.

These results would not have been possible without Kevin Fenton, the Government's chief adviser on HIV and chair of the HIV action plan implementation steering group. His bold leadership has brought together partners across the health landscape towards our shared goals, and I pay particular tribute to him.

So many of us have a part to play as we reach the endgame of ending new HIV transmissions in England by 2030. I reiterate my sincere thanks to all colleagues who have shared their stories, advice and experiences to support our efforts for so long. I hope that today's debate will inspire thousands of people to do the right thing and take an HIV test.

1.2 pm

Charlotte Nichols: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have made such thoughtful contributions today. Again, I thank the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who secured this debate, for giving us this opportunity.

The cross-party consensus on the importance of HIV testing and the tone in which today's debate has taken place represent the very best traditions of this House. I hope all those listening will consider taking a test to know their status, and I look forward to continuing to work with members of the APPG on HIV and AIDS to hold the Government to account on their progress towards the 2030 target.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National HIV testing week.

Post Office Management Culture

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Business and Trade Committee on 16 January 2024, on Post Office and Horizon – Compensation follow up, HC 477; Oral evidence taken before the Business and Trade Committee on 20 June 2023, on The Post Office, Session 2022-23, HC 1501.]

1.4 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the management culture of the Post Office.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. I spoke in Westminster Hall on this very subject in July 2023, but it is even more pertinent now.

The Horizon IT scandal resulted from the Post Office's management culture. In his March 2019 judgment on *Bates and others v. Post Office Limited*, Mr Justice Fraser stated:

“There seems to be a culture of secrecy and excessive confidentiality generally within the Post Office, but particularly focused on Horizon.”

Following this damning judgment, Nick Read, who had been appointed as chief executive officer, set about changing the management culture of Post Office Ltd when he took over in September 2019. In a letter to the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in June 2021, he stated that he was

“undertaking to drive a culture of genuine commercial partnership between Post Office and postmasters with openness and transparency at its core... a major programme of improvement has been underway. The goal is to overhaul the culture of the organisation”.

I reiterate his words: “openness and transparency” and “to overhaul the culture of the organisation”.

Since last July, we have seen a spate of historical scandals emanate from Sir Wyn Williams's statutory inquiry, from Post Office staff pursuing prosecutions despite knowing of Horizon issues, to others boastfully emailing colleagues to celebrate having sent innocent sub-postmasters to jail, and auditors omitting evidence in witness statements. It has been another shameful chapter in the Post Office's history and, at the outset, I commend the work of the inquiry for bringing these issues and many others to light.

It is worth pointing out that more than 40 current management staff were there throughout the Horizon scandal period. Some have given evidence to the inquiry demonstrating elements of the toxic management culture that has gone on too long. The continual disclosures that have blighted the inquiry appear to be another “spanner in the works,” as one victim said. The clear case of obfuscation on the watch of the current management of Post Office Ltd suggests that very little has changed in the organisation.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful opening speech, and I commend her efforts on this issue more generally. Does she agree with me and many of my constituents in East Dunbartonshire that the Post Office has a difficult culture of secrecy? That culture was highlighted by the ITV drama “*Mr Bates vs The Post Office*”, which resonated with so many of our constituents. Does she

[Amy Callaghan]

agree that sub-postmasters were othered by Post Office Ltd and the Government, and that they were not listened to or respected?

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree. The ITV drama exposed what happened, despite numerous efforts by many distinguished people in this place and the other place, by journalists such as Nick Wallis and by *Computer Weekly*. Many thousands of people knew about this scandal, but not the general public.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She has heard me speak often enough about the culture in the Post Office. Does she agree that following the money is often a good approach? Last year, the cost of administering the Post Office centrally went up by 10%, but the money going to sub-postmasters went down by 2%. When those figures are reversed, we will know that there has been a genuine change of culture within the Post Office.

Marion Fellows: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman. I frequently agree with him on Post Office matters. This is important, because the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, of which he is a member and I am the chair, is a true cross-party group. There is no party that does not have a member of the APPG.

Sean Hudson of the Communication Workers Union described the management culture perfectly:

“Every serious management failure results in a culture of offering that failure up for external investigation at significant expense to POL and the taxpayer, without learning from those mistakes.”

It has since transpired that the legal fees for resolving disclosure issues in the past year alone cost £24 million. That money could have gone into the network to help struggling sub-postmasters, many of whom are working for below the minimum wage. For context, POL announced remuneration improvements this year of just £26 million, which in no way take into account the rise of costs and overheads. Some of the issues were only brought to light through the perseverance of campaigners through freedom of information requests that revealed that not all relevant evidence had been disclosed to the inquiry. Some of the issues outlined came to light before the transmission of ITV’s “Mr Bates vs The Post Office”, which has had a monumental impact on the public consciousness in Britain. It is important that that was beamed into front rooms across the nation. It has caused deep distrust of Post Office management among the general public.

With the words “openness and transparency” in mind, I want to bring to the attention of the House the case of my constituent Salman Aslam. Salman, or Sal, is a young man who ran a post office in my constituency for five years, before he walked away last year. Sal took over the post office from his father, when he was in remission from Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Sal began noticing shortfalls, which he continually plugged himself and which ranged from £4,000 to £16,000 at a time. He estimates that he has paid in about £100,000 of his own money. When audited last year, a shortfall doubled in

front of his eyes to £80,000. He decided he could no longer go on, for the sake of his finances, and of his mental and physical health, which doctors were saying was under threat due to his levels of stress.

Throughout the five-year ordeal, Sal contacted the Post Office for help continually, but none was forthcoming, and after handing in his keys, the Post Office was not in touch for more than a year, leaving him in a perennial state of stress and fear. Sal went public with his story a few weeks ago—I had a hand in that—and once the story went out, Post Office Ltd immediately sprang into action and the communications department got in touch with him. That is not indicative of a change of culture. It echoes tales of the past that are all too familiar: desperate postmasters reaching out to POL for help, but receiving little in return; and communication from POL arriving only after some negative press.

Throughout the Horizon scandal, POL prioritised institutional reputation over the welfare of sub-postmasters, whom Mr Read himself recently told the Business and Trade Committee were the trusted asset that made the network what it is. Sal is one of many postmasters who have been in touch in the past weeks to tell me that they are experiencing shortfalls—not historical shortfalls, but ones that have occurred in the past year. Issues with Horizon appear to be continuing to this day, which is seriously concerning. Is the Minister aware of ongoing issues with Horizon? What has he done, or is he going to do, to address these? Sal, like all the victims who preceded him, is in this position through no fault of his own. Today, I call for an undertaking from the Government, the Post Office’s sole shareholder, that he will not be pursued for the ghost debt of £80,000, and I ask the Government to examine what kind of redress he can expect, having sunk so much of his own money into his post office to cover repeated shortfalls generated by Horizon. I have other constituents who are also in that position.

The culture of change that Nick Read has called for has not been apparent. In 2023, POL was rocked by scandals once again, with one appropriately named “bonusgate”. The former Chair of the Business and Trade Committee, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), outlined the statutory definition of “false accounting” at a meeting and said:

“it seems to me that in the annual accounts that Post Office reported to Parliament there was false or misleading information presented that did lead to...financial gain”.

I said in July:

“That is the management culture of POL: bonuses for doing ‘a reasonable job’.”—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2023; Vol. 736, c. 161WH.]

We should compare that with the compensation schemes, which have been fraught with difficulty every step of the way. The fundamental principles of public life, including openness, honesty, and integrity, have not been upheld by the management of POL for decades.

Regrettably, even the compensation schemes established to address the injustices of the lamentable Horizon chapter are not immune from POL’s unjust approach. Dan Neidle, a renowned tax expert, soon realised that the schemes are designed to ensure that the lowest amount of compensation is paid out. The application forms are so legally intricate that even a legal expert such as Mr Neidle expressed the need for legal advice in order to complete them, but POL provides only token

amounts for legal advice. The original absence of an option to claim punitive damages, something a lawyer would notice, puts applicants, many of whom are elderly and financially vulnerable, at risk of missing out on a significant portion of their compensation. I have seen a heavily redacted offer, and that is what happened to a sub-postmistress who was spat at by members of her local community after rumours of her stealing abounded in the neighbourhood. This is appalling, shameful and a stain on us all.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): The hon. Lady remarked earlier about the number of people coming forward following the ITV series, and I am keen for people to do that. It is important to say to all postmasters that they will be treated fairly. I know that she has some concerns about that, and she is right to raise concerns where she has them. I, too, have concerns about some elements of the original Horizon shortfall scheme. We are looking at that, in conjunction with the advisory board, to see what might be done to make sure that those payments were fair.

Let me draw the hon. Lady's attention to some of the stats on the new group litigation order scheme. We may be talking about the simpler cases coming forward here, but with 58 claims received, 52 offers have been made and 41 have been accepted without even a reference to the independent panel for people who are unhappy with the offers made. I do believe that the offers made are fair, but I am also happy to be challenged, in order to make sure that they are.

Marion Fellows: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I know that he has worked hard since he took over his post to make things better, but it would not be right if I did not continually and continuously push him.

Kevin Hollinrake *indicated assent.*

Marion Fellows: He is acknowledging that.

At this point, it is worth reading out a letter from Professor Chris Hodges, the chair of the Horizon Compensation Advisory Board, who has been similarly scathing. He writes:

“Dear Nick Read,

My colleagues on the Advisory Board and I remain deeply unconvinced by the substance of what you say on legal issues. We continue to hear stories your former Sub-Postmasters and Mistresses are confused, intimidated and hurt by the behaviour of the Post Office and its lawyers in negotiating settlements generally and in continued use of legalistic terminology. This is especially true for the significant number who remain deeply traumatised, and who do not understand the practice of terminology of what they see as an aggressive approach to settling claims. This is irrespective of whether the language or behaviour may or may not be technically permissible, and irrespective of the fact that they may have legal representation. Your reliance of legal argument and legal terminology similarly does not impress us. We do not perceive demonstration of behaviour that is anything like a sympathetic understanding towards the people your organisation has harmed. We suggest that this should give you cause for deep concern.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The hon. Lady is giving an excellent speech about a sad chapter in the Post Office's life. As someone involved from the beginning, back in 2012, Ron Warmington's first investigation into the Post Office Horizon scandal

concluded that the Post Office always tended to promote from within, which led to an incestuous management style and the keeping of secrets. Does the hon. Lady think that may be part of the problem?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Lady answers the intervention, I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to intervene because the House is quiet, but was he in the Chamber at the beginning of the hon. Lady's speech?

Andrew Bridgen: I was five minutes late.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman was not in the Chamber at the beginning of the hon. Lady's speech, it is not in order for him to make an intervention in her speech. I have allowed it because the House is quiet this afternoon, but the rules are there for a good reason and they have to be observed. It is perfectly in order for the hon. Gentleman to intervene in another speech, later, after he has been in the Chamber for a while. I have to make that point because if I do not make an example of the hon. Gentleman now, on a quiet day, we will totally lose control on busy days, when lots of people want to do that, and it is not right. There are very few people here this afternoon and there is plenty of time, so in these circumstances I have allowed the hon. Gentleman to make his point and I will allow the hon. Lady to answer it.

Marion Fellows: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He has been one of the people who has been pursuing this business for many years, and I pay tribute to him for that.

Shockingly, the Post Office's attempt to suppress the truth continues as it cautions sub-postmasters under the Horizon shortfall scheme against mentioning compensation terms to anyone. The overall process of seeking fair compensation is described by one applicant as “soul destroying”, raising concerns about the added suffering imposed on those individuals who have already endured so much. Again, I have a personal example of a constituent I am trying to persuade to apply, but he is terrified because he signed a non-disclosure agreement. Because he has heard about how others have been treated, he is even more afraid to apply.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for her speech. One issue that burdens me—I think it burdens us all in this House—is those who unfortunately took their own lives as a result of what has happened. I am conscious of the families left behind now carrying that burden. Does the hon. Lady agree that there should be some methodology to ensure families who are left without a loved one are helped through the process, which they might find equally terrifying and worrying?

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Many victims have described themselves as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. There is no scheme in place to help them and their families through what has been a traumatic and absolutely awful time for all of them, especially when someone has died before they have been vindicated. There are many recent examples of that.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am sorry to intervene on the hon. Lady yet again, but people might listen to her speech more than mine at the end, so I am keen to get a point on the record about the non-disclosure agreements. In evidence to the Select Committee, the Post Office has been quite clear—it is certainly our position—that nobody will be held to their non-disclosure agreement, so everybody should feel completely at liberty to discuss the terms of their settlement with Members of Parliament and others, as they feel appropriate. It is important to get that on the record.

Marion Fellows: I really thank the Minister for his intervention because hearing direct from the Minister that he will not be pursued will provide my constituent with some element of comfort. However, people are still traumatised years later because of the treatment they have had and it is hard for them to believe that people will not pursue them. I will show my constituent a clip of what the Minister just said.

I have met recently with Christopher Head, who is in the Gallery today. He is a Horizon victim and campaigner who, out of his own good will, helps others in applying for compensation. I do not want anyone else to add to Christopher's burden because he is doing such a good job. He has told me of the difficulties people face and that he himself received an offer that was only a minuscule fraction of his estimated Horizon losses. Alan Bates recently talked about his offer as well.

Many sub-postmasters I have spoken to recently told me that they plugged shortfalls out of their own pocket for years. The Minister has advised those people to apply for the Horizon shortfall scheme, and I sincerely hope that many more people will take advantage of that. Will the Minister ask Post Office management to make their records of those payments available to individuals? Have Post Office management let the Minister know when they will give an estimate of the excess claimed in Horizon shortfalls, from the introduction of the system to the end of financial year 2019-20? That is important because all that excess money, which was not owed, was put into Post Office Ltd and management bonuses were paid on profits.

The Post Office network is in disarray. Sub-postmasters have no faith in the current management of Post Office Ltd to turn things around. What they see is an organisation that is top-heavy, with multiple layers of management and directors, who have self-interest at heart.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. For obvious reasons, she has focused on the Horizon scandal, which has horrified the country, but the malaise within the Post Office management goes much further than that. Over the last 10 years, I have noticed the so-called temporary closure of many sub-offices that never reopen, and the loss of town centre post offices, some of which have been there for a century or more. Does she agree that the fundamental duty of the Post Office to run a viable network across the countries of the UK is simply not being fulfilled, and that lies at the door of Post Office management?

Marion Fellows: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more. I have lost three post offices in the last year, but not one vacancy has been filled. As we all know, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who regularly

use post offices. I will be applying to the Backbench Business Committee for another debate on the continuation of the network. The network also includes pick-up and drop-off offices—PUDOs, in the vernacular—that are not real post offices. Those who work there are not under Post Office terms and conditions, as they work for Payzone, which Post Office Ltd owns. The post office network is in disarray and postmasters have absolutely no faith in the current management. All the while, as the hon. Gentleman says, the network is crumbling, post offices are closing, and sub-postmasters are being asked to take on additional work for less pay, being punished for reducing hours as they try to keep overheads down in the middle of an economic crisis, and seeing their life investment lose value with each subsequent scandal that is uncovered. Lack of sub-postmaster support continues to this day, in stark contrast to the postmaster support policies championed by POL in the briefing that it gave me for this debate.

I have heard evidence of a recently widowed postmaster, who was told by a senior manager that Post Office Ltd “does not have a roadmap for bereavement”,

meaning that people were left alone without support, except from their fellow sub-postmasters. In the same briefing, Post Office Ltd outlined that it had increased fees for banking deposits by 20%. As Richard Trinder, chair of Voice of the Postmaster, put it:

“20% of not a lot, is still not a lot.”

Communities are losing a vital social asset, and the post offices that remain are being powered by the altruistic nature of hard-working sub-postmasters, pillars of the community, who are running out of energy. In 2012, the societal value of POL was estimated to be £2 billion. Does the Minister have an updated figure? I do not expect an answer on that today.

The Minister's announcement that the Government will legislate to exonerate convicted sub-postmasters is welcome. Lord Arbuthnot said that

“a mass problem requires a mass solution.”

Will the Minister commit to changing the governance format, which clearly has not worked for decades? It is high time for the Government to adopt a new approach, as the current arm's length governance arrangement has allowed scandal after scandal to fester under the watch of successive Labour, Conservative and coalition Governments. Essentially, sub-postmasters find themselves subsidising a Government-owned network at significant personal cost. Moreover, when issues arise, they are left to navigate the path to justice on their own. The pressing need for genuine support for those on the frontline is evident. Will the Minister elaborate on the Government's plan for the post office network, excluding PUDO services?

Government oversight has not solved any of the issues of the past, including Horizon. It is the hard work and tireless campaigning of sub-postmasters themselves, journalists such as Nick Wallis, and campaigners such as Alan Bates and Christopher Head, the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance, Eleanor Shaikh, Dan Neidle, Tim McCormack, the CWU, Voice of the Postmaster, the National Federation of SubPostmasters, and many Members in this place past and present, that has continued to push the Government on the issue. Will the Minister, on record, please confirm that sub-postmaster organisations, such as Voice of the Postmaster and the CWU, will no

longer be excluded from discussions with Post Office Ltd? It is essential that those who power the post office network are front and centre of any decision-making process that will carry the Post Office forward. For those who are not aware of this, the NFSP is financed by Post Office Ltd. I am making no judgment on how it performs in respect of its members, but we need a wider range of postmasters who will be consulted on and worked with if we are to change things going forward.

I have seen a rather large list of 23 directors in the senior leadership team at Post Office Ltd, not one of whom is a postmaster national executive director or a postmaster experience director, so when Nick Read speaks of putting

“postmasters right at the centre of the business”,

are the postmaster director roles simply window dressing?

Until postmasters have a say in all levels of the business, the culture will not change. Only recently, a communications director at POL, Richard Taylor, was suspended for saying that

“some of them were guilty.”

It says so much that he felt able to say that publicly.

As *Bates v. Post Office Ltd* has shown the nation, it was the hard-working community sub-postmasters who built the trusted reputation and social value of the Post Office over centuries, and it was those within management who pulled it down. If it is to be rebuilt, then the rebuild must be led by those community pillars once again.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the speech I had written was twice as long as this. I know that I have probably overrun my time, but I still have so much more to say. Change must happen. The fact that there will be a general election this year—that is without doubt—must not stand in the way of change that is so, so needed.

1.35 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak so early in this debate.

We are today debating the Post Office’s management culture, but I very briefly want to touch on the responsibility that Fujitsu has, because as I understand it, it, too, is culpable and should be part of any agreed outcome. Fujitsu has a role to play in bringing this sorry tale to a speedy end. Every computer system in the world has the potential to contain bugs. People write the code. Errors can happen, but the vast majority are tiny. What matters is how those responsible react once an error has been identified.

I worked in IT for 35 years, most of which were spent developing and implementing computer solutions for business problems. We reviewed code—we pored over it, and we took pride in doing it. Somebody, somewhere, at some point was looking at this particular problem in the Horizon system. Why were they looking at that problem? Who directed them to it, and when were they asked to address it? I have no wish to stereotype my fellow software developers, but I have a vision in my head of somebody with a brain-load of code looking at this problem one morning and then being struck by something. They take off their headphones and put down their fifth cup of coffee of the day and say, “We have a problem here. This is important.” In any system worth its salt, the modification to fix that problem will have been documented, and somebody within Fujitsu will know when it was identified. Therefore, at what point did the staff inform the Post Office? That matters,

because then we know when the Post Office stopped acting out of ignorance and belligerence and started lying to people.

Today we have a Government who have been in denial. It is as if this is not a problem of their making. Please correct me if I am wrong, but the Post Office is a limited company owned entirely by the UK Government. The Department for Business and Trade has responsibility for postal affairs. Ofcom is the regulator of postal services. It is a public corporation accountable to Parliament. Can anyone imagine what it is like to be an individual wrongly accused of a crime, humiliated and ridiculed, forced into bankruptcy and knowing that they were innocent for all those years, while the wider establishment stood back and did nothing?

The Post Office proudly boasts that

“at our core we are a business driven and defined by our social purpose”.

Well, here is a chance to prove that, and it has failed. That is despite the contrition, despite the promises to learn from its mistakes, despite admitting that it got it wrong, and despite acknowledging that compensation must be paid. What we see today is the establishment hiding behind very expensive lawyers for whom I can only presume the taxpayer is paying. Fortunately, in my life I have rarely bumped up against the legal profession in its professional capacity. It has usually been restricted to moving house, and that is confusing enough. The mountains of administration and the perpetual legal speak leave most people gasping for air. What must it be like for someone to face a criminal prosecution of which they are innocent, and then, when that innocence is proven, find that same force utilised to slow down the process that should be working for them to receive compensation?

The letter from Professor Chris Hodges, the chair of the Horizon compensation advisory board, to Nick Read, the chief executive officer of the Post Office, which was quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), perfectly encapsulates the current situation. I will not read the entire letter, but I will read a couple of lines:

“Your reliance on legal argument and legal terminology similarly does not impress us. We do not perceive demonstration of behaviour that is anything like a sympathetic understanding towards the people your organisation has harmed.”

I am not for a minute saying that the Post Office does not require legal representation; it certainly does. I am saying that the manner in which it engages with the victims of the Horizon scandal is a measure of its concern, contrition and compassion, and it has failed on all three fronts. That is crucial, because a successful resolution depends on the mindset of the Post Office management changing.

We continually see citizens of the UK being chewed up by large corporate and Government entities. The Equitable Life case, the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, the blood-borne virus scandal, and the Post Office Horizon fiasco are just a few examples. If citizens of the UK are to have faith in their politicians, we need to get it right and be on their side when big corporations beat down on them.

Andrew Bridgen: I would like to put something on the record, and see what the hon. Gentleman thinks. I was in the original Post Office review group. By 2015, a

[Andrew Bridgen]

whistleblower from Fujitsu had come forward from the boiler room, as they called it. He had been altering accounts without the knowledge of the sub-postmasters. The MPs in the review group knew. The investigator from Second Sight, Ron Warmington, knew. The Post Office knew that the convictions were unsafe, as did the Government, yet it took another five years of very expensive litigation from the 555 before justice was done.

Ronnie Cowan: That is an ongoing example of how, historically, the Government of the day thought that they could weather this storm and get away with it. The UK Government have to be part of the solution. Continuing to be part of the problem is unacceptable. They must act swiftly to ensure that all innocent victims have their convictions quashed, and that the correct, acceptable compensation is paid. Anything else is an extension of the ongoing miscarriage of justice that innocent men and women have been subjected to because of the hubris of the Post Office and UK Governments past and present.

1.42 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Today's debate is extremely timely and important. It is harrowing to listen to cases from across the UK, and it takes time for it to sink in how the cover-up of this scandal has cost the lives of ordinary, hard-working people who only wanted to provide for their families by working for their communities in post offices. We have to think about how many of those people have been treated, not just by the Post Office but by the Government and Fujitsu. Many of them have had extreme difficulties in employment. They were not just betrayed but sent to prison for crimes that they did not commit. They knew they were innocent; more importantly, the people who sent them there knew that they were innocent as well. We need a lot of answers. More and more is coming to the fore every day with regard to this scandal.

Mention has been made of who knew about this. The Government knew about it, Fujitsu knew about it, and the Post Office knew about it; yet they still sent investigators into sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses' post offices. They investigated people, charged people, and devastated people's lives. They acted like the Gestapo. They turned up on the day and closed post offices down. That is the Post Office management culture, and it needs to be addressed.

I am not sure how we can compensate anybody. How can we compensate the family of a woman or man who committed suicide as a result of the pressure that they were put under by the Government, the Post Office and investigators? How do we compensate people for the death of a loved one who was the breadwinner in the family, and decided that their only option was to take their own life? It is unimaginable. We cannot put ourselves in their shoes.

What about the men and women who went to prison because they had supposedly falsified accounts and committed theft? They were imprisoned with child-killers and rapists for things they had not done. Not only did they know they had not done them; the Government and the Post Office knew it too. Fujitsu knew what was happening behind the scenes. This does not seem like the country I am very proud of—what happened with

the Government behind the scenes. It is very murky and sinister. At the same time, the Government and the Post Office were prosecuting people with evidence from Fujitsu, and people were being imprisoned and taking their own lives. Frankly, it is enough to make us cry.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is rightly making a typically impassioned speech. I have been very careful throughout the whole time I have been involved in this matter, which is over four years, as a Back-Bencher and a Front-Bencher, not to play any kind of party politics with it. I put it on the record that the issues occurred under a series of Governments: the Labour Government, the coalition Government and the current Government. It is important that we look at the matter on a cross-party basis and seek to resolve it as such. I am keen to work with him on that basis.

Ian Lavery: I thank the Minister for that intervention, and I agree. I have a lot of time for him. We have had conversations about this matter and many others. As he will notice if he looks in *Hansard*, I have not been party political. I have said "the Government". He is correct to point out that there have been Governments of different colours throughout the period.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Lavery: The hon. Gentleman has just come in, but of course I will.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman is making some very good points, as did the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). All of us who have been in the House for a while share the feelings that all three Members have expressed of horror and great anxiety, given the cases that we are dealing with. However, roughly 3,000 people work for Post Office Ltd, including all those working in Crown post offices, like the one in my constituency of Gloucester. It is important that we try to separate things out in our minds before we know from the inquiry precisely where guilt lies and where charges and prosecutions will come, so that we do not label everybody within Post Office Ltd with the accusations that are rightly being made in the House today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Before we proceed, I heard what the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said, and I heard the Chairman of Ways and Means' admonition of another hon. Member earlier. The difference in this case is that the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) was here for the start of the speech. That said, I personally believe that there is a prerequisite for Members, whenever they can, to be in from the start of a debate and to hear the whole debate.

Ian Lavery: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and nothing I have said up until now has criticised everyone in the Post Office. We have some fantastic employees in the Post Office, but I am not going to say the same thing about the executive team in the Post Office. I refuse to accept that things have changed, because the management culture within the Post Office has not changed one iota. However, I agree that we have to look forward and take the Post Office forward.

I mentioned that there might or might not be charges in the future, but too many people have been charged already. This whole Horizon scandal is a result of people being sent to prison, people being traumatised and people—kids, men and women—having their lives destroyed because people knew there was something happening at the Post Office.

I sit on the Business and Trade Committee, and the chief executive of the Post Office has been to the House a couple of times. I must be honest: he shows no remorse whatsoever. He believes that, because he was not there at the time, that is right. This individual's wage is, I think, about £344,000 a year. I asked him, "Why are you getting a bonus in excess of £145,000 in addition to your salary? What makes you so special?" He could not answer. That is at a time when people have suffered so greatly and the Post Office and the Government are reluctant even now to address many people who have suffered as a consequence of this scandal.

I will come on shortly to the question of who has been missed in the compensation. There are three packages, and I have had a chat with the Minister—I am going to call him my hon. Friend, and why not?—about this very issue. I have three heartbreaking examples, and my understanding is that it will be very difficult for these individuals to claim any compensation whatsoever.

The culture has not changed; there has always been a serious cultural problem in the Post Office, which obviously came to the fore with the abuse of power blatantly displayed during the Horizon scandal. As I mentioned before, the management structure, the governance and the culture largely remain unreformed. We have people in post offices now suffering greatly because of low wages. They are not getting the wages from the Post Office to make ends meet. Those people are mainly in newsagents and Spar shops and so on. That is wrong when, as I mentioned before, at the same time Post Office executives are being awarded bonuses of tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of pounds. That has to be looked at.

It has been suggested, as the Minister will be aware, that a lot of the bonuses that have been paid are for progress on the Horizon scandal. How can anybody get a bonus for that? Is a bonus not supposed to be for additional production or good work? How can the chief executive get a bonus of hundreds of thousands of pounds while this is happening? Who do we blame for that? We have to look at how these remuneration packages are settled and who benefits. We cannot have people getting hundreds of thousands of pounds in one hand and bonuses of 10 times what ordinary sub-postmasters or sub-postmistresses, or postal workers, are getting in the other. It is just not correct. Bonuses should not be paid for failure, and that is what is happening here.

Andrew Bridgen: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, on investigation, it was found that the Horizon system had a suspense account? A suspense account in an accounting package is where transactions are put before they are properly allotted. At the end of most years, there was more than £1 million retained in the suspense account, which was kept for four years and then added back to profit and never resolved.

Ian Lavery: Not only that, but Jo Hamilton had to pay £36,000 back, even though she knew she was in the right. I asked Nick Read, the chief executive of the Post

Office, whether it was a possibility that the money paid back by a number of the victims would have been in a place where it could have provided bonuses for senior executives. How perverse is that? The answer from the chief executive, when I pressed him and pressed him, was that yes, it was a possibility, but he did not know where the money actually went. That in itself is so bad that it beggars belief.

Fujitsu, meanwhile, denied any knowledge of bugs or any wrongdoing, but actually knew quite the opposite, and it supplied evidence to the Post Office to prosecute individuals. How bad is that situation? This is not a spy movie—it is worse than a spy movie. They had a dark room in Fujitsu where its employees were communicating with the Horizon computer system in post offices up and down the country. Fujitsu denied it all along, saying that it was impossible it could ever happen, yet people there were changing the amounts of money openly. The Government knew. Fujitsu knew, because it had the operation in its own offices, with employees changing facts and figures in the accounts of ordinary hard-working individuals—again, spy movie stuff. It is unbelievable that that could be the case.

Is it not unreal to think that none of this would have come about if not for the ITV dramatisation, "Mr Bates vs The Post Office"? We would not be discussing it in this Chamber, because it would have been kicked into the long grass. The people would all have suffered the same—those who are in prison, the families who have been destroyed, and the kids who have been brought up with the criticism and abuse that their parents were thieves—but it would not have been unearthed.

Kevin Hollinrake: There is no doubt that the ITV series has rightly heightened awareness both in this House and further afield, and I welcome that, but much work was going on in this space before it aired, including on how we can overturn more convictions on a blanket basis. I was working on that with the advisory board before the series aired, so it is not right to say that we would not have got to this position without it. We probably would not have got here as quickly, but the hon. Gentleman must concede that this work has been going on for years—although I welcome the fact that it is happening more rapidly now.

Ian Lavery: I thank the Minister for that clarification. Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I suggested that nothing at all had happened, because I know that the Minister, the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and others have been working on the matter assiduously. However, as the Minister said, we might not otherwise have been at this stage. We might not have got Fujitsu to say for the first time, "Yes, we are sorry," and the Post Office might not have started to admit that it had pursued wrongful or unsafe prosecutions. But we are where we are. I would not want to mislead anyone in the debate.

I have three brief examples. These people, Minister, were heavily involved with Horizon and the Post Office, and suffered greatly. It causes me real heartbreak, to be honest. The first example is that of Janine, a lady from my constituency who has sadly passed on; no one came to see me about her case until they saw the ITV documentary. Her husband simply cried for the entire hour that I sat with him. He wanted justice for Janine, who sadly died of covid. He is hoping for some sort of justice now.

[Ian Lavery]

Janine was employed in a post office in a newsagents, which is a regular thing up and down the country. Her contract with the newsagents said that any shortfall in the post office finances must be made up by her. She and another person were employed by the newsagents, and then there was the sub-postmaster or mistress—I am not sure which it was on this occasion. Janine was accused of stealing £25,000, even though she had not seen that amount of money before. The Post Office investigators came to the newsagents and basically treat her like a common thief. The pressure was put on: “We are going to charge you with theft and you are going to prison.”

Janine was absolutely devastated. She pleaded guilty. Then, she sat back and realised, “Why should I be pleading guilty when I am not guilty?”. It cost her and her family a small fortune to take the case back to court and have the guilty verdict rescinded. The Post Office then said, “Okay, you can accept the lesser charge of false accounting and pay the money back.” She refused. All this cost her £15,000 in legal fees—these are just ordinary working people in the community. She was then informed that if she paid the £25,000 back, the Post Office would drop the charges. That is what happened: she paid the money back. Unfortunately, by the day she sadly passed on, she and her family had lost everything they had.

That needs scrutiny. We need to look at the management culture. What on earth was going on at the Post Office during this thing? Who directed the investigators to go to those post offices and treat people the way they were treated in the investigations? They knew at the time that the allegations were false. That is the thing that I have reiterated and will continue to reiterate: they knew that the allegations were in many ways false, unfounded, unfair. Maybe the investigators did not, but the people at the top of the Post Office certainly knew; people in government knew. That cannot be right. Janine’s husband has written and submitted a really heart-rending letter, but under the current schemes, he is unlikely to be able to claim any money. How can that be just? I will follow that up with the Minister.

The second example is that of a man who wrote to us saying: “I’ve got a massive problem. I’m like lots of other sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses. We work at the very heart of the community. It’s where people used to come to talk. We were trusted, well respected, listened to.” He was seeing mistake after mistake crop up on his computer week after week, but rather than inform the Post Office, he was putting money in week by week to balance the accounts, which had been altered by somebody at the Fujitsu head office.

This individual says that he simply could not stand the idea that anybody would think him in the slightest—in the remotest sense—a thief. He has paid tens of thousands of pounds, if we aggregate the money that he paid week by week. There is no way that he or hundreds of other employees have the opportunity or ability to claim compensation at this moment. That begs the question of whether the Post Office, together with the Government, will write to every single person who was a sub-postmaster between 1998 and now to ask them if they are aware of anyone who might have put their own money—out of their own backside pocket, out of their family’s savings—into balancing the accounts. There should be consideration

of compensation for such individuals. The Post Office will have all the details of people in those roles who claimed to have used finances from their own back pocket.

I will briefly mention the last example. I have not actually seen these individuals—they are coming to see us next week—but I have been told by one of their relations that they were involved in the Horizon scandal and paid £25,000. That sum crops up time and again. They paid that just to save their name. Nothing went to court—nothing happened—but they paid the money, despite the fact that they were innocent. They thought that because they paid the money, the matter would go away, and there is very little opportunity for people like them to reclaim their money. It is unfair. Never mind them stealing money off the Post Office; the Post Office has stolen money off hard-working people. That should be recognised.

It would be helpful if the Post Office and the Government could listen to what other people have to say. This is not just about those who were convicted or prosecuted; there are more people who were not convicted or prosecuted, but who are out of pocket and have had their life destroyed as a consequence of the Post Office Horizon scandal. We need to look at how that can be addressed. Those people deserve compensation. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, this scandal is appalling. It is disgraceful, shameful, and a stain on all of us. I agree with the Minister that this is a cross-party issue. We have the opportunity to put things right, so let us do it. Let us look after the people whose only crime was going to work and looking after their family.

2.11 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing today’s debate. This has been a shocking and heartbreaking sequence of events. Nobody could fail to be moved by the testimony of the countless families affected by this scandal.

I will focus on one specific issue today: the pervasive use of non-disclosure agreements by Post Office management. I heard the Minister’s intervention about NDAs, and I think it is worth highlighting their use as part of the management culture at the Post Office. The more things come to light, the more shocking and pernicious this aspect of the scandal is. For example, a recent report by the *Financial Times* highlighted the distressing case of Martin Griffiths, who managed a post office for 18 years before tragically taking his life after spending £100,000 of his own money to meet accounting shortfalls. Post Office lawyers apparently offered his widow a settlement in exchange for her silence about the circumstances surrounding her husband’s death. Frankly, that is appalling. The Prime Minister himself, responding to a question in this Chamber just a few weeks ago, stated that

“The ability to speak out about things is key to unlocking justice.”—[*Official Report*, 17 January 2024; Vol. 743, c. 821.]

Last month, I was contacted by a constituent who worked for the Post Office for over three decades. He only grasped that there was an issue, and the scale of that issue, when a journalist got in touch about Horizon after he retired. He was, however, unable to agree to be interviewed because he is tied to a non-disclosure agreement that he signed when he retired from the Post Office. That, together with the Official Secrets Act, which he signed when he joined the Post Office, means that he has effectively been gagged. He told me:

“As a member of the Post Office project team that delivered Horizon, I, like many of my ex project colleagues, was aware of the truth behind many of the points that the Post Office have been at great pains to hide or deny. The Post Office were very careful to ensure that their employees with links to Horizon were unaware of how the system was operating or the volume of sub-postmasters that were being prosecuted.”

He also said:

“I am still staggered that someone at a senior level didn’t question the huge rise in prosecutions after the system was implemented...The Post Office have used these Non Disclosure Agreements to ensure that current and ex employees are effectively silenced. If not tied by these agreements it is possible that information would have been available to those enquiring about the scandal much earlier in the process.”

I spoke to my constituent again yesterday, and his sense of frustration was palpable. He knew, for example, that Fujitsu had remote access to live Horizon terminals, and he shared a host of other details, which prompts the question: how much sooner would this scandal have come to light if people such as my constituent had not been gagged? Of course, it is entirely understandable that these people felt unable to speak out. If they had spoken out, they risked not only prosecution for a criminal offence, but the possibility of the Post Office seeking recovery of moneys paid for voluntary redundancy, for example. As my constituent feels unable to speak out openly, I close by giving him the final word:

“I understand that a company needs the ability to protect its valid business interests and the interests of its clients. However, the non-disclosure agreements should not be so restricting to avoid malpractice being reported or to allow the company to blatantly lie when under investigation”.

2.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for setting the scene so well. She touched on everything in her contribution; I am simply here to support her, and also to make the case for justice, for the right decisions to be made, and for fairness and equality, which have been missing from this process. The hon. Lady has endeavoured vigorously—evangelically, even—to pursue this matter, and has done so with a zest that we all recognise, as have many others. I also thank the other Members who have made contributions, including the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery).

As an MP for a rural constituency, the role of the post office in my community is vital. When we look at management culture, we have to look at the role of Post Office Ltd: what does it aim to achieve, and is it achieving that aim? We have no bank branches left in the rural community; we have no holes in the wall—as we refer to them—that are free of charge. Post offices are the only option we have for rural banking and to lift pensions, so in the rural communities I represent in Strangford, the post office plays a critical role. As such, today’s debate is one of immense interest for me.

I also commend the Minister. I think every one of us in this House—I can say this personally, but I think others will say the same—recognises that he has worked industriously behind the scenes on this issue for some two years, and probably longer. He did the spadework and the footwork, and endeavoured to ensure that we got to where we are now. The TV programme, “Mr Bates vs The Post Office”, highlighted the issue visually and helped us to understand it better, but there is always a

person who has to sow the seed, and then there is a person who reaps the harvest. The Minister has worked hard to sow the seed, and today he is hopefully reaping the harvest, which is a recognition of the endeavours that he has made. I say that very honestly, because I think we in this House all recognise that his heart was always set on justice and fair play. Today’s debate gives us the chance to air those things, so I thank him for that.

With the drive towards online banking, our older and more vulnerable people have been left behind. Those people should be considered as part of the management culture, particularly those who do not have a good mobile signal or those in rural areas who, due to broadband pockets, do not have at their fingertips the reliable internet connections that we take for granted. Never mind the ability to use online facilities; those people do not even have the opportunity to do so, so the local post office—with its trustworthy staff who can help them do what they need to do—becomes even more important.

When it comes to management culture, we have to have a Post Office that works in the way we all wish to see. Post offices really are a lifeline, not simply when it comes to filling the financial gap left by the banks in their mass exodus from rural communities, but in terms of social engagement and contact. I think 11 banks have closed in my constituency over the past number of years; one or two of those were in the towns, but most were in the rural community. People need to know that they can keep their wee routine of lifting their money or paying their electric or gas bill, or doing the other things that can be accomplished in post offices, without having to get on a bus—or even two buses—to go to one of the major towns to carry out their business.

What grieves me greatly, as I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, are those who lost their lives, as well as those who had prison terms, which the hon. Member for Wansbeck mentioned. I see the grief and the anxiety of all those people, who were good, honest, hard-working and sincere. They probably never had a parking ticket in their life or anything else, and they suddenly found themselves on the front row of discredit and disappointment, with their whole lives destroyed along with their relationships and their health. Those people deserve to be compensated. They deserve to have their lives reinstated, and for all the things that happened to them—in many ways, including financially—their compensation must be adequate.

Those honest, hard-working people lost their reputation and had their lives destroyed, so it is essential that sub-postmasters and mistresses are supported in their role by the Post Office’s management culture. The Horizon scheme is a very big indication that the culture was not good, is not good and has to improve. That is not simply because of a defunct system and scheme, but because of the lack of trust and support given to those people, who had done nothing other than offer a service. Morale in the Post Office is at an all-time low, and the question is: how do the Government—and the management as well—fix this? Some of those people have become destitute and had their lives destroyed entirely, and that has to be addressed.

How do we convince younger men and women to take up the gauntlet of running a post office? The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said that three post offices have closed in her constituency, and there is nobody taking up those jobs. We know why no one is

[Jim Shannon]

taking them up. It is because the monetary value—the wages they receive—is such a minimum quantity. We need to look at that when it comes to how the management culture moves forward, to make sure that running post offices can be, by their very nature, jobs that people can take on. There are horror stories all around about how staff have been treated and just how horribly underpaid they are. Who, for goodness' sake, would take on a role in a post office for less than the minimum wage—and, my goodness, all the worry? I have read of postmasters working out that, when they take into consideration the time taken to carry out the functions required by the Post Office, they are on less than the minimum wage. That is where they are, so I think today's debate also has to address that within the management culture. We have to incentivise people and make it a job that is worth doing for those who put their reputation on the line to do it.

It cannot be acceptable to see bosses taking bonuses. I understand people getting bonuses and the reasons for it, but I cannot understand some people getting bonuses while others are disadvantaged financially, facing destitution and with their lives destroyed. So I must express concern about some bosses receiving adulation and accolades while postmasters get less than the minimum wage. That would not entice people to take on a post office or entice others to join their ranks.

I conclude by suggesting that, in any discussion of the management culture of the Post Office, there needs to be serious cognisance taken of how to rebuild trust. That starts with honest and open communication, and the decision to work with Post Office staff at every level. A wrong has been done, and it has to be righted. I know the Minister is committed to that, and we support him. He is right, the hon. Member for Wansbeck is right and everyone else here is right. We support the Minister in what he does simply because he is seeking justice—the justice we all want for our constituents—and I commend him for that. I look forward to his reply later.

2.24 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I thank and commend my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing today's debate. I know that she has worked on this and other Post Office issues from the minute she set foot in this place in 2015. Her efforts, and those of many other hon. Members who have spent many years trying to raise this subject, are finally getting the attention they deserve, and we are actually seeing the required redress for those caught up in it. In many ways, she is our very own Madam Post Offices. I know she is going to hit me for that later, but that is okay.

This is a really important issue, and it shows that when injustices are brought to light, it is possible that they can be addressed. It may never be done as quickly as we want it to be done and it may not be done exactly how we want it to be done, but when we all come together, it can be done. The fact that we had to wait for a TV dramatisation to speed up the process is unfortunate, but at least we are there now. I commend the Minister for his personal efforts and the actions he has taken in driving this forward, because I know he has done so. That is a genuine recognition of a subject on which

we will not just oppose for the sake of opposing. When something is done right, it is important that we make that point.

By now, we are sadly too familiar with the details of this chapter in British history and, indeed, the infamy of it. Hundreds of working people had their lives ruined, and still nobody has yet really been held accountable. I know there is an inquiry under way, but we are still waiting for that accountability. More than 900 sub-postmasters and postmistresses have been prosecuted after being accused of stealing money because of incorrect information provided by the failed Horizon computer system. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) highlighted issues involving Fujitsu and the responsibilities of that company, but what questions were being asked by the Post Office itself when issues in the system were first brought to light? Were questions being asked, and were they simply dismissed? Why is it that, when questions were asked, that did not necessarily result in the Post Office much more quickly addressing the issues that were raised?

Some very serious questions still require answers, and some very serious answers are required from Fujitsu. I know others have done the same, but in the past few weeks I have written to the CEO of Fujitsu to urge him to step forward to help the corporation come forward and accept its responsibility for its part in this debacle. It would only be right if Fujitsu held up its hands and accepted that responsibility. In the spirit of openness and transparency—and, indeed, dare I say, honour—that company should recognise the part it has played.

The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) talked about injustices, and it is important that we all get behind an injustice such as this. Of course, this is only one of several injustices we are currently dealing with, which include Grenfell, infected blood, partygate, Hillsborough and—just to plug my own Bill—the subject of the Miners' Strike (Pardons) Bill, which I would encourage all Members to support. Where we see injustices, it is important that we come together to address them and tackle them head-on.

I share the concerns of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) about the use of NDAs by the Post Office, because when we are trying to get to the bottom of a scandal such as this, we need to have as much information as possible. The Minister's direct intervention and assurance on that point was very helpful in making sure that we are all clear that any postmasters or mistresses who may have concerns about coming forward can do so without fear of that coming back on them.

Every day, I and everyone in the Chamber see the important part that post offices play in our local communities. I know that my post offices in Midlothian do a phenomenal job. It is because they are a central part of the community that so many of us feel so strongly about this issue, and the heart of many of our communities have been let down by a management structure that simply tried to brush aside concerns and complaints. I am still waiting to see if there is actually the shift in culture that we all hope there has been, but there seems to be some concern that that has not necessarily entirely changed. We hear that sub-postmasters are still closing businesses because their present terms are insufficient to make it worthwhile. What will the Minister do to push the Post Office further towards a fundamental culture shift?

Some of the issues that arose in the Horizon scandal were even named after Scottish towns. We had the Dalmellington bug and the Callendar Square bug—these issues were not unseen or unheard; they were flagged to the extent of being named after towns. How could we have got to that place without action being taken sooner?

All these tragedies again show that the cards are stacked heavily against the ordinary working person. Sadly, it sometimes takes something like an ITV programme to bring that into wider public awareness. I hope we can learn lessons through this process to instigate a culture shift in the management of the Post Office, and wider than that, to ensure that where such concerns are raised, they are not simply pushed aside by whatever colour of Government there happens to be, and that those concerns are taken on board in the way the Minister is doing here. We should expect Parliament and Governments to address injustices where we come across them and to restore faith. Too often, it is the negative headlines that come out of this place that catch the public's attention, but we are seeing that it is possible to do the right thing, albeit that it can sometimes take a lot longer than we might have hoped.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw for all her work, as well as members of the APPG and other Members who over many years have contributed to trying to get to the bottom of this issue. I hope we can move swiftly to a place where this issue is a historical fact that has been resolved.

2.31 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for all her work, including on the all-party parliamentary group on post offices. Members across the House are grateful to those Members from different parties who were the first to spot this scandal, and who doggedly campaigned to place it on the Government and media agendas, which have of course been amplified by the recent television series. I also thank other Members who joined that group, from this House and the other place, and who continued to campaign for many years. As has been stated today and on many other occasions in the House, this scandal is one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in this country. We are now more than two decades into this scandal, with limited progress or justice for the victims, although recent months have seen some considerable work. I commend the Minister for his work in doing what he can from both the Back Benches and the Front Bench to address the injustices.

The wrongly accused sub-postmasters have had to endure unjust prison sentences, family breakdowns, homelessness, bankruptcy, health consequences, ostracisation from their communities, and worse. That is to say nothing of the mental health toll and stress that they have all carried while knowing they have been wrongly convicted. As of 10 August 2023, the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry and court cases have heard that at least 60 sub-postmasters have died without seeing justice or receiving compensation. Tragically, at least four took their own lives. As many Members have rightly and powerfully shared today, the scandal's impact is horrifying and wide reaching. I do not think any of us can truly understand the scale of what the victims have suffered.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw powerfully highlighted how the toxic management culture continues to be alive and present. She highlighted the

scandal of the lack of openness and transparency, and the spectre of some 40 management staff who continue in post and have been there since the scandal began. I hope the Minister will address, from his own insights, what is happening with those who remain in management positions, because it cannot be possible or right for them to continue. If we want a culture change, it would be helpful to understand how the Minister thinks that can happen when those who were involved in management at the time can take part in the reform process.

Many of those affected by the scandal remain trapped in a limbo without closure or justice, and many of the victims have limited faith in our justice system for the reasons we have heard in numerous debates and about which the Minister is well aware. Since this issue became common knowledge, the public too have lost faith in the system. People are shocked and upset. They want change, and we must work hard to repair the distrust and damage that has been done. Whatever we can do across parties to achieve that is vital if we are to ensure that such scandals do not happen in the future.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) highlighted the appalling role of Fujitsu in the Horizon scandal, and rightly pointed out that the crisis could have been mitigated if those early IT problems had been recognised and properly addressed, rather than ignored. My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) spoke passionately about the failure of the management and executive team at the Post Office, and highlighted the scale of the injustice and the trauma that victims have endured, and continue to endure. They have been let down at every turn, and we need the Government to act with the urgency that is desperately needed.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) spoke about the horrific way that non-disclosure notices and agreements were used to silence victims, including some of her constituents. That cannot be allowed to happen because it added to the injustice of what her constituent and their husband faced, and prolonged the time it took to expose the scandal. Lessons need to be learned. We recognise that the inquiry will highlight in its conclusions the lessons that the Government, and others, need to draw on.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of the importance of improving the culture of the Post Office, as we look at what it can provide for communities up and down the country, especially rural communities. Bank closures around the country have led to the need for banking and other services, for example. It is important that we work to ensure that the Post Office is fit for purpose, that there is never another scandal of this nature, and that we properly reform the Post Office for the good of citizens and communities. In that spirit, I hope the Minister will tell us how he sees that future, and tell us about the role of communities, trade unions, and those who have seen how things can go so badly wrong, so that their insights are built into how we shape the future of the Post Office.

Last month, the Secretary of State sacked the chair of the Post Office, Henry Staunton, stating,

“given all of the difficulties the Post Office is having, it's not just about Horizon, it's about the entire business model, how we make it work... we needed someone who could chair a board that was able to deal with these things”.

[Rushanara Ali]

Mr Staunton was appointed in December 2022, so was not chair of the Post Office during the key years of the scandal. In an answer during an urgent question, the Minister said that,

“some of the past conduct and culture of the Post Office has changed. However, we know that it needs to change further.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2024; Vol. 744, c. 615.]

Will the Minister outline what he believes has changed already in the culture of the Post Office? What steps is he taking to ensure that further changes take place? What will the timeline be for that reform process? I hope that the appointment of the new chair can be a clear marker for a fundamental alteration of the culture and management of the Post Office.

In the High Court case of *Bates v. Post Office*, it was stated:

“There seems to be a culture of secrecy and excessive confidentiality generally within the Post Office, but particularly focused on Horizon.”

This management culture has been affirmed by numerous testimonies. Many victims of the scandal spoke of the fear they felt as Wednesdays approached, as that was the day when sub-postmasters had to balance their accounts. Other Members have given testimonies of the experiences of sub-postmasters in their constituencies and their terror when faced with these issues. That was not because it was their fault, but because of the failures of the Horizon system and Post Office management.

The Fujitsu whistleblower Nate Orrow last week revealed how he, along with fellow staff at the Fujitsu call centre, would also approach Wednesdays with dread. They knew to expect a barrage of desperate calls from sub-postmasters whose livelihoods and lives were being snatched from them. He said that despite Fujitsu staff knowing that the software clearly had faults, they would be punished by leadership for sharing any of their doubts with sub-postmasters. For staff across the organisation to face that every week and to be silenced is hardly a sign of good management. These are the things we need to prevent.

The former Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells, as we have heard, will be giving evidence to the public inquiry. It is crucial that the evidence provides clarity on what happened and that serious lessons are learned. It is also vital to recognise that when senior management failure happens, early intervention should take place to tackle it. The Department and the institutions responsible for Post Office oversight need to learn lessons from the action or inaction that took place.

It is important also to draw lessons for parliamentary scrutiny. Could more have been done to ensure greater scrutiny? On the lessons we need to consider, should there be early warning systems within Whitehall to spot issues when Members of Parliament raise them or when cases are brought to Ministers through officials? Individual cases too often do not get the attention they deserve in Whitehall. Lessons will need to be learned on that front, too, working with Members of Parliament so that we can build a clearer picture of patterns that emerge and so that delays do not occur before a major scandal is exposed.

As we consider the future of the Post Office, given all that has happened—all that has been reported on and uncovered about the scandal—over two decades, there

is rightly huge distrust, horror and dismay about Post Office management and the Post Office as an employer. Despite the hard work of dedicated sub-postmasters across the country and all other staff, this scandal has made their role synonymous with being a victim of injustice. Citizens Advice reported that more than 200 post offices have closed in the past two years and 1,291 post offices are deemed temporarily closed. More than half of those have been shut for more than the two years.

Post offices provide a broad range of services so that communities can access cash, pay bills and deliver and receive mail, and they often act as hubs for communities. That is by no means an exhaustive list of their positive role and impact on our country. High streets have already been facing years of decline, and when the key service of a post office closes down, it leaves a gaping hole in our communities. Labour has pledged to stop the decline of high streets and to bring much-needed services back to communities. Many post offices provide crucial banking services, as has been mentioned. Labour will accelerate the roll-out of banking hubs to protect the service and to help people deposit and take out cash, as well as to get them support and help with wider banking services.

I hope the Minister can provide further updates on how his Department will reform the Post Office and how there will be wide consultation, including with the unions and local players, to ensure we have an appropriate service for the future. The scale of Post Office management's failings is seismic. This scandal has instilled mistrust in the Post Office, in public contracts and, most worryingly, in our judicial system. I hope the Minister will set out the action that he and his Government—this requires cross-Governmental work, too—will take to reform the Post Office and restore trust in our system so that these scandals do not happen again. He has heard about the numerous scandals that have come to pass, not just the Horizon scandal.

Can the Minister provide a further update on the wider independent review of governance in relation to Post Office decisions on remuneration? Another issue that has come to the fore is concerns about racism in some of Post Office management's actions, including in language and in racist classifications, which the Post Office said it would investigate. Will the Minister look at that and provide any updates?

Finally, I am grateful to all colleagues across both Houses for their tireless work over many years in highlighting this scandal and for the dogged determination with which debates have been used to keep the pressure on Ministers. We will all continue to do everything we can to ensure that justice is done.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): May I first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing this debate and her fine work as always on the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, and to the Backbench Business Committee for bringing forward this debate? I also pay tribute to all Members of this House and the other place for their work on this issue. I promise the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), that I do not need anybody to hold my feet to the fire, but it is good that we have this momentum. I very much appreciate the work that has been done by many.

There have been many kind words from contributors about my work, but it is a bit part compared with that of many others who have campaigned long and hard on this issue, as have people outside this place, including members of the legal profession and the media, many of whom we are familiar with for their great work on bringing this scandal to light.

On the governance issues, I am fond of a quote by Emerson, who said:

“An institution is the lengthened shadow of a single man.”

I am keen to ensure that the Post Office’s management culture is in the right place. A positive management culture is paramount to the health of any organisation, so I very much welcome the opportunity the debate brings to consider that point. The Post Office scandal is one of the biggest miscarriages of justice in living history, and the victims must get the justice they deserve. I do believe that today’s Post Office is different from the past, but restoring trust will take time. That does not mean that we are satisfied with the current situation. This will never be about quick fixes; it will be about fundamental changes in every part of the organisation, and that change will not occur overnight.

When the current chief executive of the Post Office, Nick Read, started in September 2019, he made it clear that as well as delivering the essential services that we value across our constituencies, the Post Office needed to apologise for the events of the past and fully address them. On the point made by the shadow Minister about the current board, no one serving on a day-to-day basis on the current board was there at the time of the scandal. As I said, Nick Read joined in 2019, and only one member of the board was there at the time, but they are on extended leave on health grounds and do not work on the board on a day-to-day basis. No members of the senior management team were there at the time.

Post Office is taking steps to right the wrongs of the past. However, it is also important to highlight what it has done with a view to the present and future of the business to improve the culture and ensure that a similar situation can never arise. Crucially, Post Office is taking steps to restore trust between itself and postmasters. That is so important, because, as I have said many times, without postmasters, there is no post office network.

In December 2019, the parties to the group litigation in *Bates v. Post Office Ltd* took part in a mediation session and issued a joint statement confirming Post Office’s commitment to resetting its relationship with postmasters. Since then, Post Office has improved the board’s structure by ensuring that two non-executive director postmasters nominated and elected by other postmasters have a seat on the board. That is intended to ensure that postmaster voices are being heard at the highest level and that senior management are aware of the impact that decisions will have on those on the frontline delivering services.

Post Office also created a postmaster experience director role, which is filled by a serving postmaster. To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, it is held by Mark Eldridge, who is a serving postmaster at Great Massingham. He is seconded to the role, so he may no longer be in that post office on a daily basis, but he is nevertheless a serving postmaster. He leads the day-to-day relationship with postmasters.

Alongside those senior appointments, the Post Office has reformed operational matters to improve culture and trust between senior management, staff and postmasters. Improved training packages and the hiring of more than 100 new area managers to provide dedicated local support are all examples of positive changes. At my meeting yesterday with Voice of the Postmaster and Communication Workers Union national postmasters, they spoke highly of the support and engagement provided by those area managers.

Post Office has also strengthened how it listens to postmasters, with two postmaster conferences and a nationwide postmaster consultation conducted each year to provide the foundation of Post Office annual priorities. I experience at first hand how postmasters in the network today can challenge Post Office leadership on various issues when I chair a regular working group between the Post Office and the National Federation of SubPostmasters. I know that, according to various commentators, past experience of that group has been mixed, but my experience from working with them on an ongoing basis has been that the challenge they provide is constructive but robust.

I know that branch profitability is the top priority for postmasters, and I am pleased that the Post Office is committed to increasing the share of income going to postmasters. That has been stressed on every occasion we have met. We have also very much stressed the need to control central costs—indeed, to reduce them—so that we see more of the remuneration heading towards postmasters. The clear strategy for the Post Office to do that and ensure that the highest share of income goes to postmasters is through parcels and banking services, which are key; we have discussed that regularly when we have met. That point was raised by the hon. Members for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I have been clear that the banking framework, which is negotiated between the Post Office and the UK banks, should be as ambitious as possible. Banks have saved about £2.5 billion a year through closure of branches, and in our view a greater percentage of that should go to postmasters directly. I am pleased that the shadow Minister likes our policy on banking hubs, which came principally as a result of our legislation on access to cash. Thirty are open already, and another 70 are in the pipeline, so we will be at 100 and we anticipate that about 500 will be rolled out across the country. Clearly there is more to do to strengthen the relationships with postmasters, but I believe that the Post Office has made and is making some positive steps forward.

Members rightly raised compensation, which speaks to the current management culture at the Post Office. Getting compensation to those impacted by the scandal has not been as swift as we would have hoped. I can assure Members that my Department has been working hard on compensation, alongside colleagues in the Post Office who were recruited specifically for that purpose. As the Secretary of State said recently, we continue to look for ways to speed things up, and we work closely with the Horizon compensation advisory board to ensure that we deliver faster compensation, and that compensation is seen to be fair and is fair.

Recently, we introduced measures such as fixed sum awards of £600,000 for overturned convictions, and £75,000 for the GLO. To be clear, a fixed sum award is an option for people who believe that it will provide

[Kevin Hollinrake]

sufficient redress. People who believe that their claims are above that level can go down the full assessment route, but the fixed sum award route has the benefit of speedy resolution of claims and reducing the number of people in the queue who want to go down the full assessment route. That should mean faster resolution of claims for all parties involved in the compensation process.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The Minister has been given credit for the assiduous way that he is righting the wrongs. Members in all parts of the House have been contacted by those affected, such as sub-postmasters who have been prosecuted or have suffered in other ways. Is there a constituency breakdown of the numbers affected? Some people will be more familiar with how to avail themselves of opportunities than others. If we can make ourselves available to those affected—not just those prosecuted—that may provide some assistance, albeit at a late stage, and some solace to them as they try and right the wrongs that he has rightly outlined.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and his work on this matter. It is interesting that more people are coming forward, through colleagues, to the compensation processes, which is very welcome. Some colleagues have written to all their postmasters in their area, asking them to come forward. That is a positive step. I was not aware that I had a postmaster in my area who had been affected—Sam Harrison of Nawton, near Helmsley, who sadly passed away last May. She was one of the 555 members of the GLO scheme. Sadly, she has passed away. New cases come to light all the time. I am very happy to work with my right hon. Friend to see what information we might provide him, so that he can take forward those actions.

As I said, we are aware of concerns about the Horizon shortfall scheme, which was the first scheme set up. We are looking at ways to ensure that that scheme's compensation is fair and seen to be fair. More than £160 million has been awarded already to 2,700 victims, and 64% of all claimants who made their claims prior to the ITV series—more will come forward as a result, which we welcome—have had full and final compensation. Much work has been done by me, my predecessors and many officials, who do a tremendous job trying to right the wrongs of the past, but there is more that we can and have to do.

As of 6 February, more than £35 million has been paid out to those with overturned convictions. There have been 42 claims submitted already for the 101 convictions that been overturned; 36 offers have been made and 32 have been accepted. A very significant proportion of those have taken the fixed sum award. £27 million has been paid out to 479 claimants among the original 555 postmasters who took the Post Office to court. A total of 58 completed claim forms have been received, and 52 claimants have received offers. Of those, 41 people have accepted those offers without going to the next stage, the independent panel. That indicates that people feel that the offers they are receiving are fair, because there are two further stages in that process if they feel that they are not getting fair settlement of their claims. Some £98 million has been paid out through the Horizon

shortfall scheme.

There were 2,417 claimants who claimed prior to the original deadline, which has now been extended for late applications, so there is no final date for applications in that scheme. Some 2,417 offers have been made and 2,051 have been settled, meaning that 84% of claims have been settled. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw raised the total compensation amount—I think she mentioned the figure of £2 billion. The maximum budget set thus far is £1 billion. That is the number we are working to at the moment. However, we have always been clear that that is not a cap and it will not stop people getting fair compensation for their claims.

On the matter of more people coming forward, we are absolutely united with the Post Office in calling for anyone impacted by the scandal to bring forward their claims as soon as possible. I welcome the fact that the ITV drama has helped to uncover people who had not previously come forward.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw asked about ongoing shortfalls. There may be instances of that, although not all shortfalls occur as a result of software problems. I am happy to look at any cases of that that the hon. Lady has, but I have to say that it has not been raised with me thus far in my conversations with the National Federation of SubPostmasters, the Voice of the Postmaster and the CWU. However, I am happy to look at that as we proceed.

Compensation is one part of providing justice; the other is truth and accountability, which the Post Office has told us it is fully committed to. The Post Office Horizon inquiry has been established to uncover what went wrong, and the chair, Sir Wyn Williams, continues to make good progress.

The Post Office is co-operating fully with the inquiry. While the recent disclosure issues have been disappointing, they were the consequence of a failure of process rather than a reflection of the management culture. We do not regard them as a deliberate obfuscation, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said. Nevertheless, it is a serious and unacceptable matter, and we certainly want to ensure that they do not happen again.

It was reassuring to hear Sir Wyn Williams's comments on Friday that he was "impressed" that the Post Office's new lawyers have a

"grasp of the scale of the disclosure exercise",

and that he currently has no reason to doubt that the Post Office will continue to assist the inquiry by disclosing relevant material. The inquiry will also look at the future of the Post Office itself from September this year.

On governance, strong and effective leadership of the Post Office is essential. As is set out in the Post Office articles of association, the Business Secretary appoints the chair and approves the appointment of directors of Post Office Ltd. It is a role that the Government take very seriously. As Members will be aware, following a conversation with the Business Secretary in late January, Henry Staunton agreed to step down as chair of the Post Office. We judged that the current chairmanship was not proving effective and had a difficult decision to make between changing course or waiting and hoping that it improved.

The shadow Minister referred to ministerial scrutiny, and I think all Ministers should learn the lessons of the past in terms of their approach to concerns that are

raised. Of course, we as a Department have learned from this ourselves. We will continue to look at governance arrangements and make sure they are fit for purpose. We are not planning any further changes at this time. Members of the House and others have looked at different models of governance of the Post Office, such as mutualisation. As I said, I met with the Voice of the Postmaster and the CWU yesterday, and I am happy to have further conversations with them about that potential route. We are confident that our representative at UK Government Investments, Lorna Gratton, is doing a good job to ensure that the Post Office's governance is fit for purpose.

The hon. Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Motherwell and Wishaw asked about the surpluses and where they ended up—whether they went into a suspense account, into profit and loss, or into bonuses for directors. We are currently conducting an exercise to find out where that money went and how much it was, and we will report accordingly.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) talked about the role of Fujitsu. We welcome the admission from Fujitsu that it holds moral responsibility for the scandal and a responsibility to contribute towards the compensation bill. We will certainly take that up in due course, but it is right for us to ensure that we understand the extent of the bill. The inquiry is looking at other matters surrounding Fujitsu and it is right that we wait for the outcome of that. He mentioned the role of Ofcom. Ofcom does not regulate the Post Office; it regulates Royal Mail. There is a distinction there.

The hon. Member for Wansbeck talked about who knew what. That is something we very much want to know. The inquiry's purpose is to find exactly that. He made the absolutely correct point that no amount of redress could ever make up for what has happened to some people in this scandal. People have taken their own lives and people have been made bankrupt. The least we can do is try to make that good by providing them with full and fair compensation.

I am very sorry to hear about what happened to Janine. I am very happy to look at that case with the hon. Gentleman, as he asked me about it offline the other day. It is certainly the case that if an employee suffered financial detriment, their employer should be able to claim on their behalf. There may be other cases we need to look at, including that case, so I am very happy to have that conversation with him.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) talked about non-disclosure agreements and raised the tragic case of Martin Griffiths in that context. As I said to her in an intervention, it is absolutely right—the Post Office has said this and it is also our position—that no NDA should prevent somebody speaking to relevant individuals, including their Member of Parliament. It is the case, in whatever part of our system and wherever an NDA is signed, that no NDA can ever prevent somebody speaking out—going to the police or other authorities—about a crime. That is the case in any circumstance. The Official Secrets Act only covers the confidentiality of mail and it is no longer signed by postmasters. Again, I am very keen that the gentleman she referred to passes on his evidence to the inquiry, because I think it might find it very useful.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford again for his very kind words. Understandably, many people are still affected by the scandal and in terms of my performance as a Minister—whether I am the right person or whether I am fit for purpose—I guess the jury is out. I quite understand that. People will judge me at the end of the process, but while I am here, I am very keen to make sure that the full and final settlements are made as quickly and as fairly as possible.

To conclude, I have outlined some of the progress the Post Office has made to improve its culture and its relationship with postmasters, and its determination to right the wrongs of the past. Despite the positive progress made since 2019, there are clearly still improvements to be made. Where the Post Office makes mistakes, I will continue to challenge the leadership. Where action is needed, I will not hesitate to act decisively.

3.8 pm

Marion Fellows: I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate. It was quite a surprise that so many people turned up on a Thursday as the House rises for a recess. I intend to go on with this. I intend to secure more and more debates to keep this issue, as far as possible, in the public eye and in the eye of the House, the Minister and any Government that follow.

I will start by mentioning Fujitsu, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). I, too, have written to it. I have had no response as yet, but I am ever hopeful. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) has been doughty in his questioning in the Select Committee and I have had the privilege of listening to him. As with so many of us, he has had many difficult cases which sometimes leave you almost gasping for breath. They fire you, as they have me, with a real sense of injustice. We have to follow through and make sure things are done.

I thank the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green) for what she said about non-disclosure agreements, and I thank the Minister for his response. It is important for people who have been affected by the Horizon scandal or by working for or in conjunction with Post Office Ltd as sub-postmasters to be able to come forward with their experiences and speak about what has happened to them. I also want to give special thanks to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has been very supportive in every debate that I have initiated, on this and on other subjects.

Let me gently remind the Minister that the chief executive officer of Post Office Ltd has been in post for more than four years. I think that many people, especially postmasters, expected to see more change during this period than seems to have happened. I am extremely pleased that the Minister is to continue discussions with representatives of Voice of the Postmaster and the CWU, and I hope that he will, in turn, gently remind the CEO of Post Office Ltd that he should be talking to those organisations as well.

I am pleased that things have moved forward a bit. The Minister is pleased that those in the GLO scheme are accepting £600,000, but it should be borne in mind that people are accepting offers because they have simply had enough. They want nothing more to do with the whole process, and they are broken by it. That is something on which we should all reflect deeply.

[*Marion Fellows*]

I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for chairing the debate—in part—and, as I have said, I am grateful to all Members who have taken part in it. I do not often compare myself to Arnold Schwarzenegger, but I will be back.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the management culture of the Post Office.

Post Office Services: Isolated Communities

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

3.12 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Continuing the trend, I am delighted to have secured a debate on post office services, in this case those in isolated communities. It is an issue that is very important to me and many of my constituents. You may not think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that a Member of Parliament who represents Stretford and Urmston, a seat relatively close to central Manchester, would be interested in post office services in isolated communities, but the key point that I want to make today is that it is not necessary to be rural to be isolated, and that post office services are just as important to isolated communities in city regions as they are to those in the countryside. That is why it is so important that the right support is in place to enable post offices to stay open and to thrive.

That brings me to the subject of Partington, in my constituency, which has been without a post office since August last year, when its long-serving postmistress retired. That has had a significant impact on many of my constituents, because while Partington is a great place in which to live and an area that I am proud to serve, there is no doubt that it is an isolated community. Transport connectivity is abysmal, there are no rail or light rail links, bus services are infrequent to say the least, and there are low levels of car ownership. What is more, its town centre banks have long since closed. In other words, the array of services that Partington post office used to provide, such as banking facilities, the collection or delivery of mail and the ability to pay bills, are now incredibly difficult for residents to access.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for initiating a debate which, coincidentally, follows another very significant debate about the Post Office. As he may have heard Members say during the earlier debate, post offices are a vital tool in combating rural isolation. Does he agree that there should be a statutory obligation to rural-proof post office provision? While the banks have abandoned communities like those he has referred to without fear or favour, the post offices have a responsibility not to do so, and we must ensure that that responsibility is fulfilled and delivered.

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct and, in fairness, there is a Government grant to support the subsidisation of post office services in isolated and rural communities. There is, however, a question of whether that grant is sufficient or, indeed, whether it is reaching the right places.

For the people of Partington, their nearest post office is now several miles away, and the lengthy round trip for those without transport is prohibitively expensive for many local residents. People in Partington are now in the 1% of post office customers whose nearest branch is more than 3 miles away.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is clear that the Post Office's treatment of isolated communities is increasingly poor, and two post offices in my constituency, in Treharris and Deri, have closed, with Pantyscallog in Merthyr Tydfil closing temporarily

next week. Without a full consultation, we know that closures are usually permanent. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in terms of access for geographically isolated communities in which transport is poor and in which people have mobility issues or are elderly, not having a post office within 3 miles is placing services out of reach?

Andrew Western: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Partington's nearest recommended post office site, as advised by the Post Office, is 3.9 miles away. Although that is a significant distance in and of itself, the post office is within a local Co-op store. Residents are unable to access the full range of services at that location, and to do so they have to travel even further into Urmston town centre. Having these services in local communities is incredibly important, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight that, once they are gone, they often do not return.

Like my hon. Friend's constituency, there is not only one recent example of a post office closure in my constituency. The Woodsend Road post office has also been closed since last summer, and the loss of two local post office branches within a few months—like my hon. Friend's example of three closures in his constituency—gives an insight into the scale of the challenge nationally. We know that many branches, particularly those in isolated communities, are struggling.

As well as losing access to vital banking and postal services, people in Partington and Woodsend Road have lost something else—an important community hub. I know the Minister recognises that the value of post offices goes beyond the provision of mere services; they can contribute to tackling loneliness, they can prevent older or more vulnerable people from becoming digitally excluded, and close and trusting relationships are built between staff and customers. Indeed, research from the Post Office shows that three in four people who use branch services list face-to-face interaction as their main reason for choosing to do so.

In preparation for this debate, I reached out to residents in Partington and around Woodsend Road asking them to contact my office to share the impact that the closure of their post office has had on them. I am grateful to everyone who did, and I will share a snapshot of their experiences.

One resident, aged 77, told my team that conversations with post office staff were the only human interaction he had. If losing this was not bad enough, the gentleman in question had to start relying on Partington's one ATM to access cash. He was recently mugged just after using the machine, because criminals know that vulnerable people have no other place to go in Partington to withdraw cash. He is now understandably scared to use the ATM again, and he instead has to rely on a friend to drive him to the closest post office, several miles away.

Another resident, aged 89, described the loss of the post office as “devastating” to her independence. She explained how in the past she used to walk to her local branch, but now her family must travel from Oldham, in the north of Greater Manchester, to drive her all the way to the Sale post office for her to access the services she needs. Her family's journey will take upwards of two and a half hours to complete, on a good day. Another constituent is now spending £20 a week on taxis to go to her nearest post office, following the closure of her local branch on Woodsend Road.

This is unacceptable, not least because often those most affected are pensioners and are therefore necessarily on fixed incomes. I have written to the Post Office about both branch closures in my constituency on multiple occasions to try to find a resolution. At both branches, the Post Office could have been better prepared in terms of recruiting a new postmaster to run the branch and providing some sort of alternative provision in the short term. The postmistress in Partington gave the Post Office three years' notice of her impending retirement, yet we find ourselves in this unacceptable situation. I am still awaiting news on whether a mobile or drop and collect service could be put in place as a temporary measure to provide residents with access to post office services while a longer-term solution is sought. I had to request that, as, seemingly, it had not been proactively considered by the Post Office.

I understand from the Post Office that recruiting new postmasters can be challenging. That reflects a wider challenge nationally about the viability of branches in isolated communities and the remuneration of the people running them. That brings me on to the issue of the support that post offices need. Like any other retailer, post office branches are facing the challenge of declining footfall, as more and more people go online for services. That makes the host shops from which post offices often operate less commercially viable. We should also reflect on the provision of Government services through post offices, which have declined by more than 75% since 2010 and today make up only 4% of their overall revenue. In March 2024, the Government are set to withdraw their Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services from post offices.

We also need to look at the relationship between banks and post offices. With high street banks, including those in Partington, closing en masse in recent years, post offices have increasingly had to step in to provide banking services in communities. The 5,500 bank closures since 2015 have saved those banks about £2.5 billion to £3 billion a year. There is a strong case, which the Minister has articulated previously, for some of that money to be redirected to support the post office network. I would be grateful if he could update us as to whether any progress has been made in talking to the banks about their potentially providing some revenue to support post office services. One of my local post offices, in Stretford, hosts pop-up banks regularly and that town centre also is to lose one of its banks in the near future.

Last but by no means least, we face the big issue that the cost of sustaining the loss-making post office network is significantly greater than the £50 million in annual network subsidy that the Post Office receives from the Government, as I highlighted earlier in my response to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As the Post Office itself has said, the pressures on branches in isolated communities have increased, but the subsidy the Government have in place to support them has not reflected that. I understand that it has declined over the past decade, from £210 million in 2012 to £50 million per year in recent years. Will the Minister assure me that the £50 million subsidy and/or other forms of financial support is available to provide post office services in places such as Partington, which, although not rural, are certainly isolated? I understand that if the money has been reduced, there is less to go around, but it would be reassuring to know that somewhere such as that would be eligible. The previous postmistress was

[*Andrew Western*]

not accessing this grant in order to run her post office, but the difficulties in attracting a new postmaster to run the service suggest that it may be something that should be considered in the future. I would be incredibly grateful for the Minister's support in working with the Post Office to try to establish that, and in looking at any ways in which we can restore post office services on Woodsend Road and, in particular, in Partington.

To conclude, I hope I have highlighted the importance of post offices to isolated communities, particularly those such as Partington, as well as those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and the hon. Member for Strangford. When residents lose these services, the impact can be devastating as they often support incredibly vulnerable customers. I again thank everybody affected by the post office closures in Partington and Woodsend Road who took the time to contact me and share their stories. I am pleased the Minister has had the chance to hear them today. I hope they help him to push for the changes needed to support our post office network moving forward and ensure those services are retained in isolated communities.

3.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) on securing this important debate on a subject close to my heart, as the representative of the rural seat of Thirsk and Malton.

We all know how highly our communities value post offices, and our constituents have deep concern whenever they are closed, even temporarily. They value them because of the services they provide but also, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, because they are the provider of trusted relationships—I could not agree more. The post office network is still significant, with over 11,500 branches across the country. Recent research by the London School of Economics highlighted that the network makes a valuable contribution to the economic health of our high streets, generating £3.1 billion of additional spending every year. It is understandable that the hon. Gentleman wants to debate the issue, given that his constituency has seen changes in its provision of post offices in recent months and years.

The Post Office has the commercial freedom to deliver the branch network within the parameters set for it by Government. Those parameters include minimum access criteria and minimum services to be provided at branches across the country. For example, 99% of the population must live within three miles of their nearest branch and 95% of the total urban population must live within one mile of their nearest outlet, which relates to the hon. Gentleman's constituency because it is in an urban area. Despite all the challenges faced by retailers in recent years, it is pleasing that the Post Office meets and exceeds those criteria at a national level. In fact, more post offices have opened this year than have closed and the network is as large today as it has been for five years, with around 11,700 branches open.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, 12 branches are operating in in Stretford and Urmston, serving around 13,000 customers each week. The post office network in the area supports around 60 full-time equivalent jobs

and has an economic contribution to his constituency of over £6 million each year, as well as driving an additional wider high street spend of £5 million a year.

I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the situation in Partington, where I understand the post office branch closed last year when the postmistress retired after an incredible 35 years serving her community. From my own constituency experience, I fully appreciate the impact a branch closure can have on a community. It can be disruptive, particularly for communities without nearby alternatives, but that fluctuation is part of the modern, dynamic, franchise-led business that the Post Office primarily is. The network is made up of small businesses and, just like any other franchise-based business, the Post Office cannot control a franchise's decisions about their future. As postmasters move on, branches close and new ones open, as the hon. Gentleman has experienced at first hand, with the opening of Stretford post office in its new permanent location late last year.

The reasons for a temporary branch closure are generally outside the control of the Post Office. However, in such instances, the Post Office ensures services are maintained as quickly as it can. I understand from the Post Office that there is interest from a community group in taking on the Partington branch, with a further meeting scheduled next week, so I am hopeful that the branch can be reopened as soon as possible. I note the hon. Gentleman's point about the provision of a mobile service, and I am happy to take that away and update him. It is not easy to secure, as I have experienced myself, but we will do whatever we can.

We are not blind to the realities of taking on and running a post office. Like any other retailer, post offices face pressures from continually evolving consumer behaviours, particularly as consumers shop online more, driving footfall away from our high street. When it comes to consumer habits and accessing Government services, it is not our place to dictate to people where they should access those services—I think that we often like to access those services online. None the less, we are keen to retain what services we can. The hon. Gentleman did point to the DVLA contract, which has been extended for another year. I think that everyone would like to see that contract extended on a longer-term basis, but negotiations will have to continue.

Changes in consumer behaviour are significantly driving down the number of letters being sent, which is also having an impact on post offices. Nevertheless, there are reasons to be optimistic. We were pleased to see the Post Office launch its Parcels Online business last year, whereby customers can select and pay for Evri and DPD products online before dropping parcels off at their nearest post office. The Post Office is now also rolling out a similar proposition across the physical network, which means that customers can compare different carriers to choose the option that best suits their needs. We see this as a significant opportunity to improve competitiveness and competition in the market, and I am keen that the Post Office expand that proposal further to include more carriers.

There is also a major opportunity, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, in banking services. All customers should have appropriate access to banking and cash services wherever they live. That is why we have legislated to protect access to cash to ensure that customers can continue to access everyday banking services at the post office.

This development is important for the hon. Gentleman's constituency as, for example, around 50% of bank branches in Stretford and Urmston have closed since 2015, so post offices are key in providing access to cash in the constituency, as they are across the country.

In December, £3.3 billion in cash was either deposited or withdrawn across the country. The post office network is therefore a crucial component of this country's long-term provision of cash and banking services. And that is why I have been clear that the Post Office should be ambitious in its negotiations with the banks for the next iteration of the banking framework agreement, which already provides significant revenue into the post office network. We welcome that, but there are further opportunities. The hon. Gentleman may want to speak to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about other services, such as banking hubs. As I said earlier, there are 30 hubs around the country already and 70 more in the pipeline, but our aspiration is to get 500, and it may be suitable to provide a hub in his constituency.

Gerald Jones: I thank the Minister for giving way. I fully accept that there are challenges. For example, many of the people working in our post offices have done so for many years and when they come to retirement, it really is a challenge to get people to take on those businesses. The communities that we have described this afternoon—geographically isolated communities and communities with public transport issues—tend to have many older people who often use cash in their transactions. Banking hubs are great in larger towns perhaps, but things are much more difficult in smaller, isolated communities. What other options can be considered so that those communities do not become financial deserts?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Banking hubs are not a one-size-fits-all solution. There are other solutions, some of which are facilitated by the banking framework. Enhanced facilities

in post offices is one such solution—for example, a separate line in the post office. Smart ATMs are part of the solution. OneBanx provides a mini-banking solution that can be provided in libraries, for example. Different financial organisations, such as some of the building societies, are rolling out such provisions, but we see banking services, and the remuneration that flows from them, as critical to ensuring that we have a sustainable network of post offices. I have always been clear in this House that if Members have particular local issues, I am happy to work with them and the Post Office to try to deliver solutions on a case-by-case basis.

Although there are opportunities, that does not mean we are out of the woods. Branch profitability is a top priority for postmasters, and I am keen to ensure that it can be enhanced wherever possible. I assure Members that we remain steadfast in our support for the network. We have provided significant financial support to sustain the nationwide network—over £2.5 billion in funding in the past decade alone—and we are providing a further £588 million for the Post Office between 2022 and 2025. The moneys include investment and, as the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston referred to, an annual network subsidy of £50 million, which helps to safeguard services in the uncommercial parts of the network.

The Government have been clear that post offices should be a valuable social and economic asset for communities and businesses for years to come. We continue to work with the Post Office to ensure that the organisation and the network are fit for the future, and we always welcome views on the network, such as those expressed today. I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston for introducing this important debate, and the other hon. Members who contributed to it.

Question put and agreed to.

3.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 February 2024

[VALERIE VAZ *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Gaza: Humanitarian Aid and Children

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 14 November 2023 and 9 January 2024, on the Humanitarian situation in Gaza, HC 110; Correspondence from the International Development Committee to the Foreign Secretary, on the Humanitarian situation in Gaza, reported to the House on 17 January 2024; Correspondence between the International Development Committee and the Foreign Secretary, on the Humanitarian situation in Gaza, reported to the House on 16 November and 5 December 2023; and e-petition 649371, Allow Palestinian Children to Enter the UK During Ongoing Conflict.]

1.30 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered humanitarian aid and children in Gaza.

I begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate. I am grateful for the cross-party support that I had when seeking to secure it.

Before the war began, Gaza's streets were alive with the sound of children. Roughly half the population are under 18, but unlike children in the UK, Gaza's children have had to endure so much in their short lives. A 15-year-old will have lived through five wars, including the current conflict. Many have been displaced several times. Even so, they have never experienced destruction and death like this.

Since October, it has been clear that children have been affected by the conflict on an unprecedented and unparalleled scale. We know that the Hamas attacks involved the killing of Israeli children, and that an estimated 40 Israeli children were taken captive in Gaza. Nevertheless, more than 11,500 children have since been killed in Gaza by Israeli airstrikes and ground operations. The phrase "war on children" is echoing across the international community. Lost in the numbers are the faces, the names, the lives and the moments of joy that those children brought—children like six-year-old Hind Rajab, whose fate is reported to be still unknown after the car in which she was fleeing to safety with her uncle, his wife and their four children came under Israeli fire. More than 24,000 children have lost one or both parents.

Gaza's hospitals have treated so many wounded children arriving alone for treatment after Israeli airstrikes that, chillingly, medical workers have coined a new abbreviation—WCNSF: "wounded child, no surviving family". Obviously, unaccompanied and separated children require urgent protection and the provision of essentials. Given that these children need refuge and compassion, will the Minister clarify whether the Government have considered allowing children into the UK for their safety and wellbeing during this conflict, as per the petition which

has been signed by over 17,000 people? For the children who have survived the bombardment, a slow and painful death looms due to the denial of essentials, the destruction of infrastructure and the lack of aid.

The healthcare system in Gaza is in crisis due to major shortages of doctors and nurses, the lack of medical supplies and the destruction of hospitals. Small children caught up in explosions are particularly vulnerable to major life-changing injuries, and more than 1,000 children have had one or both legs amputated. According to the World Health Organisation, many of these operations on children were done without anaesthetic. Such horrors are virtually unimaginable for us in the UK, but it does not stop there. Many children are accessing well below the recommended water requirements for survival, and those under five are at high risk of severe malnutrition and preventable death due to famine. According to Islamic Relief, Gaza is now the world's worst hunger crisis.

As I have laid out, the situation for children in Gaza is catastrophic. Unfettered access for humanitarian aid is needed urgently, but the conditions on the ground, the bombardment, the siege and the destruction of infrastructure do not allow it to reach children and families in need. It brings to mind Israel's Minister of Defence's announcement on 9 October:

"We are putting a complete siege on Gaza...No electricity, no food, no water, no gas—it's all closed."

Can the Minister update us on the Government's understanding of the legality of what many are arguing is the collective punishment of civilians and how this has affected children?

Save the Children International's chief executive officer's harrowing plea demonstrates the significance of what people all over the world are bearing witness to:

"We are running out of words to describe the horror unfolding for Gaza's children. Most of them have been forcibly displaced, squeezed into a tiny sliver of land that cannot accommodate them. Those who haven't been forced from their homes are cut-off from the basics needed for survival, far away from the little amount of humanitarian assistance that can be delivered."

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): The horrors of recent months have literally been intolerable. Israel continues to use devastating tactics that have seen far too many innocent civilians—including children—killed, with unacceptable blocks on essential humanitarian aid. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need the fighting in Gaza to stop immediately, with a humanitarian truce now, and not just a temporary ceasefire but a lasting, sustainable ceasefire that leads to a viable two-state solution?

Apsana Begum: I agree with my hon. Friend that without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, it is hard to imagine how we can turn around this situation and ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the places where it is most needed.

The chief executive officer of Save the Children also said:

"Children are enduring and witnessing horrors, while the world looks on."

I repeat that for emphasis:

"Children are enduring and witnessing horrors, while the world looks on."

Why is humanitarian aid not getting to children who need it? What are the blocks on humanitarian aid? According to reports, the flow of aid is being drip-fed.

[Apsana Begum]

Although around 500 trucks per day are needed to meet basic needs, most days fewer than 200 actually make it inside, and on one day this month it was reported that only 30 crossed into Gaza. Human Rights Watch argues that the blocking of humanitarian assistance amounts to collective punishment of the civilian population and poses further grave risks to children. Can the Minister update us on his understanding of why aid is not being distributed as needed, and whether any blocks to aid would constitute the collective punishment of civilians?

Then there is the question of funding itself. The United Nations Children's Fund has requested \$168.3 million to support its response in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for 2024. On 17 January, it said there was a funding gap of \$55.5 million. Shortly after the International Court of Justice's plausible genocide ruling, the UK stopped funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the largest UN agency operating in Gaza, due to allegations from Israel that 12 of the agency's more than 13,000 staff were involved in the 7 October attacks. UNRWA has since spoken of being "extremely desperate".

International aid agencies including Oxfam and ActionAid have said they are deeply concerned and outraged at what they have called a

"reckless decision to cut a lifeline for an entire population".

Amnesty International has said that while allegations against individuals must be independently investigated, cutting lifesaving assistance to millions could amount to collective punishment in and of itself.

It would be helpful if the Minister could update us as to the situation in this regard. What is the latest evidence the Government have seen regarding the allegations, and how are they being investigated further? What assessment have the Government made of the consequences of their decision for the children in Gaza? I know that many of my constituents are appalled that it appears the UK is continuing to send weapons to potentially kill children while withdrawing funding that saves children's lives. I urge the Government to prioritise upholding their humanitarian obligations and resume the funding.

The ICJ's plausible genocide interim judgment made it clear that Israel must take steps to prevent acts of genocide, and that its obligations regarding children and aid are key. Can the Minister tell us what the UK is doing to protect children in Gaza accordingly? In terms of the UK's own obligations, it would be helpful to know what the Government's response is to the growing call for the increasing of humanitarian aid and the halting of the transfer of weapons or parts for weapons that can be used against children.

All children should be cherished, Israeli and Palestinian. We know that children in Gaza should not be slaughtered, but they continue to be by Israeli forces in unprecedented numbers. We know that children in Gaza are enduring a humanitarian catastrophe with no relief in sight. We know that aid is desperately needed and that children need food, healthcare, shelter and water but are just not getting them. Does the Minister agree that an immediate and permanent ceasefire is the only way to bring about the end of the suffering of children in Gaza and to enable the urgent delivery of desperately needed aid?

1.40 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Thank you for calling me to speak so quickly, Ms Vaz. I was rushing here—I had trouble with my journey, and I think you got that message. I am obliged to you.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing the debate. It is absolutely timely and absolutely essential that this debate be held, because the war has just become a horror show—a horror show of bodies being taken away, of unknown numbers hidden under rubble in Gaza, and of the terrible devastation caused by all the other disasters that war brings about, such as shortage of water, shortage of food, shortage of medicine and everything else.

Obviously what happened on 7 October was appalling by any stretch of the imagination, and the continued hostage-holding of a number of children obviously has to be brought to an end as quickly as it possibly can. But as the Secretary-General of the United Nations pointed out at the time, this did not all come from nowhere; it comes from the siege of Gaza, which has gone on for a very long time, and also, of course, the occupation of the west bank. I recall many visits I have made to Gaza and the west bank, some in the company of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), on a number of occasions. Every time I have been to Gaza, I always felt, "It can't get any worse." Then you go back there and it is even worse. Now, the bombing has made it absolutely appalling.

The International Court of Justice hearing was a seminal moment in many ways. I went to the ICJ hearing, at the invitation of the South African delegation, and I was there in the Court for the whole of the hearing. It lasted a very long time, and it was painstakingly presented by South Africa. There was a certain synergy about South Africa, a country that had come out of apartheid, presenting a case, essentially on behalf of the Palestinian people, that the behaviour of the Israel Defence Forces in Gaza was tantamount to acts of genocide against the Palestinian people. The statement made as a result of the ICJ hearing, which should be read very carefully, calls upon Israel to cease activities in the Gaza strip that could be construed as a continuation of genocidal acts against the Palestinian people. It is quite important that the world recognises that, in essence, it was calling for an urgent and immediate ceasefire and an increase in aid going through. That aid has increased very slightly, but it is very difficult to deliver aid when you are under bombardment at the same time.

There are now more than 1 million people around the Rafah crossing. It is a small town. It is grotesquely overcrowded and has a shortage of absolutely everything. One can cite many images, but I saw one the other day of two children—they looked five or six—walking down the road together, hand in hand. They were a boy and a girl. The girl was holding a bottle with a small amount of water in it, and they were aimlessly wandering about. When they saw anyone, they said, "Do you know where we can get food?" The world should not treat children that way, particularly when a few kilometres away there is plenty of food, medicine and clean water deliberately being denied to those people. This country signed the UN convention on the rights of the child in 1989—there is a stone commemorating that in Hyde Park—and we should abide by it.

The UK Government's decision to withhold further funding to UNRWA until the inquiries have taken place is beyond regrettable. When he announced his decision in Parliament, the Foreign Office Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), pointed out that payments had already been made and that this was withholding future payments that might be due after April. Well, I think we need a bit more certainty than that that we will continue supporting the UN Relief and Works Agency. Around one third of its income is now at risk or already gone.

The case against the people who are alleged to have taken part in the 7 October event has not yet been backed up with evidence, not yet been presented and not yet been concluded. In any event, if there is a case against individuals who were employed by UNRWA, let us bring it forward, bring it into the open and have the hearing. But to deny the whole organisation funding and to deny the staff of UNRWA continued employment all across the piece—in the refugee camps and the west bank as well as in Gaza—seems to me to be totally wrong and unfair. I hope that when the Minister who is here today replies, he will be able to assure us that we will rapidly resume funding for UNRWA.

I have visited many UNRWA depots over the years, with my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and others, in the west bank, Gaza and indeed the refugee camps. It is an underfunded organisation, anyway. It performs superhuman tasks just to provide food, medicine and education for Palestinian people. It is the oldest UN agency. We have to recognise the absolute importance of that.

The question of food supply to Gaza is obviously critical. The population is very young and possibly half of the 27,000 recorded deaths in Gaza will be of young people or children. The number who are still under the rubble is enormous. There is very limited access for outside help to get in. The numbers of medical staff who have been killed are huge, as are the numbers of journalists who could report on the situation—80 journalists have already lost their lives in Gaza. This is a horror show on live TV all over the world.

The idea that, somehow or other, this country can adopt a policy of not funding the one agency that can deliver help, food, aid and medicine to the children of Gaza I find to be completely unconscionable.

Mr Dhesi: Like my right hon. Friend, I have seen the amazing work of UNRWA on the ground in Palestine. We in the UK and across the globe cannot become desensitised to the civilian deaths that we are witnessing, especially those of thousands of innocent children, and there has been no let-up to the suffering in Gaza. Does my right hon. Friend agree that with so many displaced, desperate and hungry people and with potential aid cuts and continuing conflict, there is a real danger of a deadly famine engulfing Gaza as well?

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is right. Frankly, the famine is already there. The number of people dying from wholly preventable conditions in the southern part of the Gaza strip is already greater than the number who have been killed by the daily bombardment there. And what are they dying from? Diarrhoea, hunger, malnutrition and lack of any kind of medicine.

I talked to a doctor who I met in Leeds two weeks ago when I was at an event in support of the people of Gaza. He told me that he had done something that he had hoped he would never, ever have to do in his life: perform an amputation on somebody without anaesthetic—on a child. Imagine being a professional doctor who has taken the Hippocratic oath and having to put a child through the most unbelievable pain in order to, hopefully, save their life. He told me of cases where he has performed a successful operation, in the sense that the operation was carried out, but the patient has then died of a heart attack because of the pain inflicted on them. None of that is necessary. Medical aid and anaesthetics could get there if only they were allowed in.

Currently, in the southern end of the Gaza strip there are reported to be 135,000 cases of diarrhoea; they have been recorded by those doctors who remain there. That is 13.5% of the people around Rafah and possibly even more than that. Diarrhoea is a killer, particularly of children, because it means that they cannot feed food down or keep their body hydrated; it is an absolute killer.

In addition, no child has been to school anywhere in the Gaza strip since November—so that is three months of education already lost. Even if the bombardment and fighting stopped tomorrow, there is no school to be reopened; there would have to be schools in tents for months, if not years, to come. The children affected will be physically devastated, and mentally scarred and devastated. What is the next generation going to be like when they have been through this horrific experience?

Surely, therefore, it is incumbent on all of us to do everything we can to bring about a ceasefire in Gaza and save the lives of children. The messages are there—from the UN, from all the children's agencies, from the World Food Programme, from Amnesty International, from Human Rights Watch and from a whole range of other people who have either been to Gaza or managed to pick up information about what is going on there regarding the crying need for help, particularly for children. That help can best be achieved by a ceasefire.

The Government announced that they were providing £87 million of aid; I am sure that the Minister will correct me if I have got that figure wrong. However, it was not clear how that aid was going to be delivered, how it was going to be dispersed or who was going to disperse it. I gently say to the Minister that the existing agencies that have done so much work for so long and managed to ensure the continuation of a health service of some sort throughout Palestine but particularly in Gaza, such as Palestinian Red Crescent and others, are the best people to do it. The most important role that any of us anywhere else in the world can play is absolutely to demand peace in the region and a solution to this crisis, starting with an immediate and permanent ceasefire to stop the killing of so many children in Gaza.

As somebody who has been in this House for quite a while and in Israel, Gaza and the west bank, including in the refugee camps, on nine occasions, I feel the sense of hope that children there have. I went to a primary school in Jabalia refugee camp; I have been there twice, on successive visits. It was a beautifully run if underfunded school. From the roof of the school, it was possible to see the fence—the border with Israel. We met the children; this was a primary school, so they were 10 or 11-year-olds. They were excitable, artistic, enjoyable to be with, full of ideas, full of hope and full of aspirations. I always left that school feeling, "Well, these children will be a huge

[Jeremy Corbyn]

asset to the country of the future, as they are the citizens of the future.” The school has now been destroyed—completely destroyed. Those kids have lost their school. Having lost their homes, the one strong factor in their lives had been their sense of a place to go to school, and that applies to every other school across the Gaza strip, as well as to every hospital across the Gaza strip.

Let us give all the aid we can to UNRWA now and give all the support we can now to the people of Gaza—particularly the children, so that they may grow up to at least live without the threat of being bombed day in and day out. But above all, get off the fence and get on the side of supporting a ceasefire now to save life in Gaza and bring about a long-term peace for all the people of the region, before this thing degenerates into a ghastly war that engulfs the whole region.

As you can gather, Ms Vaz, I feel extremely strongly about this issue, but it is not just me. I am stopped by people in the street who have never shown the slightest interest in international affairs or politics of any sort, but they now say, “Please, please, you’re our MP—do what you can to save life in Gaza!”

1.54 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Ms Vaz.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this really important debate on the last day before recess. We may not be many, but we are strong, as they say.

The horrors of recent months in Israel and Gaza have been intolerable, and there has been no let-up in the suffering in Gaza and no end to the cruel treatment of hostages. Millions of people are displaced, desperate and hungry. Thousands of my Luton South constituents have contacted me about the ongoing conflict, so I wanted to make sure that I added my voice to this important debate. I will echo many of the comments that have already been made.

Israel continues to use devastating tactics that have seen far too many innocent civilians and children killed. There have been unacceptable blocks on essential aid, with nowhere being safe for civilians. It is a humanitarian catastrophe, and now there are warnings of a deadly famine. Women, children and newborn babies bear the brunt of the violence in Gaza. Since the horrific attacks on 7 October, Israel’s devastating response has killed over 11,500 children in Gaza—one in every 100 children in the Gaza strip—and UNICEF has reported that 17,000 children have been left unaccompanied or separated from their families.

Many of my Luton South constituents, as well as non-governmental organisations such as Islamic Relief and Medical Aid for Palestinians, have highlighted the fact that, without an immediate and permanent ceasefire, the numbers dying of hunger, malnutrition, disease and unmet medical needs could far exceed those that have already been caused by the bombardment. Like many others, I have heard briefings from UK doctors who have regularly visited Palestine to carry out medical work, procedures and training. They are despairing that we will see children dying from preventable diseases and lack of simple medicines such as insulin for diabetes. That is terribly shocking.

Alongside the horrific physical impacts, Oxfam has reported that about 1 million children are in need of mental and psychosocial support. The deep trauma of Palestinian children will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Nearly all the children in the Gaza strip require mental health support. Many are presenting very challenging symptoms, including extremely high levels of persistent anxiety, with the responses to that such as not eating and being in despair.

While that is going on in Gaza, the worst hunger crisis and starvation are setting in; it is on the verge of being a famine. It has been reported that all children under five are at high risk of severe malnutrition, as that risk of famine conditions continues to increase. Other hon. Members mentioned hearing reports and receiving briefings from Islamic Relief staff in Gaza describing how desperate children are roaming the rubble-filled streets in search of any scraps of food that they might find.

Like others, I have heard first hand from doctors who have, sadly, had to do medical procedures in Gaza without anaesthetic, including the amputation of children’s arms and legs, because there is a critical shortage of drugs and medical supplies. We also hear about babies being born on the streets, and the umbilical cords being cut with whatever sharp object is to hand.

The constant, indiscriminate bombing, the debris, the electricity blackouts and the lack of fuel make it extremely dangerous to distribute any aid and make many parts of the Gaza strip inaccessible. As has been so well put by others, to meet the need for humanitarian aid, an estimated 800 trucks of aid would have to enter Gaza daily; since 7 October, however, the highest daily average has been two trucks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, we really need to question whether this is a blockade and what that would actually amount to. I would welcome the Minister’s views on that issue.

Unfettered access for humanitarian aid is needed at scale to meet the desperate need of the children in Gaza. The UN Relief and Works Agency is the largest agency operating in Gaza: 80% of aid to the Gaza strip is delivered through it. I have asked questions about this issue. In response to my written question, the Foreign Office Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), said that the Government are “pausing any future funding of UNRWA”

while they review allegations of its staff being involved with Hamas. However, Channel 4 has reported on the document in which Israeli officials alleged that a dozen UNRWA employees were involved in the 7 October attack, led by Hamas. Channel 4 reported that the document “provides no evidence to support its explosive new claim that UNRWA staff were involved”.

I would welcome an update from the Minister with regard to the Government’s position on the matter. If this key UN agency is not funded, how do they intend to fill the gap for humanitarian aid in Gaza?

I recognise that the Government have on many occasions expressed their commitment to ensuring that much-needed humanitarian aid and medical supplies reach Gaza for the many children in desperate need. Will the Minister provide information on the current position and on the Government’s long-term plans to support children in Gaza, many of whom are now orphaned and will be living with this trauma for the rest of their lives?

2 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing the debate and on all she has been doing since the beginning of this crisis to draw attention to what is happening in Israel and Gaza, which has now spread to other parts of the middle east.

Everyone around the world was horrified by what happened on 7 October, but everyone—or almost everyone—has watched with increasing horror the effect in Gaza over the ensuing months. It is almost somewhat prurient that, as we debate this matter every week in this place and out in the wider community—as the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, there is huge interest among the public in this—we are commenting on the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, predominantly civilians and overwhelmingly women and children. That is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in, but we have to try—and, above all, we have to try to persuade the UK Government that they and their partners need to do more.

My starting point for dealing with what is different between Gaza and some other conflicts is that there was a long period before the current hostilities—since at least 2007—when Gaza was under siege, so these depredations are happening not to a robust society, but to one that has already been depleted in many ways. I visited Gaza twice during that period. The first time was just after Operation Cast Lead, another major Israeli military incursion, though obviously not on the scale of the current one, and I saw what happens when heavy-duty weapons of war are used against civilian populations. We were lucky to get into Gaza through Erez that time. The second time I visited, most political visits had been stopped, but we were able to cross Sinai—something that, again, may not be possible now—and enter through the Rafah crossing.

What impresses me most about Gaza, as others have mentioned, is the resilience of its people, despite the utter squalor of life, caused by occupation and the control of land, sea and air borders for a long period, such that most are reliant on aid, cannot leave the country, except in very few cases, and have been living almost as stateless citizens, in limbo, for nearly a generation now. Gaza has a highly educated population, and it has become clear during the current conflict, as we have seen hospitals and other civilian infrastructure destroyed, that it was there. Indeed, many doctors and other specialists have gone out from this country to assist medics and others in Gaza in running the health service as best they can, despite the deprivation of supplies. At the same time as being horrified by the conditions that people had to live in, one could not help but admire the fact that life continued as normally as it could under the circumstances. Not only did a siege go on, but there were four or five separate land or air assaults by Israel on Gaza between 2008 and the current conflict. Life had been worn down, and people had been worn down, not just physically but mentally, over that period.

The other aspect of Gaza that is perhaps unique is that there is nowhere to flee to. There is no route out of Gaza. Gazans do not want to leave Gaza. They do not want to be forced into Sinai or elsewhere, or into any of the mad schemes that extreme members of the Israeli Government have come out with. Undoubtedly, there

are those who would like to be able to cross the border, perhaps because they are wounded or injured, they are foreign nationals or have family abroad, or they simply cannot stand what is happening, but they are simply unable to. That adds another dimension of horror to the situation. People are being bombed and shelled daily, as we have seen. We do not get the full picture, but we see that whole districts and neighbourhoods, and the majority of residences, have been damaged or destroyed in what would be an extraordinary level of bombardment in any war but is particularly so in such a narrow and small piece of land.

People have mentioned some of the headline statistics, if I can put it that way. The fact that 85% of the population have been displaced is extraordinary. Some 27,000 people have been killed, over 11,000 of them children, and we have heard about the half a million people who are in the most severe level of food crisis. A very substantial proportion of people around the world who are in that highest level of crisis are now living in Gaza, which previously had a first-world economy, in many ways, and first-world education and skills. That is the seriousness of the case, and that is why we have seen attempts to defend the victims through action in the International Court of Justice in the United Nations itself.

The debate is about one narrow aspect of this crisis and conflict—aid. Whatever the Government say about aid shipments that they have authorised, it is clear that aid is not getting into Gaza in anything like the amount that is needed. UNRWA is not the only aid agency; there are many others, such as Islamic Relief and Medical Aid for Palestinians, whose local staff are working on the ground under appalling conditions. Those charities do a very good job, but they do not do what UNRWA has done since 1949 and provide whole-infrastructure support for a population that, through no fault of its own, is unable to supply it itself. UNRWA also provides education, healthcare and employment for many thousands of people.

Let us not disguise the fact that what some UNRWA staff—a very small number—have been accused of has to be investigated. Those staff, quite rightly, are out of a job while that is being investigated, and if it can be proven that they played any part in the 7 October events, they must be punished with the full severity of the law. But the idea that the whole organisation should be effectively brought to a halt by being defunded seems extraordinary. The Minister for the middle east said, and I am sure he is sincere, that he does not believe the defunding will make a difference because we have made the current financial year's payment and are not due to make the next one until the next financial year, but will the various inquiries—there are more than one—be resolved by then? I would like a commitment from the Minister today that, as long as we are assured that investigations are being properly carried out, we will not restrict the funding we would otherwise have given to UNRWA, which itself is only a fraction of what is needed and is less than used to be given.

The Government are failing. Even with respect to aid, they have singularly failed to give a political lead. They have singularly failed on many of the issues that have arisen since 7 October, including on what is happening in the west bank and the wider middle east, but every time questions are raised about those things, we get the reply, “Yes, but we are prioritising aid.” Well, with

[*Andy Slaughter*]

respect, that does not appear to be happening. If it were, we would be working more closely with the UN, our European allies and the US, as well as bilaterally, to ensure the necessary amounts of aid are getting into Gaza through a variety of crossings and in a variety of forms, and many of the current hold-ups would be relieved.

It is so obvious—and I think this is the Government's position—that aid cannot be got into Gaza in any meaningful way without the cessation of hostilities. We may differ on what that cessation should involve and on the terminology, but it would be good to hear from the Minister that the Government wish to see an end to the hostilities between Gaza and Israel until such time as the famine and disease that are running rife are ended, and the wounded and others who are suffering in Gaza have received proper medical attention, food and other supplies. Surely that is the least that we should demand.

The way that Ukraine is reported in the UK differs from the reporting of Gaza. There is rightly a high degree of access to what is happening in Ukraine, so we get a good picture of the atrocities visited on the Ukrainian people by Putin and his forces. Despite the brave efforts of many journalists, many of whom have been killed, we do not get a full picture of what is happening in Gaza. For those of us who are familiar with the region, it is possible to imagine it, but probably not on the current scale. The suppression of information coming out of Gaza is being used to disguise the full horror of what is happening there.

Despite that, it is clear from every polling exercise and from the correspondence that every MP receives—I have had more than 5,000 emails on this subject, calling for an immediate and full ceasefire by a ratio of 100:1, and others have had considerably more than that—that the public in this country are deeply concerned about what is happening and want to see their Government take action to stop the killing, particularly of children, and the destruction of a whole civilisation. There is clearly a targeting of civil society bodies, records, courthouses, Parliaments and business districts, which can have no military significance whatever, in a way that punishes and degrades the entirety of the Gaza strip. I want the Government to speak out against that more and, above all, take many more steps to ensure that aid is delivered in secure circumstances in the course of a ceasefire.

2.14 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as always, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) on securing this absolutely crucial and emotional debate. As others have said before me, the situation in Gaza is nothing short of a humanitarian catastrophe. Children, of course, are bearing the brunt of the crisis, facing unimaginable horrors every single day. That those children—and adults—are having to go through this is not the mark of a civilised world. We, the adults, in this place and elsewhere, cannot ignore their plight any longer.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, a new term has been coined for children in Gaza—WCNSF: wounded child, no surviving family. What a horrible thought and image to have in our heads. It embodies the tragic reality of many innocent children in Gaza, where

death, destruction and injuries have become just daily occurrences. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) described the image of two children walking along the road asking somebody for food. As always, the numbers paint a grim picture of the harsh, stark, horrible reality of war. Some 40% of the casualties are believed to be the innocents—the children.

“Suffer little children to come unto me”

springs to mind all the time when one hears these stories. But the horror does not end there. Even those who survive face an uncertain future, with disease, starvation and exposure threatening their lives. God only knows what the long-term impact will be on those children.

Jeremy Corbyn: Surely the issue now is that as the weather gets warmer, without any sewage facilities or clean water, the next thing will be cholera.

John Mc Nally: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Disease is only going to worsen over the next period. Unless there is intervention immediately, it is just going to get worse and worse. After the war is finished, we will still have to deal with the situation that is left, so the quicker we intervene, the better.

There are reports of deliberate strikes on civilian safe zones and hospitals—deeply disturbing accounts have been heard. Let us be clear: aid efforts, while crucial, are no substitute for a ceasefire. There is absolutely no doubt about that whatsoever. The lack of safe zones and the destruction of medical facilities mean that innocent lives continue to be lost unnecessarily. As the right hon. Member for Islington North said, unless we intervene, it is just going to get worse. The ongoing suffering of children in Gaza is heartbreaking. It is unthinkable in this day and age that it is going on. More than 1,000 children have had their limbs amputated—hundreds without anaesthetics, proper medical care, running water, electricity, food or shelter. It is unimaginable. The blockade imposed by Israel only exacerbates the situation, leaving more children vulnerable to infections and untreated injuries.

Furthermore, education has come to a total standstill in Gaza, with thousands of children deprived of their right to learn. The UNRWA schools—a lifeline for many—have closed their doors, robbing children of their future and denying their basic rights to education. Keep in mind that that all impacts on the mental health of children, and the mental health toll on children is absolutely staggering. Anxiety, loss of appetite—if they can get food—and emotional distress are commonplace. Can we even begin to understand, to take any of that into our heads? Entire families have been wiped out, leaving children orphaned and traumatised through no fault of theirs. In my constituency of Falkirk, I have personally heard first hand from a woman and her mother whose whole family are in Gaza, and they related the whole thing to me in a very calm, organised manner over a two-hour period. It is hard to take in what these people are going through.

It is unconscionable that the UK Government should continue to support Israel's actions under the guise of self-defence. The consequences are simply dire, with totally innocent children paying the ultimate price. It is downright wrong. Humanitarian aid is essential, but it must be accompanied by a ceasefire. The decision to

freeze funding for UNRWA will only worsen the crisis, putting millions of lives at risk. I ask the Minister to seriously rethink and reverse that decision.

We cannot stand by idly while innocent children suffer. The international community cannot afford to remain silent in the face of such atrocities. The UK Government, among others, must heed the calls for a ceasefire, and prioritise humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of Gaza's most vulnerable inhabitants. Resuming funding for UNRWA is not just a matter of humanitarian obligation, but a moral imperative. We must also recognise the psychological toll of war on children. The trauma they endure leaves scars that may never heal. Gender and age-appropriate mental health support must be provided urgently to mitigate the long-term effects of conflict on Gaza's future generation.

In conclusion, the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza demands our immediate attention and action. We cannot stand idly by as innocent children bear the brunt of this senseless violence. Let us join hands in solidarity with the people of Gaza advocating for peace, justice and the protection of children's rights. Our humanity compels us to, for the sake of those children who have suffered enough.

2.21 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Vaz. I begin by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for introducing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time for it. I also note the e-petition that was submitted, and the significant time allocated to it. Although the House is about to rise for February recess, I am glad that we are having this debate, and I am very pleased that Members have made the effort to come along to express their views and opinions this afternoon.

I believe it is important that we do not become desensitised to the appalling suffering taking place in Gaza. There can be no doubt at all about the sincerity of Members who have spoken this afternoon. We know that in these terrible circumstances, more than 27,000 Palestinians have lost their lives as a result of the actions of the IDF. As a number of Members have correctly pointed out, women and children have been the primary casualties in this conflict. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned that 11,500 children have lost their lives, and that 24,000 children have lost one or both parents. As we have heard a couple of Members mention, we have the terrible, unbelievable horror of operations, such as the amputation of limbs, being conducted on children without anaesthetic.

It is important to recognise that the people who have been killed and severely injured are primarily not terrorists or their supporters. The people of Gaza, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) correctly said, are highly educated, resilient and wish to live in peace. The shadow Minister for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), and other members of the shadow Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office team have met with British Palestinian families very recently. Those families raised a number of important and distressing issues with us, including the need for children with

urgent medical needs to be temporarily evacuated from Gaza for surgery. We are pursuing these issues with the Government. If the Minister could give any indication today of what the Government are doing or planning to do on this, it would be welcome.

We are all acutely aware that the only way to resolve this appalling humanitarian crisis is through a sustainable ceasefire. This will allow the return of all hostages and an immediate concerted international effort to take into Gaza the greatest possible amount of humanitarian aid: food, water, fuel and medical supplies. There is a frustratingly limited amount that we, as an Opposition, can do or say to help, but I assure Members that all members of our Front-Bench team are discussing the situation with our counterparts in Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Nations and the United States. Only yesterday, I met the Foreign Minister of Qatar in person; I made it clear to him that the Labour party stands firmly behind those who want to see a ceasefire, an immediate end to the suffering and the achievement of a lasting peace.

As we all know, serious allegations have been made against 12 UNRWA employees. The Government must ensure that they have robust processes in place regarding the use of UK aid. However, it would be wrong if anything were to stand in the way of crucial aid reaching Gaza in the midst of this terrible crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, the shadow International Development Minister, has discussed the issue with her counterpart, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who has confirmed that the next allocation to UNRWA from the United Kingdom is due in the next financial year. There will be a UN review, led by a French former Foreign Minister, and an interim report will be published at the end of March. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) alluded to this; like her, I would be appreciative if the Minister could confirm that there will be no interruption to the flow of UK funding to UNRWA in the next financial year.

There are, of course, other aid agencies working in Gaza. I pay tribute to them and in particular to Medical Aid for Palestinians, an organisation with which I have had a fair bit of contact. They are all doing a tremendous job in the most difficult circumstances; indeed, many of the aid workers have lost their lives. However, UNRWA's role is absolutely central to the humanitarian effort in Gaza and across the entire region. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) made the point that there are 13,000 people working for and in Gaza, and a number of those workers have lost their lives too. Their work is essential, especially when we remember the appalling fact that more people are dying from hunger and thirst in Gaza than from bombs and bullets. Let me be clear: if UNRWA's vital work is disrupted, the consequences for the people of Gaza will be further death and suffering. Again, I ask the Minister to make the Government's position absolutely clear.

The debate has been important, and we have heard a number of heartfelt and moving contributions from Members. I hope that before too long there will be an enduring ceasefire, agreed by all parties, and that the necessary aid will be brought into Gaza and distributed in safety and without conditions to all parts of Gaza. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I look forward to the Minister's reply.

2.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty):

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for leading this important debate. I am also grateful for the sincere and passionate contributions of other right hon. and hon. Members. I am here on behalf of the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). I will try to cover the points that have been raised.

Four months have now passed since Israel suffered the worst terror attack in its history at the hands of Hamas, who still hold more than 130 hostages. Meanwhile, as has movingly been laid out this afternoon, Palestinian civilians are facing a devastating and growing humanitarian crisis inside Gaza. Children in particular are bearing the worst consequences of the conflict, as we have heard. We want to see an end to the fighting in Gaza as soon as possible. An immediate pause is now necessary to get aid in and hostages out, and the UK is engaged in sustained efforts to achieve that and to build towards a lasting solution.

I will start by reflecting briefly on how the current situation in Gaza is affecting children, as has been laid out by many colleagues this afternoon. The number of people killed in Gaza has reportedly surpassed 27,000, and more than 67,000 have been injured, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza. As we have heard, the vast majority are women and children. Many people, including children, are still missing, presumed dead and buried under the rubble.

Of the 1.7 million people who have been displaced, more than half are children. Tens of thousands of those children have been orphaned or separated from their family. Hunger and disease are spreading rapidly, which has been made worse by overcrowded shelters. There are reportedly more than 223,000 cases of acute respiratory infection, to which children are particularly vulnerable, and over 158,000 cases of diarrhoea, more than 50% of which are in children under the age of five, as colleagues have referred to. Many of these children are likely to be malnourished, making the effects of disease more severe. UNICEF reports that all children under five in Gaza—about 335,000 children—are at high risk of severe malnutrition. For children, especially those under two years old, a lack of food and vital nutrients during the developmental stage of life can lead to grave lifelong setbacks.

The healthcare system in Gaza has virtually collapsed. Only 13 of 36 hospitals are even partially functional, and even those are without enough specialised medical staff to manage the scale of the crisis. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) referred to the grave constraints that doctors face. Hospitals simply do not have sufficient medicines or medical supplies.

I turn to the UK's response. We are focused on practical solutions to get more aid into Gaza. I am happy to confirm to the right hon. Member that we have trebled our aid this year for the Occupied Palestinian Territories to £87 million, of which £60 million is for Gaza specifically. We continue to call for an immediate pause to get aid in and hostages out.

Jeremy Corbyn: I understand the figure that the Minister has just given, and I understand that a third is allocated for Gaza, but I would be grateful if he let us

know exactly how that aid will be administered. Who will actually deliver it? How will it get there, given the current problems of getting anyone—even medical workers—into Gaza through the Rafah crossing?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that question and will address it in my remarks.

We have trebled our aid commitment this financial year to the OPTs. There is, as I said, a £60 million uplift for the humanitarian response. We are doing everything we can to get more aid in and to open more crossings.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse quite rightly asked for an update regarding UNRWA. Colleagues will know that we are a long-standing donor. The £35 million that we have given this year is for this financial year and will last until March. But, of course, we are appalled by the allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attack. That is why we are pausing, and that is why a pause has been announced of any future funding, while we review these very concerning allegations. Of course, we remain committed to getting humanitarian aid to people who desperately need it.

In addition to the UK, 16 countries have paused funding temporarily. The pause will be in place until we are satisfied that we have been able properly to review the allegations. A future funding decision will be taken after that point, and the Minister for the middle east will keep colleagues updated as to that decision point.

Apsana Begum: In Europe, as the Minister will be aware, Belgium, Spain, Norway and Ireland—while calling for, and endorsing the need for, a swift and serious investigation into the allegations—have maintained their funding. I want to understand from the Minister what conversations or discussions are being had with counterparts in those countries to understand how they are approaching the situation, as part of the UK's review.

Leo Docherty: That is a very good question. We are talking to all counterparts. On Sunday of last week, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister for the middle east, spoke to the UNRWA commissioner-general, Philippe Lazzarini, who provided an update regarding the UN investigation. We will keep closely in touch with the progress of that investigation, and that will inform our decision. Up until the point at which we are satisfied, the pause will remain in place, but the Minister for the middle east will keep colleagues updated.

In terms of our calls for increased border crossings and access, children need additional food and shelter and the health support that we are providing through our partnerships with all the UN agencies, NGOs and Red Crescent societies. From the £60 million that I mentioned, we have provided specific, targeted support for children through our £5.75 million contribution to UNICEF. Our funding is supporting its work to assist more than 5,800 children with severe malnourishment, as well as providing 853,000 people with emergency child protection services, including the mental health and psychological support that, as we have heard this afternoon, is very badly needed.

We are also a founding member of and a key donor to Education Cannot Wait, the global fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises. The fund is supporting several education interventions in

Gaza. However, its ability to reach children who so desperately need help is, of course, restricted by the very grave security situation.

The Foreign Secretary discussed the urgency of getting significantly more aid into Gaza, to alleviate the desperate situation there, with Prime Minister Netanyahu on 24 January. He reiterated the need for Israel to open more crossing points into Gaza, for Nitzana and Kerem Shalom to be open for longer, and for Israel to support the UN to distribute aid more effectively across the whole of Gaza.

Apsana Begum: On the crossings and the ability of aid to reach the places where it is needed, agencies such as Oxfam have reported to me that they are experiencing delays in aid actually getting through, because of the excessive checks at the crossings. Some trucks have been checked up to eight times at the Kerem Shalom crossing.

The agencies have also raised with me a lack of clarity about which items are able to pass through. The Minister may be aware of Israel's dual-use policy, which strictly controls which items may or may not enter Gaza. For example, people are being told that they are not allowed through with olives with stones; only pitted olives are allowed. What discussions have there been with the Minister's counterparts in Israel on the dual-use policy?

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful for those questions. We have made these specific points to our Israeli counterparts. We believe that there are 10 steps that they should be taking to increase the flow of aid. Primarily, of course, we need a humanitarian pause to allow humanitarian agencies and Gazans to operate more safely right across Gaza. We need to ensure effective systems to guarantee the safety of aid convoys, humanitarian operations and IDP returns and facilitate access. We need to ensure that the UN has the people, the vehicles, the equipment and the fuel to distribute aid safely across Gaza once it is inside Gaza. That includes the issuing of visas.

We need to extend the opening hours and the capacity of the Nitzana screening facility and Kerem Shalom checkpoint so that more trucks, aid and fuel can enter Gaza. It needs to be open seven days a week, not just five. We need to remove restrictions in order to ensure greater consistency on the goods allowed in, as the hon. Lady referred to. We need unencumbered access to aid coming in from Jordan. The Israelis need to open Ashdod port as a route for aid to reach Gaza. The Israelis need to open the Erez crossing to allow direct access to north Gaza. And, of course, there needs to be a restitution of water, fuel and electricity connections. We continue to make these points to our Israeli interlocutors.

The Foreign Secretary also announced work with Qatar to get more aid into Gaza. Our joint consignment containing 17 tonnes of family-size tents was flown in last Thursday. Last month, RFA Lyme Bay delivered 87 tonnes of aid into Port Said. Crucially, we are supporting the United Nations World Food Programme to deliver a new humanitarian land corridor from Jordan into Gaza, which has already delivered more than 1,000 tonnes of aid. It is vital that we sustain this support and go further.

We are clear that Israel must take steps, working with other partners including the UN and Egypt, to significantly increase the flow of aid, including by allowing prolonged humanitarian pauses, opening more routes into Gaza and restoring and sustaining water, fuel and electricity. Above all, the best way to address the humanitarian

situation is by bringing an end to the fighting as soon as possible, which is exactly the point that right hon. and hon. Members have made this afternoon.

The Foreign Secretary was in the region last week to urge de-escalation and build towards a sustainable and permanent ceasefire without a return to the fighting. We have identified five steps to allow that to happen—first, the release of all Israeli hostages; secondly, the formation of a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza, accompanied by an international support package; thirdly, removing Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel; fourthly, Hamas no longer being in charge of Gaza; and fifthly, a political horizon that provides a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution. We will continue to do all we can diplomatically to push this agenda forward in order to save lives, quite frankly.

Andy Slaughter: I doubt that there is anybody here who does not fully agree with those five points, beginning with the release of the hostages; it is indefensible that they should continue to be held. Realistically, however, given the nature of the Netanyahu Government, does the Minister expect those things, including looking forward to a new peace process, to happen before there is a sustained ceasefire?

Leo Docherty: Despite the difficulties, there will come a point at which a humanitarian pause can lead to a ceasefire if international assurances are given, if the contents of the five-point peace plan are catered to and if there is confidence on both sides. As difficult as it may seem to imagine that now, we believe that it could be possible to get to a ceasefire, and a horizon of statehood would be a necessary component of that.

As has been discussed this afternoon, it is clear that children are the worst-hit by this conflict. Even though too much of the humanitarian relief that children need is not getting into or across Gaza, UK aid is saving children's lives and we are doing everything we can to get more of it into Gaza. We are working hard to generate momentum towards a permanent peace, as difficult as it may seem. That is the only way we can give the children and the people of Gaza hope for the future and a better life.

2.43 pm

Apsana Begum: I thank the Backbench Business Committee again for enabling this debate. I applied for it before the Government's decision to pause the UNRWA funding; none the less, colleagues' participation in it has been important and timely for that reason.

I emphasise again that all children, Israeli and Palestinian, should be cherished. We need aid to be made available and distributed so that children in Gaza get the food, health-care, shelter and water that they so desperately need. We need clarity about the situation of any remaining Israeli children who are held captive, and we need all hostages to be released. As many Members have said today and have been saying for some time, only an immediate and permanent ceasefire can end the suffering of children affected by all these decisions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered humanitarian aid and children in Gaza.

2.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 February 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Trade Measures: Support for Ukraine

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Following Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine, in May 2022 the UK led the world by being the first country to remove all remaining tariffs under our free trade agreement with Ukraine. This approach was followed by the EU and other partners around the world. The current tariff liberalisation runs until 31 March 2024.

Russia's invasion has impaired Ukraine's ability to export goods and disrupted their usual supply chains and transport routes. It was important that the UK acted when it did to liberalise remaining tariffs and provide much needed economic support to Ukraine. As was intended, Ukrainian businesses have benefited from the liberalisation, with goods such as cereal grains and poultry benefiting from tariff free trade.

Ukraine continues to defend itself against Russian aggression, while also rebuilding key infrastructure destroyed during the war. Tariff liberalisation forms an important part of UK Government's overall support, with that support being put on an even longer-term footing. Therefore, the Government have agreed to extend tariff liberalisation for an additional five years until March 2029 on all goods, with the exception of eggs and poultry which will be extended for two years until March 2026. This new agreement means the UK continues to lead the world in our trade liberalisation support for Ukraine, but also takes a more cautious approach to poultry and eggs, following feedback from those sectors.

The Government will now take the necessary steps to extend the liberalisation measures in the UK's domestic legislation by completing the parliamentary scrutiny process for the new agreement and laying the required statutory instrument to implement it. Both the UK and Ukraine will continue to review the operation of the agreement and monitor trade flows. The agreement extends to the whole of the United Kingdom and the Crown dependencies.

As the Prime Minister made clear in his most recent visit to Ukraine, the United Kingdom will continue to do everything in its power to support Ukraine's fight against this brutal invasion, for as long as is needed.

[HCWS252]

Trade Negotiations: Republic of Korea

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The first round of United Kingdom-Republic of Korea (RoK) free trade agreement negotiations took place during the week commencing 22 January. A delegation of officials undertook technical discussions in person in Seoul with some talks taking place virtually. This follows a successful state visit in November 2023, which saw negotiations launched by the Secretary of State and the Korean Minister

for Trade, Industry and Energy Bang Moon Kyu, as part of a wider business forum event held at Mansion House.

This round was an opportunity to build on the scoping conversations we had held prior to launch and to explore a variety of further areas with the RoK. Overall, these conversations demonstrated our shared ambition to secure an enhanced deal to create new opportunities for business in the UK and the RoK. During the first round, there were discussions across 17 policy areas over 22 sessions.

Our existing agreement came into effect in 2021 and enabled trade continuity between the UK and the RoK following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It replicates the provisions outlined in the 2011 EU-RoK free trade agreement. Our trade relationship with the RoK has grown substantially since 2011, from £7.4 billion to £18.3 billion in 2022. With strong utilisation of the existing agreement, ongoing growth in bilateral trade, and an ever-strengthening broader strategic relationship, this negotiation represents an opportunity to ensure that a critical set of trading arrangements are secured and optimised for the next phase of UK-RoK relations; to allow more UK businesses to fully realise the opportunities of the RoK market; and to maximise the use of modern trading tools, while protecting businesses and consumers from current and future global pressures.

The second round of negotiations is due to take place in March 2024.

His Majesty's Government remain clear that any deal will be in the best interests of the British people and the economy. We will not compromise on our high environmental and labour protections, public health, animal welfare and food standards, and we will maintain our right to regulate in the public interest. We are also clear that during these negotiations, the NHS and the services it provides are not on the table.

HM Government will keep Parliament updated as negotiations progress.

[HCWS253]

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): On 18 December 2023, I updated the House that the Government would appoint a group of clinical, legal and social care experts to advise the Cabinet Office on detailed technical considerations of responding to the infected blood inquiry's recommendations on compensation.

Further to my December update, I am today pleased to announce the appointment of Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery as chair of this expert group. Sir Jonathan will lead the expert group to provide me, the responsible Minister for the Government response to the infected blood inquiry, with technical advice on compensation.

Both my right hon. friend Earl Howe GBE and I have met separately with Sir Jonathan to discuss the technical advice the expert group will provide and are reassured that the group is working as quickly as possible to advise the Government in responding to the inquiry's recommendations following the publication of the final report.

Sir Jonathan is an experienced healthcare law scholar who has played a leading role in UK public bioethics for many years, having previously chaired the Human Genetics Commission (2009-12), the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2012-17) and the Health Research Authority (2012-19). Sir Jonathan is currently the chair of the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and professor of healthcare law at University College London. Sir Jonathan received a knighthood in 2019 for his services to bioethics and healthcare law.

Ensuring the victims of the infected blood scandal receive the justice and recognition they deserve remains my top priority and I look forward to working with Sir Jonathan and the expert advisory group to ensure that the Government have the relevant expertise to make informed choices in responding to the inquiry's recommendations on compensation.

[HCWS254]

TREASURY

Home Responsibilities Protection: Corrective Exercise

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): The pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), and I can now announce that HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has started to write to people whose national insurance records may be affected by some missing periods of home responsibilities protection, inviting them to apply to fill potential gaps and ensure that they receive the state pension entitlement they are due.

Home responsibilities protection was a scheme that ran between 6 April 1978 and 5 April 2010 which reduced the number of qualifying years of national insurance contributions a person with caring responsibilities needed to receive the full basic state pension.

The Government reported the findings of our investigations into some missing historical periods of home responsibilities protection in some individuals' records, and the associated impact on state pension awards, in the Department for Work and Pensions annual report and accounts 2022-23 (HC 1455). The main cause of the issue was that NI numbers were not always recorded when customers claimed child benefit before 2000. The Government have estimated that around 210,000 individuals may have been affected by missing periods of home responsibilities protection.

HMRC and DWP are working together to correct cases as quickly as possible. HMRC started contacting potentially impacted customers from September 2023, prioritising those above state pension age. They aim to identify and contact the majority of individuals who may have been affected over the next 18 months so that those eligible receive any arrears payments as quickly as possible.

To correct this issue, potentially impacted customers will be invited to check their eligibility and make an application to HMRC for home responsibilities protection. To help individuals determine their eligibility, a self-identification tool is available on www.gov.uk. Where an application is successful, those with a state pension impact will have their award corrected and any arrears paid. HMRC and DWP will also trigger a wider

communications campaign working with key stakeholders and representative bodies to ensure that all those who may be eligible are aware of this.

Before making an application, people can learn more about home responsibilities protection, check the eligibility criteria and find the application form online at www.gov.uk/home-responsibilities-protection-hrp/eligibility. Customers under state pension age can check their national insurance and state pension forecasts online at www.gov.uk/check-state-pension.

[HCWS255]

EDUCATION

Schools and Colleges Condition Update

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This update follows from my oral and written ministerial statements to the House in September, October and December 2023.

There are over 22,000 schools and colleges in England and the vast majority are unaffected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. A final list of schools and colleges with confirmed cases of RAAC in England has been published today. There are 234 education settings, around 1%, with confirmed RAAC in some areas of their buildings.

Thanks to the hard work of school and college leaders, all schools and colleges with confirmed RAAC are providing full-time face-to-face education for all pupils.

The Government are funding the removal of RAAC present in schools and colleges either through grants, or through the school rebuilding programme. The longer-term requirements of each school or college will vary depending on the extent of the issue and nature and design of the buildings. Permanently removing RAAC may involve refurbishment of existing buildings or rebuilding affected buildings.

Today we have confirmed to schools and colleges how we will fund them to remove RAAC permanently. One hundred and nineteen schools are being included within the school rebuilding programme where works to remove RAAC are more extensive or complex. One hundred and ten schools and colleges will receive grant funding where works will typically be smaller in scale. Five schools and colleges have alternative arrangements in place, for example the building will not be part of the school or college estate over the longer term.

The Department for Education's RAAC identification programme is complete, and the questionnaire has closed. All responsible bodies for schools and colleges with blocks built in the target era have submitted responses to the questionnaire.

Any school or college that advised us its suspects it might have RAAC has had a survey to confirm if RAAC is present. Other than the 234 education settings, the surveys found no evidence of RAAC. A small number of schools and colleges are carrying out additional checks for further assurance in some spaces. We are working with responsible bodies to support them to complete these additional checks as quickly as possible. As these final checks are completed, we expect the number of further cases to be very low. This has been the case over the last two months, when only three cases have been identified.

Our priority will always be to ensure the safety of pupils and staff, which is why we took a cautious approach for schools and colleges. Although the technical advice does not recommend removal in all cases where it is present, we have taken a precautionary approach for the education estate in England to remove RAAC.

[HCWS256]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fire and Rescue Minimum Service Levels

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

The Government are today publishing our response to a recent public consultation on establishing minimum service levels on strike days for fire and rescue services. At the same time, the Government are laying regulations before Parliament setting out the services which should be provided on a strike day, together with the level of service to be provided.

The services that are provided by fire and rescue authorities are critical to the safety of the public, protection of property and the environment. It is therefore vital that these services are available to the public during strike action. We believe that the prescribed minimum service level balances the ability of workers to strike with the needs of the public to access these crucial services during strike periods.

Minimum service levels exist in a range of countries globally. The International Labour Organisation (an agency of the United Nations) recognises that this is justifiable for services where their interruption would endanger citizens' lives, personal safety or health. Disruption to fire and rescue services puts lives at immediate risk.

The regulations address the uncertainty of relying on voluntary agreements with unions and arrangements for military or private contractors to provide firefighting

capabilities by giving employers the power to issue work notices. This will increase public confidence in the service and better protect public safety during periods of industrial action.

All fire and rescue authorities (FRAs) in England will be subject to these regulations.

Under the regulations, the services included are control rooms, emergency incident response and fire safety. This will ensure that an FRA is able to answer all emergency calls and deploy suitable vehicles and equipment to respond to emergencies, and that serious fire safety issues can be managed while strikes are taking place. This may include deploying trained staff to crew national resilience assets, should they be required. This will ensure that the activities carried out on a strike day are those that are essential to public safety, and that they are prioritised as such.

On 20 July 2023, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 received Royal Assent. The Act sets out the powers and processes required to deliver minimum service levels, beginning with a power for the Secretary of State to make regulations regarding which services should be in scope for minimum service levels, and the level of service which must be provided on a strike day. The Act also sets out that before any such regulations are made, the Secretary of State must consult with such persons as they consider appropriate. The Secretary of State for the Home Department held a public consultation for the fire and rescue sector between 9 February and 11 May 2023.

A copy of the consultation response, equality impact assessment and economic impact assessment will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The consultation response has been published on www.gov.uk. The Government wish to thank everybody who took the time to provide feedback as part of the consultation process.

[HCWS257]

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 8 February 2024

EDUCATION

School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill

The following is an extract from the Second Reading debate on the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill on Friday 2 February 2024.

Damian Hinds: We have launched 32 attendance hubs, to reach more than 1 million pupils. And **we have expanded** our attendance mentor pilot, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) rightly mentioned, to reach 15 priority education investment areas.

[Official Report, 2 February 2024, Vol. 744, c. 1175.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds):

An error has been identified in my speech on Second Reading of the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill.

The correct information should have been:

Damian Hinds: We have launched 32 attendance hubs, to reach more than 1 million pupils. And **we will be expanding** our attendance mentor pilot, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) rightly mentioned, to reach 15 priority education investment areas.

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Education questions on 29 January 2024:

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Educational psychologists are enormously important. What progress are the Government making on their current recruitment drive to increase their number?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a highly competitive training scheme. Between 2017 and 2019 the Department filled all 160 of its funded training places per year, and since 2020 it has filled all 200 of the funded places each year. We have now committed to training a further 400 educational psychologists.

[Official Report, 29 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 605.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston):

An error has been identified in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin) during Education questions. My response should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a highly competitive training scheme. **In 2018 and 2019** the Department filled all 160 of its funded training places per year, and since 2020 it has filled all 200 of the funded places each year. We have now committed to training a further 400 educational psychologists.

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