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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 30 April 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Deputy Foreign Secretary was asked—

Blue Belt Programme

1. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of the blue belt programme on ocean health. [902562]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The blue belt programme supports the protection and sustainable management of 4.3 million sq km of ocean around Britain's overseas territories.

Dr Evans: The blue belt programme, directly funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, is a fantastic way not only to help with climate change but to improve our environment. One of the biggest threats to oceans is plastics, so will the Government consider strengthening the UN global plastics treaty in the upcoming negotiations?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is interesting to note that 85% of plastic pollution in the Pacific and Indian oceans comes from just six rivers, and therefore an international treaty really matters. The point he makes is a good one, and it is at the centre of negotiations, which the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), was talking about last week in Ottawa.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The Deputy Foreign Secretary will be aware that over 90% of the UK's biodiversity is within the overseas territories. I was privileged last summer to visit St Helena in the Atlantic ocean, where I was amazed by the natural biodiversity both on the island and in the seas around it. What more help are the British Government giving to the overseas territories Governments to ensure that their biodiversity can be enhanced and maintained?

Mr Mitchell: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has had a chance to visit St Helena—as have I in the past. It is one of the most remarkable places on Earth. On the issue of cleaning up the ocean and plastics, I can tell him that the UK is a founding member of the high ambition coalition to end plastic pollution, which is a group of 60 countries whose central aim is to stop

plastic flowing into the environment by 2040. The overseas territories are not suppliers of plastic but they are receivers of a lot of it, and that is why this is so important.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The recent Environmental Audit Committee reports—on the Arctic and the current one on the Antarctic, both of which I chair—have called attention to the excellent blue belt programme and how very important it is in the Arctic and the Southern ocean. One of our recommendations was that the programme would work properly only if all the Ministers responsible for the Arctic in different Departments got together on a reasonably regular basis to discuss it. Can the Deputy Foreign Secretary please advise on whether that committee has met or what plans he has to call the meeting?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am advised that the meeting is, I think, today.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Many of my constituents have written to me concerned that the UK is delaying its ratification of the global ocean treaty, which could limit human activity in what would be known as sanctuary areas in order to protect valuable marine life. Has a Minister made an assessment of how that could work with the blue belt programme to ensure that our overseas territories have the highest possible protection for their water and their biodiversity?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The Government are extremely well joined up on that—I made the point earlier about the DEFRA Minister working closely with the Foreign Office on these matters—so I think she can reassure her constituents that that matter is very much in hand.

Middle East: UN Security Council

2. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What recent steps he has taken through the UN Security Council to support progress towards a sustainable peace in the middle east. [902563]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The UK played a leading role in securing the passage of Security Council resolutions 2728 and 2720, which set out the urgent demand for expanded humanitarian access.

Stephen Hammond: The way to a sustainable peace, as my right hon. Friend says, is through humanitarian access. Could he please confirm what the UK Government are doing to ensure the full funding of UNRWA again, and what they will do to stop the Hamas terrorist group affecting the supply of aid to Palestinian citizens?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right about the importance of aid getting in, and UNRWA is a critical organisation in achieving that. He will know that we have had a chance to look at the Colonna report, and I spoke about this matter with the UN Secretary-General yesterday when I was in New York. We are waiting for the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, which we expect to hear about soon, and we will then

reach our conclusions on the best way of getting aid into Gaza. My hon. Friend may rest assured that we are doing everything we can to ensure that aid gets in.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Next Sunday will mark 100 days since the International Court of Justice warned of a genocide in Gaza, yet the Israeli military continues to ignore the legally binding orders of the world's highest court, continues to bomb Gaza indiscriminately and continues to block vital humanitarian aid, all while the UK stands by and lets the right-wing Netanyahu Cabinet blatantly undermine the court's legitimacy.

Can the Minister explain to me just what blatantly disregarding international courts and openly violating UN ceasefire resolutions means for the rules-based order he claims to uphold, because to me, my constituents, the Palestinians and countless persecuted groups across the world, frankly these rules are now not worth the paper they are written on?

Mr Mitchell: What the hon. Gentleman says—the way he reflects on what the ICJ said—is not accurate. The ICJ called for hostage release, for more aid into Gaza and for Israel not to commit acts that violate the rights of Palestinians. The Government agree with those three points.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary take the message back to his boss that the insertion of British troops on the ground in Gaza will simply play into the hands of those who wish to divert attention further away from the existential conflict between Russia and Ukraine? Does he share my sadness that there is not a single mention of Ukraine in any of the questions on today's Order Paper?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend will know that the Government are absolutely committed to doing everything we can to help Ukraine. He will have seen the Prime Minister's announcement last week on the increase in defence spending, and where that announcement was made.

I very much hope that my right hon. Friend will not draw any conclusions from today's Order Paper, but note specifically this Government's driving ambition to ensure that Ukraine is successful in beating back the Russians.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The creation of a sustainable peace in the middle east will require the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. The Deputy Foreign Secretary will know that Prime Minister Netanyahu is now implacably opposed to the creation of such a state, so what will the UK do to oblige Israel to comply with the international peace process? Does he think a sustainable peace is possible so long as Mr Netanyahu remains in power?

Mr Mitchell: Many voices are heard within Israel, but the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the predominant view of the region, of the United Nations and of the regional powers, the great powers and the British Government is that a two-state solution is required, with both Palestine and Israel living behind secure borders in peace and safety.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): More than 30,000 Palestinians are dead, more than 100 Israeli hostages are still unaccounted for and Gaza is facing famine. The war must end now with an immediate ceasefire. That needs both sides to agree. It was Hamas, not Israel, who rejected the last internationally brokered ceasefire deal. Now a new offer is on the table, and Hamas now have the power to stop the fighting. Does the Minister agree that Hamas should accept this deal and avert a catastrophic continuation of this war?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and, although these negotiations are fluid at the moment, he is right to say that Hamas should accept the deal that has been put on the table.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister knows that securing a sustainable peace will require a massive aid and rebuilding programme, in which UNRWA will have, and must have, a crucial part to play. Indeed, he has previously acknowledged that UNRWA has a vital role to play in providing aid and services in Gaza. Why, then, having assured this House that he will come to a decision on the future of UNRWA's funding when he received Catherine Colonna's interim report, has he sat on that report for 10 days and said absolutely nothing about restoring funding? He now seems to be setting us up for even further delay. It is simply not good enough. Will he now tell us when this Government will make a decision on UNRWA's funding?

Mr Mitchell: We have been very clear that we are waiting for not one but two reports. As I say, I discussed this matter yesterday with the UN Secretary-General. We know very well, as the hon. Gentleman does, that the assets UNRWA has in terms of logistics, vehicles, warehouses and so forth, are essential for the supply of humanitarian relief within Gaza. We are considering the matter carefully. He will also know that Britain is not currently in deficit in its funding; we are fully funded at this point for UNRWA. It has also received additional resources, including private resources as well as new Governments coming in to support it. We will consider carefully both those two reports in full and then make a decision, and I will come back to the House to inform it when that decision is reached.

Persecution of Christians

3. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the implications for his policies of the Open Doors report entitled "World Watch List 2024".

[902564]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The report provides a sobering account of the extreme difficulties faced by many Christians around the world, noting that more than 365 million Christians face persecution each year. As my hon. Friend knows, freedom of religion or belief is a priority for the UK, and we will continue to recognise and seek to address issues of persecution of Christians globally.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) on the Front Bench.

The “World Watch List 2024” laid bare the significant persecution that Christians face across the world and the increasing pressure on churches in China. During recent ministerial visits, what representations were made on this issue to the Chinese Government, alongside highlighting other aspects of their dreadful human rights record?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has always been a staunch advocate not only for the churches but for all faith groups in his constituency. It is unacceptable that Christians are persecuted simply for practising their religion. He highlights China in particular, and we remain deeply concerned about the persecution there of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Falun Gong practitioners. He knows that I was sanctioned by China for raising the issue of the persecution of the Uyghur Muslims. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is the Asia Minister, visited China last week, where she made clear our concerns about its human rights violations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that answer. Open Doors produces the World Watch List reports and we are deeply indebted to it for what it does. Pakistan continues to cause concern for me and many others; there are Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Christians who cannot have the freedom of human rights and are persecuted across all of Pakistan. How can we exert greater influence to effect change in Pakistan and make it better for people when it comes to worshipping their God as they so wish to do?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman is already applying a lot of pressure through his chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, which took forward a Bill just last week. My co-Minister Lord Ahmad met Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, in March to discuss the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and the former Foreign Secretary has raised the issue of the persecution of religious communities, including recent attacks against the Christian community in the Punjab. Those conversations will continue, and the fact that we have committed to continuing the role of the freedom of religion or belief envoy will provide us with the authority to do that.

Illegal Migration: International Co-operation

4. **Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con):** What diplomatic steps he is taking to strengthen international co-operation on tackling illegal migration. [902565]

5. **Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con):** What diplomatic steps he is taking to strengthen international co-operation on tackling illegal migration. [902566]

13. **Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con):** What diplomatic steps he is taking to strengthen international co-operation on tackling illegal migration. [902575]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Tackling irregular migration is a priority for Foreign Office engagement across our overseas networks, through international forums, including at the G7 and European Political Community, and bilaterally.

Nick Fletcher: Given the success of the agreement with Albania, which has considerably reduced the number of illegal immigrants crossing by small boats, does the Minister believe that more of these agreements are necessary, alongside our Rwanda policy?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a good point. He will have seen that on 17 April we signed an agreement with Vietnam to tackle irregular migration and reduce channel crossing casualties. The numbers of Vietnamese people coming across the channel has been one of the fastest rising groups in recent months.

Chris Clarkson: Recently, the Irish Tánaiste stated that he believed the increase in irregular migration to the Republic of Ireland was a direct result of the deterrent effect of our Rwanda policy. The Irish Government have since made moves to try to remove those illegal migrants back to the UK. What conversations has my right hon. Friend had with EU counterparts and Home Office colleagues about ensuring there is no returns policy with the EU unless a reciprocal agreement is made?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a very good point: what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. The movement of asylum seekers from the UK to the southern Irish Republic would suggest that the Rwanda agreement is already having the deterrent effect we are seeking.

Giles Watling: I have been saying for some time in this place, and many other places, that a combined effort between French and English forces would be very useful on the ground in France to stop the boats from even getting to the beaches in the first place. We have the technology and we can destroy the boats; I do not see why we do not do that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and I wish to visit Calais to meet the mayor to discuss that idea. Will my right hon. Friend join us?

Mr Mitchell: That is an unbelievably tempting invitation from my hon. Friend. Recently, we have seen a 120% increase in French troops on the ground and a 36% reduction in the number of migrants coming across compared with last year, so French troops on the ground are delivering what is required, at least in part.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Irish Republic’s Government and their Justice Minister indicated that they believe that up to 80% or more of those who are illegally in the Republic of Ireland are coming across the land border, but that appears to have been a purely subjective figure. Has the Minister been able to establish the veracity, or otherwise, of such an exceptionally high figure, which the Justice Minister has claimed to be the case?

Mr Mitchell: We have not because, as the hon. Gentleman will understand, that is a southern Irish Government responsibility. No doubt the southern Irish Government will be pressed on this matter and will deliver an answer in due course.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On one hand, the Minister says he wants to improve international co-operation on tackling illegal migration, but on the other hand he says the Government are not willing to come to an agreement with the Government of Ireland or any other European countries on returns of asylum seekers.

Mr Mitchell: I did not say anything of the sort, Mr Speaker. We are working together in numerous international fora, including the Global Refugee Forum, the G7, the UN General Assembly and the European Political Community summit, to tackle this matter upstream. Working upstream and working with others is critical to resolving this deeply disturbing problem.

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

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): The only way to stop boats at sea and illegal migration is through structured co-operation with our neighbours and internationally. I welcome the signing on 23 February of the agreement between the UK and EU's Frontex border protection service, but is it properly funded and what mechanisms are in place to review that funding as it evolves? Surely the Minister must agree with me that the best way to tackle illegal migration is to fund safe and legal routes properly. What progress is he making on a comprehensive deal to that end with our EU friends, including Ireland?

Mr Mitchell: We need to tackle this issue, as I think the hon. Gentleman is implying, on a series of different fronts. We are working upstream, as the deal with Vietnam demonstrates. Our Prime Minister has substantially repaired the relationship with France. The Calais Group has met the UK-France customs partnership. We work closely with Frontex. There are far more officials now in Britain dealing with these cases. As the Prime Minister has made clear, once this matter has been resolved, he is going to look at bringing in safe and legal routes from elsewhere.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

6. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [902567]

9. **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help get more aid into Gaza. [902570]

14. **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. [902576]

20. **Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [902583]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We have trebled our aid commitment in the past year and we are doing all we can to get more aid to Gaza by land, air and sea.

Mohammad Yasin: The Colonna review was given no evidence to back up claims by the Israeli Government that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks. Other countries have already restored funding to the aid agency, so it can continue its work feeding

tens of thousands of people who are starving in Gaza, including innocent babies who are dying without milk. Will the Minister commit to refunding today? Or will he continue to risk UK complicity in using famine as a weapon of war?

Mr Mitchell: I have set out the process by which we will judge how and when to restore funding to UNRWA, but the situation has improved in recent weeks. The hon. Member will have seen that fuel for bakeries has been restored. We are pressing for the activation of the water pipeline and, over the past week, we have been averaging more than 200 trucks each day. Progress has been made, but there needs to be a lot more progress, and Britain will continue to press for it.

Ian Levy: When Putin invaded Ukraine, the people of Blyth, Cramlington and Seaton Valley came together and generously gave what they could spare. With help from local companies, such as Moody Logistics and Storage in Cramlington, we were able to ensure that aid reached those who had lost their homes and their belongings. What plans does my right hon. Friend's Department have in place to get aid from the UK to Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute to the good people of Blyth, Cramlington and Seaton Valley for their generosity, and to my hon. Friend for helping to channel that goodwill so constructively. His constituents will want to support reputable non-governmental organisations and charities working to support humanitarian relief in Gaza.

Yasmin Qureshi: Israel has forced more than 1 million Palestinians to flee to Rafah, claiming it to be a safe zone, yet for months the Israeli military have been bombing Palestinians there relentlessly and, according to the UN, killing mostly women and children. Now it is planning a ground invasion that will lead to carnage. Does the Minister agree that President Biden could stop this with one phone call, and will he press him to do so?

Mr Mitchell: President Biden has been very heavily engaged in this matter. As the hon. Member knows, both the American and British Governments have pressed Israel not to launch an all-out assault on Rafah for the reasons that she set out. The shadow Foreign Secretary rightly said that he hopes that Hamas will accept the current deal on the table, and I agree with him.

Naz Shah: An Israel ground invasion in Rafah is probable within days, leading to 1.5 million displaced Palestinians with no safe place to shelter. Children in Gaza have been starved at the fastest rate that the world has ever seen, and Members across the House, including myself, have come here time and again asking for something to be done in terms of delivering aid and pushing for a ceasefire. Time and again, the Minister says that we are trying, trying, trying, but clearly trying is not working. What will the Government do to move the dial and stop children dying?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member will have seen the 6 April maritime announcement and she will know that Britain is ramping up the delivery of aid by land, sea and air. She will, I hope, be aware that we have a naval ship standing by with £9.7 million of aid and logistics equipment. There have also been 10 air drops already

from the Royal Air Force; an 11th one is expected today. Therefore, the British Government are doing everything they possibly can to move the dial, as she requests.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the Minister will know, it is not only Governments and NGOs supporting Palestinians across Israel, the west bank and Gaza, but a lot of charities. I have been contacted by one such charity, ABCD, which operates a centre for disabled Palestinian children in the Nur Shams refugee camp. It tells me that its centre has been raided and destroyed not once, but several times, by the Israeli army—not by settlers. What more can the Government do to protect the facilities and personnel of British charities operating in the Palestinian territories?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend will know that we do everything that we can in that respect, but if he is able to give me some specific details about that particular charity and what has befallen it, I will look into it.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Prime Minister has identified getting aid in and getting hostages out as two key priorities for the UK Government. Israel is facilitating aid getting into Gaza by air, land and sea, with 468 trucks entering the area in a single day. We are seeing real progress on aid; when will we see progress on hostages, too?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to see breathing space so that we can get the hostages out and more aid in; in spite of what she says, the aid that is getting in at the moment is not sufficient. That is precisely the policy of the British Government, and we will continue to pursue it with all vigour.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Given that the Colonna report makes clear that donors should have confidence in UNRWA and that Australia, France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Japan and Denmark have all restored funding, and with Gaza facing famine, I ask the Deputy Foreign Secretary again: when will the Government do what Labour has called for and restore full funding to UNRWA?

Mr Mitchell: As I have set out, we are looking at all those reports and we will make a decision in our own time. Britain is not falling short in that respect, because we are currently fully funded on all the earlier commitments we made. We will look at the Office of Internal Oversight Services report and the UNRWA reaction to it. We are aware of non-traditional donors and private donations coming in, and UNRWA is fully funded until the end of May. When we reach our conclusion, I will be sure to inform the House of it.

Strategic Export Licences: Israel

7. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): If the Government will revoke strategic export licences to Israel. [902568]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): As required by the UK's robust arms export control regime, the Foreign Secretary has reviewed the most recent advice about the situation in Gaza and Israel's

conduct of its military campaign. The British position on export licences is unchanged, but we will keep that position under review.

Owen Thompson: Given that the very purpose of the UK's arms export licence criteria is to apply a precautionary principle to arms sales to prevent them from fuelling future atrocities, and given the extensive evidence of potential war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law by Israel in Gaza, surely it is clear that the UK export licensing system is not working. Does the Minister agree with me and the countless Midlothian constituents who have been in touch with me that the Government should now suspend the transfer of arms to Israel in order to prevent future atrocities, and does he agree that UK Government policy allows for that decision to be made at the discretion of Ministers, outside the failed export licensing system?

Mr Mitchell: Our position on the arms embargo is consistent with most of our like-minded partners, who have not taken any decision to suspend existing arms export licences to Israel. It would be an odd decision for us to take when we have used our own military weaponry to defend Israel from the attacks by Iran.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Exports are linked to law, of course, and the White House said yesterday that the International Criminal Court does not have jurisdiction over Israel because, rather like the USA, it is not a signatory to the statute of Rome, which set up the Court. More than three years ago the then British Prime Minister wrote an open letter saying that the UK does not accept that the ICC has jurisdiction, again because of the statute of Rome and the absence of sovereignty over the situation in the region. Can the Deputy Foreign Secretary confirm that that is still the position of His Majesty's Government?

Mr Mitchell: I can tell my right hon. and learned Friend that we do not think that the ICC has that jurisdiction, as was set out in the letter to which he referred, but it is a matter for the ICC ultimately to reach a determination on that.

British Embassy: Port-au-Prince

8. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the welfare of staff in the British embassy in Port-au-Prince. [902569]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The safety of our staff is paramount, and a decision was taken in November 2019 to move the last UK base staff member in Haiti to the neighbouring Dominican Republic. The security situation since has not allowed us to consider returning permanently. We have two country-based staff members in Haiti's capital, who we are in constant contact with. They are working from home and there are no specific threats to them based on them working for the UK.

Fabian Hamilton: When Haiti's transitional council was sworn in last week, the location of the ceremony had to be changed owing to gunfire erupting from nearby criminal gang outposts—a stark reminder that

Haiti is a country far from political legitimacy. What steps are the Government taking to assist the transitional council in order to ensure that a new President is democratically elected in 2026 and that we do not see them targeted with violence in the meantime?

David Rutley: We are working closely with international partners, including the United States, Canada and, very importantly, CARICOM—the Caribbean

Community—and of course we are also working incredibly hard to ensure that we provide every support we can for the multinational security support mission. The Foreign Secretary has already pledged funds for our support for that important mission.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome the UK's £5 million commitment towards the deployment of the multinational security support mission in Haiti. Will my hon. Friend tell the House a little more about how that mission is being deployed, and can he expand on the discussions that he has had with our friends in the Dominican Republic about their security on the border with Haiti?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question about the Dominican Republic. I was there at the end of March and met President Abinader. We talked about the situation and the importance of the MSS. Clearly, the Kenyans will need to decide how they move forward, but as has been said, the putting in place of the transitional presidential council was an important moment.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Half of Haiti's population is starving, violence is rife, dead bodies lie forgotten on the street. For too long this crisis has been ignored. As the Minister knows, that grave situation risks also destabilising the wider Caribbean region, including our overseas territories, with the Turks and Caicos islands less than 200 miles away. Can the Minister confirm the UK's donation to the UN fund—the Government missed that out of their statement—and lay out what other diplomatic support the Government are offering to address the crisis?

David Rutley: Most importantly, beyond the other things that I have mentioned, we are working closely with the UN Security Council, which is a vital forum here, and we continue to work with like-minded countries to help with the establishment of the MSS. The hon. Lady rightly highlights the importance of humanitarian support. We are one of the major donors to the UN central emergency response fund, and there has been an authorisation of disbursement of \$12 million to support those affected.

Conflict in Gaza: Iran

10. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of Iran's role in the conflict in Gaza. [902571]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Iran's support for proscribed groups operating in Gaza, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, compromises our efforts towards a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza.

Antony Higginbotham: Iran continues to operate in violation of the joint comprehensive plan of action. Its nuclear programme is way beyond anything needed for purely peaceful processes. However, it does not end there: Iran is threatening journalists on UK streets, and its proxies in Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis continue to inflict tragedy on the region. What is my right hon. Friend's assessment of whether the JCPOA is still fit for purpose?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Alongside international partners, we are prepared to use all options available to tackle the difficulties that he describes, including triggering the UN snapback and ending the JCPOA if necessary.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As probably the only Member who has actually lived and worked in Gaza, I must say that I have been heartbroken over the past six months by what I am hearing from friends and colleagues there about the almost total destruction of the healthcare system and the impact of widespread starvation on their patients. With the UK having defunded the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, still supplying arms to Israel, and often defending Netanyahu's policies, is the Minister not anxious that the UK Government are undermining international law itself?

Mr Mitchell: No. The hon. Lady will have seen how, in respect of UN Security Council resolutions 2720 and 2728, Britain's diplomacy worked to move people into a common position. We are very clear about the importance of getting aid into Gaza and getting the hostages out, and all British policy is bent, without fear or favour, towards achieving that.

Rafah: Military Offensive

11. **George Galloway** (Rochdale) (WPB): If the Government will make an assessment of the potential impact of a military offensive in Rafah on the humanitarian situation in that area. [902573]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): We are deeply concerned about the prospect of a military offensive in Rafah. We need an immediate humanitarian pause to get aid in and hostages out, then progress towards a permanent, sustainable ceasefire.

George Galloway: The Foreign Secretary is fortunate to have such an able deputy, which makes it all the more difficult to understand the inherent complacency in that answer. We are hours away from a bloodbath that will make Falluja pale into insignificance—it will be the worst bloodbath seen in the world since the second world war. Some 1.6 million people, most of them women and children, are 72 hours away from a full-scale invasion. The Minister keeps saying that we are going to press Israel; what are the Government going to do about it if it happens?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman and I first entered this House on the same day, nearly 40 years ago, and it is no surprise to see him back in his place. It has to be said that throughout that time his views have been remarkably consistent. Given the number of civilians sheltering in Rafah, it is not easy to see how such an offensive could be compliant with international

humanitarian law in the current circumstances, and on his overall point, I hope he will recognise that the British Government are doing everything we can to prevent the circumstances he has described.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): “Sustainable calm” is the latest buzzword, but the fighting simply has to stop. In the past two days, Palestinian President Abbas has said that in order for there to be sustainable calm or a ceasefire, the United States must give a warning to Israel. What warnings have the UK Government given to Israel when it comes to a possible ground invasion in Rafah?

Mr Mitchell: I refer my hon. Friend to the comments I made earlier. He will know that the British and American Governments have been working in lockstep to prevent the situation he has described.

International Parental Child Abduction

12. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his Polish counterpart on international parental child abduction. [902574]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I recognise the distress caused to all those affected by international parental child abduction, particularly the children. The primary global mechanism for dealing with international child abduction cases is the 1980 Hague child abduction convention. Due to the persistent campaigning of my right hon. Friend, the Foreign Office has raised this matter with the Polish Government, including the Foreign Secretary raising it with his counterpart.

Priti Patel: The Minister is fully sighted on what is, frankly, one of the most tragic and appalling cases: that of my constituent, Mr Tom Toolan, whose Polish ex-partner defied a family court order and took their daughter Rhian to Poland. This case has been going on for too long—for many, many years. I thank the Department for the engagement it has been having. The Minister will also know that there are hundreds of other cases of children being abducted that are specific to Poland. With the change in the Polish Government at the end of last year, what further plans do the Minister and the Government have to give real support to my constituent? His life is being destroyed by this, and it cannot go on. It is not sustainable any more, and he has been let down by Polish court orders again and again.

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend’s persistent campaigning has made sure that the case of Tom Toolan has been raised regularly with our Polish counterparts. The Government have raised it many times, including on 9 April with the Minister of Justice. The Foreign Office remains committed to using every appropriate opportunity to raise issues surrounding the enforcement of court orders under the 1980 Hague convention, as well as individual cases, with the Polish Government. As my right hon. Friend will know, now that I have taken over this brief, I am absolutely committed to ensuring that we are returning children to the parents they have been allocated to by courts.

Sudan: Humanitarian Situation

15. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the humanitarian situation in Sudan. [902577]

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): This year, the UK will nearly double its support for people in Sudan, with £89 million in aid. That is nearly double the amount we set out at the beginning of last year, but in the past quarter, we have augmented that figure as well.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Sudanese city of El Fasher is the western region of Darfur’s humanitarian hub, but the US ambassador to the UN has said that El Fasher

“is on the precipice of a large-scale massacre”.

What is the Minister doing to avert this impending crisis?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member raises the position of El Fasher, and I specifically spoke about this with the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, yesterday. She is absolutely right, and we are doing everything we can. As she will know, Darfur is a particular focus of the British Government—and indeed of Parliament, through the all-party group on Sudan and South Sudan—and, through a number of mechanisms, we are doing everything we can to try to ensure that the people in Darfur are protected.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I do not know whether the Deputy Foreign Secretary has had the opportunity to see the evidence that frontline aid workers gave to the International Development Committee last week. It was very traumatic evidence, but the one chink of light was their positivity towards the work that the FCDO has been doing to try to continue education for children displaced during this crisis. Will my right hon. Friend give a commitment that that support will continue and, indeed, be enhanced?

Mr Mitchell: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he has said. We are seeking to assist 500,000 children under five in Sudan. He will know that 8.6 million people have been displaced, 2 million have fled across borders and 17.7 million are suffering acute food insecurity. More widely, 730,000 Sudanese children are suffering from the deadliest form of malnutrition.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): As we know, and as has been said, right now an offensive is under way to capture El Fasher, the last remaining city in Darfur outside Rapid Support Forces control. The risk of massacres and rapes targeted at non-Arab communities is imminent, and I fear that it will be simply appalling in scale. All arms supplies to the warring sides must stop, and we thank our tireless diplomats, alongside African Security Council colleagues, for Friday’s statement at the UN, but what mechanisms are the Government using, with our partners, every single day to build pressure for an immediate ceasefire and a sustainable peace?

Mr Mitchell: We very much hope that Jeddah 3 will be the next significant opportunity to negotiate. What we require is a ceasefire, with the troops returning to barracks, and a political track. When I was in Adré on the Chad-Sudan border a few weeks ago, I saw for myself the difficulties of supporting Darfur, including with food. The hon. Lady, and indeed the House, may rest assured that Sudan is not forgotten and that Britain, as the pen holder at the United Nations, is doing everything it can to help.

Nicaragua: Freedom of Religion or Belief

16. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to support freedom of religion or belief in Nicaragua. [902579]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. We share widespread international concern about the suppression of human rights in Nicaragua, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. We continue to call, in bilateral and multilateral settings, for the Nicaraguan Government to respect democracy and all human rights.

Fiona Bruce: Three all-party parliamentary groups, including that on international freedom of religion or belief, recently produced an inquiry report, “The Silencing of Democracy in Nicaragua”, outlining widespread, grave and brutal human rights violations by the regime against journalists, academics, political opponents, religious leaders and wider civil society. Our report makes recommendations for the UK Government and other states. What public steps will Ministers take, both unilaterally and jointly with other countries, to challenge those violations, to support the victims and survivors, such as Bishop Álvarez, and to call to account the Nicaraguan regime for such violations, in line with our recommendations?

David Rutley: I very much welcome the report. It was good to meet my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour, the respected special envoy on FORB, to review the report—I read it with interest and will respond to the inquiry members shortly. She can be assured that we continue to call out this behaviour—this unacceptable behaviour—by the regime, which does not respect human rights and certainly does not respect freedom of religion or belief.

Jimmy Lai

17. **Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support Jimmy Lai during his trial in Hong Kong. [902580]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): We have called for an end to British citizen Jimmy Lai’s prosecution in Hong Kong and for his release. The Foreign Secretary raised his case with the Chinese Foreign Minister in February, and I raised it during my visits to Beijing and Hong Kong last week.

Bob Seely: Would Ministers agree that this dreadful case shows the true nature of the Chinese communist regime? Could we be doing more to really get a stout

defence of British citizens throughout the world, including Vladimir Kara-Murza in Russia and Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong, who are part of political show trials in authoritarian or fascist states?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Mr Lai has faced multiple charges to silence and discredit him, and he has been targeted in a clear attempt to stop the peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of expression and association. My hon. Friend raises an important question about dual nationals and the challenges that our consular teams face in countries that do not recognise that British nationality. We will continue to champion them, and we have consular teams at Jimmy Lai’s trial almost every day and will continue to provide what support we can, including to his family.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I know that the Minister takes a close interest in this issue. Has she or any other Foreign Office Minister had an opportunity to raise this directly with the Chinese ambassador?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I have raised this issue with the ambassador, and was able to raise it last week when I was in Beijing with my Foreign Minister counterpart.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The trial and detention of British citizen Jimmy Lai shows the symbolism and importance of getting a grip on the question of Hong Kongers and their rights. Can the Minister confirm that when she was in Beijing she was able to get the balance right between the legitimate trade interests and the importance of human rights, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and all those other moral and political duties that we have in foreign policy?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I was able to meet many different groups, from businesses to civil society and religious voices, and indeed political interlocutors, last week in Beijing and also in Hong Kong. I raised very firmly all those issues, such as freedom of expression, without fear or favour. They were robust discussions. It is so important that we are able to engage so that we can have those conversations. Our complex relationship with China and Hong Kong continues but we will continue to stand firm to make sure we champion and stand up for all those who defend those freedoms.

Topical Questions

T1. [902587] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The Government continue to stand up for our values, our allies and those most in need. The Foreign Secretary attended the NATO and G7 Foreign Ministers meetings and reaffirmed our unwavering commitment to Ukraine. He urged partners to increase their support in line with the Prime Minister’s pledge of 2.5% of GDP for defence. I returned overnight from the United Nations in New York as part of Britain’s contribution to the international conference on population and development 30 and our work on Sudan and securing funding to stave off a famine in Ethiopia.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Conditions in Gaza are desperate and civilians are suffering. It is now an immense issue. Water has still not been fully switched back on and famine is taking hold. The World Food Programme reports that 90% of people in northern Gaza are living on less than a meal a day. Will the right hon. Gentleman clearly outline what his Government are doing to alleviate the threat of famine and prevent its further spread?

Mr Mitchell: We are trying to make sure that the water is restored, as I set out earlier, and we are championing the provision of aid by land, sea and air, and I set out the help we have received from the Royal Air Force in that respect. But at the end of the day, the right way to get aid into Gaza is by road and we are pressing in every way we can to ensure that that access is restored.

T5. [902591] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Following on from that discussion about getting aid into Gaza, sometimes we need novel ways of thinking about doing that, so what conversations is my right hon. Friend having with other countries and counterparts about opening a new maritime corridor if the road routes are failing?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are working closely with a number of partner Governments, including the United States of America, Cyprus and the United Nations. Maritime discussions include corridor planning for the delivery of UK aid and our package of support including equipment and the use of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Cardigan Bay.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Last week the US Congress agreed a new \$61 billion aid package for Ukraine. The bipartisan co-operation led by Mike Johnson is essential if Ukraine is to continue to defend against Putin's illegal invasion. I am proud that this House will stand united on Ukraine for as long as it takes to win. Will the Minister update the House on progress with our G7 allies to seize and repurpose frozen Russian state assets in the UK, to support the reconstruction of Ukraine?

Mr Mitchell: The Government are seeking agreement on a way of advancing this matter with the G7. The right hon. Gentleman is right about the mechanism, and we are doing everything we can with our allies to achieve precisely what he describes.

T8. [902594] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Hamas are rightly an internationally proscribed organisation, yet the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which funds and supports Hamas, is not. Should it not be?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): The list of proscribed organisations is kept under review, but we do not comment on whether any particular organisation is being considered for proscription. However, the Government have taken measures to counter the threat from Iran, including sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety.

T2. [902588] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Tibet is currently ranked as the least free place for civil and political rights by Freedom House, alongside Syria. There are credible reports of torture, extrajudicial killings and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the media. Last year, three independent UN experts warned that almost a million Tibetan children are coerced into a residential schools system designed to systematically assimilate them into Han culture. *[Interruption.]* What diplomatic steps have the Government taken to hold the Chinese Government to account for these grievous violations?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government consistently raise human rights issues with the Chinese authorities, as I did during my visit last week, as I have mentioned. We also regularly raise Tibet in multilateral fora, such as in January at China's universal periodic review and in March as part of our item 4 statement at the UN Human Rights Council.

T9. [902595] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Many people in the Aylesbury constituency are understandably concerned about the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. They condemn the appalling actions of Hamas, but at the same time want the UK to do everything possible to get more aid in. Can my right hon. Friend let them know what further plans he has to provide more aid directly, especially with our friends in the region, including Egypt, Qatar and Jordan?

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his thoughts and ideas, which he came and spoke to me about last week. He was conveying the views of the mosques in Aylesbury. We are pursuing many of the ideas that he set out, as he knows, especially on meeting the evident humanitarian needs that have rightly preoccupied the House today.

T3. [902589] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): One month since UN Security Council resolution 2728 passed with UK support, what are our Government doing to bring about the immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the compliance with international law, the release of hostages and the passage of aid that it calls for? What are the consequences for non-compliance, apart from more death and destruction?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady knows, UN resolution 2728, which was passed on 25 March, reflected the international consensus behind the UK's position about the importance of getting aid in and the hostages out. That is what we are bending every sinew to achieve.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Bearing in mind Lord Cameron's unique responsibility for Libya, following our intervention in that country during the Arab spring, what are the Government doing to help the Libyan Government to tackle the enormous fraud that is taking place from the sale of oil from the Libyan state oil company?

David Rutley: We continue to work closely with the Government in Libya. Lord Ahmad and I keep in touch on these matters, and I will update my hon. Friend further.

T4. [902590] **George Galloway** (Rochdale) (WPB): When the International Court of Justice, almost 100 days ago, sent Israel for trial, plausibly on charges of genocide, the British Government called it a foreign court. What attitude will the Government take if, as is widely reported, the British King's Counsel chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court issues an arrest warrant for Benjamin Netanyahu?

Mr Mitchell: I think the hon. Gentleman is speculating in an extraordinary manner. What the Court said at the time was that the hostages should be released, that there should be more aid into Gaza and that Israel should not commit acts that violate the rights of Palestinians. That is where the Court rests at this point, and we must wait for further events.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Ahead of the UN General Assembly high-level meeting on antimicrobial resistance, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital to build the political will of developed and developing countries to prioritise tackling AMR? What discussions has he had with his counterparts coming up to this high-level meeting?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right. An enormous amount of work is going on in respect of AMR, which is being discussed extensively this year at the United Nations. Dame Sally Davies, who leads for Britain on this vital issue, is doing a fabulous job, and Britain is committed to doing everything it can to make real progress.

T6. [902592] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As of 9 April, eight field hospitals are reportedly active inside the Gaza strip, with some operating at 265% of their capacity and with a shortage of medication and supplies. What are the UK Government doing to help facilitate medical evacuations, particularly of children?

Mr Mitchell: We have worked extensively with our partners in the Gulf on evacuations, and Britain is doing a great deal through our medical support for the field hospital we have in Gaza as well as to support other humanitarian and medical activities, which are so vital there.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): British citizen Ryan Cornelius has now been imprisoned in the United Arab Emirates for 16 years. In 2022, the UN determined that he was "arbitrarily detained", and before the Deputy Foreign Secretary came to his current position, he signed a letter calling for his immediate release. On Saturday, Ryan turned 70, and his children have grown up without him. Will the Government please update us on what they are doing to get him home and whether they will lodge a plea for clemency, given his age and ill health?

David Rutley: I assure my hon. Friend that FCDO Ministers and officials continue to raise the cases of both Mr Cornelius and Mr Ridley with the UAE authorities. We are urgently looking into the information provided by the family and seeking expert advice. We will follow up with the people concerned when we have more information.

T7. [902593] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The proposed EU-UK youth mobility scheme would have allowed 18 to 30-year-old UK citizens to work and study in the EU without barriers that the Government's Brexit have created, yet the Tories and the Labour party immediately rebuffed the offer. What is the message to young people across the UK who are watching opportunities being blocked by Westminster?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The EU scheme requires people between the ages of 18 and 35—I did not realise that you were still a young person at 35—to have absolutely free movement. That discussion has been had at length both in the Chamber and during the Brexit vote. What we do have is bilateral youth mobility schemes, which we are more than happy to propose with interested parties.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On Gibraltar, the Minister has stated that our current EU negotiations are consistent with UK sovereignty. How will that be achieved, given our defence and RAF assets as well as any nuclear naval capability that the UK has in that region? How will our sovereignty be guaranteed at the border if there is a Schengen border post on the soil of Gibraltar?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend can be assured that we will continue to safeguard the sovereignty of Gibraltar, which is much cherished. He can also be assured that in the negotiations we will fully protect the operations and the independence of the UK's military facilities in Gibraltar. I very much look forward to discussing this more fully in front of his Committee tomorrow morning.

T10. [902596] **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South) (SDLP): Despite repeated claims by the Saudi authorities that they would abolish the death penalty for children, child defendants are still regularly sentenced to death. Some 11 have been executed since 2015. Child defendants Abdullah al-Howaiti, Abdullah al-Derazi and Youssef al-Manasif have all received death sentences for crimes allegedly committed before the age of 18. In April 2020, Saudi authorities issued a royal decree purporting to abolish the death penalty, but that appears to have been an empty promise. Will the Minister intervene and impress on them their human rights obligations?

David Rutley: We continue to engage with the Saudi authorities on this and, as the hon. Member knows, we push back on the death penalty being used in any country around the world.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): When will the Foreign Office and the Home Office abandon their ridiculous pseudo security argument that is preventing the return of Shamima Begum and other

women and children from northern Syria? Our allies oppose that policy because they know that it risks turning those children into tomorrow's terrorists.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about this matter, speaks with considerable authority on it. I have no doubt that his voice will be heard in both the Foreign Office and the Home Office.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Spain, Norway and Ireland are ready jointly to recognise Palestine as a state within weeks. Four other European countries look likely to follow suit, and France recently voted to admit Palestine as a full member of the UN. Is it not time that the UK Government joined their European partners in recognising Palestine?

Mr Mitchell: As we have made clear, recognition of a Palestinian state cannot come at the beginning of the process, but it does not have to come at the end.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Could the Deputy Foreign Secretary update us on the state of our relations with Djibouti, and his assessment of the impact of the UK recognising the memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somalia on the development of the port of Berbera? Does he have any plans to visit Djibouti? If so, may I give him some advice?

Mr Mitchell: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that I have visited Djibouti, without suffering the fate that I am so sorry he suffered. As he knows, we are taking up this matter with the authorities in Djibouti.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Israel's deliberate and wilful starvation of Gaza is a war crime, yet the Government deflect all questions on UNRWA funding by saying that it runs until the end of April. We are here—today is the last day of April. If the Government do not restore UNRWA funding, are they not aiding and abetting Israeli war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: I have made very clear the Government's position on UNRWA. We are in a process, and after it has been completed I will report to the House.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Ahmed Ali Alid, the Moroccan asylum seeker convicted last week of murdering 70-year-old Terence Carney, wandered through 13 European countries before entering the UK illegally and claiming asylum. Does the Minister agree that we must redouble our efforts and work with international allies, and that we do not want criminals like that in our country?

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Lady's concerns. I am not familiar with the case, but I will follow up and get back to her.

Port Talbot Steelworks

12.36 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on Tata ending the statutory consultation on redundancies at Port Talbot steelworks.

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): On 25 April Tata announced its strategic direction to proceed with its Port Talbot transformation, following the launch of the formal national consultation with the unions on 6 February. Technically, the consultation has not concluded at national or local level. The statutory consultation remains under way, and I understand that the company intends to move to local consultation with staff who may be affected.

This is a deeply concerning time for the Tata workforce and the wider community. I hold regular conversations and meetings with the unions and management, and will continue to do so as we develop interventions to build a brighter future for Port Talbot. On 15 September we announced an unprecedented £500 million Government grant as part of the £1.25 billion investment by Tata Steel to build a new electric arc furnace. Tata Steel employs more than 8,000 people, including at Port Talbot. All those jobs—along with many thousands more in the supply chain—would be under threat were it not for the agreement that we struck. The transformation will be difficult but the funding has saved 5,000 jobs in the company. It is not the case that we have paid money to put people out of work—we have paid a lot of money to save 5,000 jobs. We are also looking to modernise production and ensure that steelmaking in south Wales can continue for generations to come.

Going beyond that, to support those affected by Tata's decision we have put £100 million towards the creation of the transition board, which I chair, and which includes representatives of the UK and Welsh Governments, local authorities and industry. The funding includes £80 million from the UK Government and £20 million from Tata—nothing as yet from the Welsh Government, but we hope that there will be some. It will be used to achieve the transition board's priorities, the first of which is to support those affected employees to find new, well-paid jobs. The board's priorities also include supporting businesses in the supply chain and the longer-term regeneration of the region.

In its most recent meeting last week the transition board endorsed a local economic action plan, which will act as a road map for how best to use the funding to support those affected. While the ongoing consultation is a matter between the trade unions and the company, we will continue discussions with all parties. We hope a resolution is found that avoids industrial action. The Government will continue to work closely with industry to secure a sustainable and competitive future for the Welsh steel sector.

I am confident of a good future for Port Talbot and the region, with the UK Government progressing the bid by Associated British Ports to the next stage for up to £160 million of funding to support our nascent floating offshore wind industry, and our progress towards establishing the Celtic freeport, backed by £26 million of UK Government funding.

Jo Stevens: Last Thursday's news was a gut punch for workers in Port Talbot, with economic consequences that could reverberate across south Wales for decades. Last month, I met workers at the plant. The sense of the threat to nearly 3,000 people's livelihoods was all-consuming. The wider supply chain in Llanwern, Shotton and Trostre is vulnerable, too. We again urge Tata not to make any irreversible decisions before a general election.

My hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) have been proud vocal advocates for their constituents. In contrast, the Government have forked out £500 million of taxpayers' cash for the loss of 3,000 jobs. That is their deal and they own it.

In addition, the loss of sovereign steelmaking is a fundamental threat to our UK economy and security. It will constrain our ability to build the floating offshore wind we need to lower energy bills, deliver energy security and create the jobs of the future.

We are now around a month away from blast furnace No. 5 potentially closing, so what assessment have the Government made of the impact of the closure on job losses at the plant and in the supply chain across Wales? With the talks ongoing between unions and Tata this week, does the Secretary of State, like me, want to see an agreement from Tata that compulsory redundancies will be avoided? What steps will he take to encourage such an agreement? He has said that no one will be left behind if they lose their jobs. Will he publish the local economic plan that the transition board has agreed as the basis for its investment decisions?

With Labour's national wealth fund, the future of UK steel will be fuelled by the skills, talent and ambition of Welsh steelworkers, but until the country is given the chance to have its say at a general election, I want workers across Wales to know that Labour Members have their backs.

David T. C. Davies: Let me take the hon. Lady's points one by one. First, the £500 million investment will save 3,000 jobs. We are not paying money to throw people out of work; we do not want to see anyone thrown out of work. Tata has made a decision to close blast furnaces based on the losses it is making. When it came to us, we said, "What can we do to keep people in work?" This was the plan it came up with.

Secondly, the plan will have no impact on sovereign steelmaking. The hon. Lady, if she talks to Tata, will understand—[*Interruption.*] She is chuntering, but all the iron ore that goes into the blast furnaces comes from abroad, all the coal that is turned into coke comes in from abroad, and all the limestone comes in from abroad. It therefore has no impact whatever on our sovereign steelmaking ability. In fact, we have 8 million tonnes of scrap steel in this country, much of which has been exported abroad. We are going to use that scrap steel and put it in the electric arc furnace, which will increase our sovereign ability.

The hon. Lady says that the plan will have an impact on our ability to create floating offshore wind. Last time, she said it would have an impact on our ability to create battleships. She needs to understand that battleships are made using steel plate and that floating offshore wind turbines are also made using steel plate. Steel plate

is not made by Tata at Port Talbot. Tata at Port Talbot produces coil, which is thin and not strong enough to make either battleships or floating offshore wind turbines.

The hon. Lady asked about the number of people affected. We have been very clear about that from the start. [*Interruption.*] I am trying to answer the hon. Lady's questions. She asked the questions; I listed them and I am answering them. She asked about the number of jobs affected. We have said all along that we expect it to be around 2,800, but it is for Tata to confirm that once it has gone through the statutory consultation procedure.

The hon. Lady asked whether we would encourage Tata to come to an agreement so that there are no compulsory redundancies. Of course, we would. We do not want anyone to be made redundant against their wishes. We did not want this process to happen in the first place, but as I said to her several times, Tata came to the UK Government with a threat to pull out, which would have cost 8,000 jobs and the entire supply chain.

The hon. Lady asked if the local area action plan can be published. It is not fully finalised yet—it is a road map—but she will surely be aware that the current First Minister was sitting on the board as the economic development Minister. The Labour economic development Minister in the Senedd is on the board. The local Member of Parliament is on the board, as is the local Senedd Member, the chief executive of the local authority, and the representatives of three trade unions, so it is hardly a secret document. It is not as if the transition board is meeting in conditions of great secrecy.

If the hon. Lady has any further questions, I am more than happy to answer them.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When will the Government do something about the very high energy prices in this country, which have been made high by regulations and taxes? Does my right hon. Friend not accept that any kind of steelmaking will be extremely difficult if we have uncompetitive energy, and is it not wrong to import such materials, because it will mean even more carbon dioxide emissions, as well as destroying jobs here?

David T. C. Davies: We have looked carefully at the losses that Tata is making, which have come about partly because of the age of the infrastructure. In fact, Tata has had to close down the furnaces at the Morfa coke ovens within the last few weeks. The UK Government are fully cognisant of the cost of energy at the moment, which is why Tata has already benefited from many of the schemes that we have introduced over the past few years, will begin to benefit from the British industry supercharger scheme shortly, and will benefit from the carbon border adjustment mechanism at the start of 2027.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Despite what the Secretary of State may claim, the Government are investing in support of plans that will lead to approximately 2,800 job cuts, along with an irreversible cut in the capacity to produce virgin steel. Tata has announced that it will open a voluntary redundancy scheme on 15 May. Can the Secretary of State update the House

on what he expects the redundancy packages to include, and will he join me in condemning threats that the company appears to have made to withdraw enhanced redundancy packages if industrial action goes ahead?

David T. C. Davies: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman's questions directly. The value of the redundancy packages will have to be agreed between Tata and the trade unions, but Tata has made it very clear that it wants to go well beyond statutory redundancy. It has put out several figures, some of which could be more generous if there is no industrial action. I do not want to see industrial action, but I do not condemn the unions either; I think that they have played a very positive role in discussions on the transition board and outside it, and I understand the strength of feeling among people at Port Talbot.

As for the two other points made by the hon. Gentleman, let me say this again, and say it clearly, so that everyone can understand it. Tata came to the UK Government and said that it was going to pull out of steelmaking in south Wales. That decision would have cost 8,000 jobs, as well as, we think, about 12,700 in the wider supply chain. Officials from the Department for Business and Trade wanted to come up with a plan that would save as many jobs as possible, which is where the arc furnace plan has come from. That plan will save 5,000 jobs, with a Government investment of half a billion pounds. It is not the outcome that anyone wants, but it is a better outcome to see 2,800 jobs lost than to see 8,000 lost. Neither is a good outcome, but that is what we wanted to achieve.

Let me repeat that this is not really about a sovereign ability to produce virgin steel. All the elements of steelmaking are being imported from abroad. We are not about to start opening up iron ore mines. Steel is produced here with iron ore from abroad, limestone from abroad, and coke made from coal from abroad. We cannot do this by ourselves. At the same time, we have 8 million tonnes of steel that is being exported. We will be making use of a resource that is already in our country.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): Back home in Scunthorpe, we watch very closely what is happening in Port Talbot. What work has been done to determine the quality of those 8 million tonnes of scrap and whether it will be suitable for use in the electric arc furnaces? May I also ask my right hon. Friend to reflect on this point? When it comes to sovereign capability, the issue is not always what you are doing and choose to make; it sometimes comes down to what you may need to make at some point in the future. May I remind my right hon. Friend that we have a perfectly good mine full of coke and coal in Cumbria, and that there is an awful lot of limestone under the ground in this country as well?

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend is right that if we wanted to, we could probably find iron ore, coke, coal and limestone in the UK, but I do not see any great enthusiasm at the moment for opening up the mines to do that. As for the 8 million tonnes of scrap in the UK that will go into the arc furnaces, officials from the Department for Business and Trade and EY have gone over very carefully the business plan being put forward by Tata. Let me point out to my hon. Friend that not

[David T. C. Davies]

only are the UK Government investing half a billion pounds, but Tata is investing £750 million, so Tata obviously feels that there is a good, strong, commercial case for building that arc furnace, and is putting its money where its mouth is.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Port Talbot steelworkers in my constituency have given their life to the steel industry and to Tata Steel. The reckless deal that has been done by the UK Government and Tata is a hammer blow for them, and we hope that there is still time for the employer and the unions to come together, drop the bad deal for steel, and adopt the compelling and robust multi-union deal instead.

May I ask the Secretary of State about the role of contractors in all this? Everyone knows that for every job lost in a steelworks, between two and three more are lost through supply chains and contractors, so the figure of 2,800 that is being used is a massive underestimate of the devastating impact, as there will be job losses through supply chains and subcontractors. Does he agree that the number of job losses will be far higher than 2,800 if this reckless deal is adopted? If so, does he agree that it is time for everyone to pull back from the brink and adopt the multi-union plan, which offers us a bridge to the future, rather than the cliff edge that is currently being pursued?

David T. C. Davies: Clearly, there will be an impact on those in the supply chain; there has been absolutely no doubt about that. At the last transition board meeting, at which the hon. Gentleman was present, we discussed that, and we agreed that we would want to support anyone in the supply chain who has been affected, but we cannot start putting numbers on this. It would be irresponsible to start guessing the number of people who will lose their job, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there will clearly be an effect.

The hon. Gentleman talks about a reckless plan, but ours was the only plan on the table. He keeps suggesting that we adopt the Syndex plan, but it is not a plan unless Tata agrees to it. I have discussed the Syndex plan with senior management at Tata and with the head of Tata Holdings, Mr Chandrasekaran, in Mumbai. He does not believe that it is commercially viable, and he believes that it would be technically far too difficult to try to build an electric arc furnace on the site of the steel melt shop.

Stephen Kinnock *indicated dissent.*

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. I do not know what the answer is; he says that it is possible to implement the Syndex plan, but Tata says that it is not. What the hon. Gentleman has to realise is that it is not the UK Government he has to convince; it is Tata. The UK Government have never said that they would be against the Syndex plan. It is Tata that has to be persuaded.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his comments, and for reminding us that half a billion pounds is no small beer when it comes to intervention in a private industry. There are clearly difficulties with the transition, and a lot of us who care deeply about the steel industry in Wales and

Britain are worried about our capacity to do what we need to in the future, as my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) said. What ongoing discussions are there on whether Tata will keep one of the blast furnaces open for longer than is set out in the plan, in which they are to be shut down by the end of this year?

David T. C. Davies: I have had that discussion with senior management at Tata, as have members of the Labour party, trade unions and many others. Tata faces losses of over £1 million a day as a result of keeping the two blast furnaces open. It says that those losses would continue even if one was functioning, because, first, it would have to make significant capital expenditure on blast furnace 4 for that to go ahead, and, secondly, it would have to import all the coke that goes into that blast furnace, as the coke ovens were shut down with the agreement of the unions, because of health and safety concerns. Then Tata would face the additional technical problem of trying to build an electric arc furnace on the same site as a steel melt shop containing hundreds of tonnes of molten steel that is poured off into casters. That is why it has said very clearly that it will not entertain the proposal. The UK Government have never said that we would not entertain the proposal. If Tata wanted to come forward with a plan to build the arc furnace, using the grant that the Government have put forward, while keeping one blast furnace open for longer, of course the Government would be open to discussion of that.

Mr Speaker: I call Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Llefarydd. In the Netherlands, political pressure has resulted in Tata investing in an electric arc furnace and direct reduced iron technology, all while protecting jobs and keeping blast furnaces open. The German Government are spending €2.2 billion—over four times more than the UK is spending—on transitioning the country's steel industry towards hydrogen. Why is the UK so uniquely incapable of effective investment in our strategic steel future?

David T. C. Davies: A few people seem to have the idea that building a DRI plant would resolve this problem. The first point to remember is that if a DRI plant were built on the site, it would probably save another 200 jobs. There is a plant in Texas, run by Voestalpine, which I believe produces 2 million tonnes or so of steel every year and employs 200 people, so a DRI plant will not resolve the problem. Clearly, DRI plants require access to a regular and affordable amount of natural gas. There is, however, nothing whatsoever to stop Tata, at some point in future, building a DRI plant to go along with the electric arc furnace, if it believes that that is commercially sensible. Even if it were to do that, it would not really resolve the problem that we face: 2,800 jobs being lost in Port Talbot. At best, it would save another 200 jobs.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am sorry, but this Government's lack of ambition for our steel industry is just disgraceful. As many of the Secretary of State's constituents work in Llanwern, he should understand that decisions made about Port Talbot have a direct impact on Newport and can lead to problems with

securing volume for Llanwern. We are looking at potential redundancies, and uncertainty about the long-term future of the plant. It is not too late for the Secretary of State to stand up for his constituents, show more ambition for our steel industry—as other countries do—argue for a fairer transition, and try to avoid compulsory redundancies. Why will he not do that for his own constituents?

David T. C. Davies: We have acknowledged all along that under the proposals, Port Talbot planned to close down the pickle line at Llanwern, but not until the electric arc furnace was built. We discussed that at the last meeting of the transition board, and we all agreed that just as we want to help everyone in Port Talbot, we want to help anyone affected in Llanwern.

The hon. Lady keeps talking about a lack of ambition. We can all dream about a situation in which blast furnace 4 is kept open for another six years, but what we cannot do is force Tata to continue accepting losses of over £1 million a day in order for that to happen. I have to say that there has been a lack of responsibility on the part of some Labour Members—though not any present in this Chamber—who seem to have gone around suggesting that they have a special, costed secret plan that would save all those jobs. They do not. They have not put any kind of a costed plan to any senior management in Tata. They have never sat down and said, “If you do this, we will give you this, and that way, we could save all those jobs.” They have simply gone around saying that they want to see all the jobs saved. We all want to see every single job saved, but we cannot force Tata to continue to take losses of over £1 million a day.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I come from an area of the country that suffered from industrial decline two generations ago, and the human impact of what we see happening to Port Talbot will blight the current generation. We talk a lot about a transition to a green economy. When will the Government invest in the national skills strategy that we need to provide? People in Port Talbot are about to lose their jobs, and redundancy payments do not last forever. A generation will be blighted. They need skills for the 21st century, so will the Government commit to a national skills strategy?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady asks about the money to support the town of Port Talbot. I have said already that there is £500 million to build an arc furnace that will save thousands of jobs. There is £15 million going into regenerating the town. There is £26 million of funding for the freeport, £7.5 million of funding for Launchpad and, as far as skills are concerned, £80 million from the UK Government primarily to retrain people. There is another £20 million coming in from Tata. There has not been one penny from the Welsh Government towards this endeavour. They have been able to find £120 million to spend on more Senedd Members, and £30 million to spend on 20 mph road signs, and we have just learned that they have lost £60 million, having set up a bank, but they have not been able to find one penny to support the steelworkers at Port Talbot.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Is this not just the tail end of a Government who abandoned the words “industrial strategy” a decade ago when I asked questions on this matter? Why have the Government not had the

ambition and the vision to realise the potential? For example, if there were a plate mill on the site, it could produce the steel for the substructures and wind turbines that are planned to be built in the Celtic sea around the Milford Haven and Port Talbot freeport? There is no industrial strategy, there is no vision and there is no joined-upness. There are just massive sticking plasters from this Government.

David T. C. Davies: There are discussions going on about the possibility of building a plate mill on the site when the electric arc furnace is completed. There is nothing whatsoever to prevent a plate mill from being built. The hon. Gentleman will not be aware of all the discussions going on, but I say respectfully to him that a plate mill will not save 2,800 jobs. We face the loss of a significant number of jobs as a result of the decision to close down the blast furnaces, and even if a plate mill, a direct reduced iron plant or a hot zinc dip line were built on the site—all of which are reasonable things to consider—it would not solve the problem that 2,800 people are facing the loss of their jobs. That is why the £500 million for the arc furnace was so important, as was the £80 million for the transition board.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): We talked earlier about the supply chain. The repercussions of this decision will be felt across south Wales, so can I ask the Secretary of State directly whether he has secured any commitment whatsoever from Tata about the future of the workers at those downstream facilities across south Wales?

David T. C. Davies: Yes, Tata has been clear that it was originally going to close those sites but it now expects all those sites to remain open. During the process of building the arc furnace, while the blast furnaces are shut down, it will be bringing steel in from elsewhere to make sure that the product is going into those other plants.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): With the closure of the coke ovens making the viable lifespan of the blast furnaces all the more precarious, and the electric arc furnace still being a long way off, we will rapidly reach a situation where Port Talbot can no longer supply the Trostre works in Llanelli in my constituency, so what talks has the Secretary of State had with Tata bosses about securing high-quality interim supplies for Trostre and securing all the jobs there?

David T. C. Davies: I have spoken to Tata on that very issue. It has been clear that it would have to import steel to feed Trostre, and it is willing to do that. The timeline for the electric arc furnace is ambitious, but work is ongoing: the groundworks will start very shortly, the application for planning permission should go in in the autumn, and hopefully it will be turned round and dealt with by early next year. It will then take about two years to build the electric arc furnace.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State casually discards 2,800 jobs and is so uninterested in the ongoing effect on the rest of the economy in south Wales that he has not even made an assessment of what the economic impact will be on the south Wales valleys more generally. Can he clear up for us precisely how many other people’s jobs are likely to be affected?

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

Is he aware that, in the last few months, we have had 500 jobs go at UK Windows and Doors in the Rhondda and 100 jobs go in the last 24 hours at Everest 2020 in the Rhondda? As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) says, it does not feel as if the Government have an industrial strategy. Nor does it feel as if they have an anti-poverty strategy. For that matter, they do not have a levelling-up strategy either, do they? Is it not time we had a new Secretary of State for Wales, so that we can get on and have a proper plan for the economy of south Wales?

David T. C. Davies: I am sorry to have to say this to the hon. Gentleman, but it is slightly insulting for him to suggest that the tone in which I have set out the answers suggests casual disregard or a lack of interest. I assure him that nothing whatsoever in the Wales Office at the moment is more important than securing the future of Port Talbot. I am sorry, but frankly, while this Government are putting up £500 million to ensure the future of steelmaking in south Wales and demonstrating an interest in making steel, some Opposition Members are more interested in making headlines.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): My constituents who work in Port Talbot inform me that there has been no progress on enhanced redundancy negotiations between the unions and Tata. Given the scale of the public investment involved, will the British Government use their leverage to ensure that Tata treats its workforce with a degree of dignity?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I think that Tata now needs to come forward with a bit more information about who exactly we can expect to see being made redundant and what their current skillsets are, so that we can begin targeting the help. The challenge up until now is that we have not had the information on who is being made redundant. Tata has made it clear that it will not automatically be the people on the blast furnaces, for example, who are made redundant, because it hopes to retain some of the people who are working there but offer redundancy to people in other parts of the plant. We have not had the information as of yet, but I think the time has come to have that information. We of course want to ensure that any redundancy packages are as generous as possible.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituents who work at the Shotton plant are very worried about the news they are hearing and concerned about their colleagues' futures, but they are also wondering what it means for them. Clearly there will be knock-on effects, not just in the supply chain but in other Tata plants around the country, so what assessment has the Secretary of State made of the short, medium and long-term impact of these decisions on other plants?

David T. C. Davies: We were very clear that while the arc furnace was being built, we wanted to make absolutely certain that all those other plants around Wales were able to receive product to finish, and Tata has been very clear that that will happen. It will have to bring it in from elsewhere over the next two to three years, but that will happen. There will therefore not be the impact that the hon. Gentleman is rightly concerned about.

Of course, that is possible only because of what some of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues have described as a reckless deal. What would have been reckless would have been for us to see Tata in an office and say, "Okay, you're going to make 8,000 people redundant and shut down all these sites, and there's nothing for us to do about it." That would have been reckless. What we actually did was to come forward with a £500 million package of taxpayers' money, and rightly so, to support the continuation of steelmaking in Port Talbot and to ensure that all the other plants in Wales—Shotton, Trostre and Llanwern—continue to receive product during that interim period, so that we do not see significant job losses anywhere else.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is an increasingly dangerous world, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) and the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) said, so will the Secretary of State release an impact assessment on Britain losing its sovereign capability to produce virgin steel?

David T. C. Davies: It is starting to feel a bit like groundhog day here. Can I explain again that the iron ore, the limestone and the coke are all coming in from abroad? There is no sovereign capability to make steel in the blast furnaces at Port Talbot. However, we are already producing high-quality steel in arc furnaces that is used in the defence industry. I recently met Sheffield Forgemasters, which is producing steel for nuclear submarines in an electric arc furnace in the United Kingdom.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We have great hopes and plans to build offshore floating wind structures in the Cromarty firth and the surrounding area, which would be a fantastic use of the great fabrication skills we have there, but do the Government recognise that the continued production of steel—and very probably the increased production of steel—will be crucial to this plan becoming a reality?

David T. C. Davies: Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important that we have a means of producing steel that can be used to build floating offshore wind turbines. Technically, that is quite difficult to do. It would require either steel plate or a very heavily reinforced version of steel coil. I know that discussions are going on between Tata and at least one of the likely major investors in floating offshore wind turbines to ensure that the steel can be made, and we hope that we will use steel from the electric arc furnace to do just that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. It is clear that he is keen to find solutions, but obviously many on this side of the Chamber—indeed, on both sides—are a bit concerned. Bearing in mind that steel produced in Port Talbot is the backbone of much construction in Northern Ireland—which prompted the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) to highlight protocol problems with the Prime Minister in the past—I too want to express my deep concern and ask the Minister to explain where the steel for our construction sector in Northern Ireland will come from if the Government are unable to step in and save jobs in Port Talbot.

David T. C. Davies: In the short term, I assume that the steel going into the industry in Northern Ireland does not come directly from Port Talbot. It probably comes from some of the other finishing plants. I do not know the full detail of the exact grades of steel that go into the Northern Ireland construction industry, but I am happy to discuss that with the hon. Gentleman.

Tata has made it absolutely clear that it does not expect any disruption in supply while the arc furnace is being built. Everyone I have spoken to—not just those at Tata, but independent experts—has said that 90% of the grades currently produced using blast furnaces can be produced using an electric arc furnace, and that the technology of electric arc furnace steel production is rapidly improving, so I would not expect there to be any disruption to supplies in the medium or long term.

Telegraph Media Group Ltd: Acquisition

1.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the proposed acquisition of the Telegraph Media Group by RB Investco Ltd. I will refer to the Telegraph Media Group as the *Telegraph* and to RB Investco Ltd as the purchaser.

As the House will know, the sale of the *Telegraph* is currently subject to the media mergers process. Today, I would like to confirm that the purchaser has notified me of its intention to sell the call option agreement that gives it the ability to buy the *Telegraph*, in effect withdrawing from the purchase of the newspaper. This step follows the intervention I made on the merger situation on 26 January 2024, both to issue a public interest intervention notice, or PIIN, and to issue a pre-emptive action order. It also follows on from my announcement of 19 March on my assessment, following the reports of the Competition and Markets Authority and Ofcom, that I was minded to refer the merger to a further, more detailed phase 2 investigation. I have taken these decisions on the basis of the evidence in the case, and I will continue to do so.

I am now updating the House on the procedures and protections for the public interest that are in place in respect of the *Telegraph*, given the sale process that I understand will begin shortly. I have informed the parties that it would not be appropriate at this stage for me to take a decision on whether or not to make a phase 2 reference. In my view, the relevant merger situation remains in contemplation. I therefore continue to have powers, under the order, to prevent actions by the parties to the merger that might prejudice any phase 2 reference to the CMA or make it more difficult for me to take action as a result of my final decision following such a reference. The order prohibits the parties from making significant organisational and staff changes, including to the editorial team, without my consent. These restrictions remain in place. However, I have now agreed to derogations from the order that will give the parties the flexibility and regulatory space to make all reasonable preparations for the sale of the call option agreement.

It is important to be clear that I will not be engaging with prospective buyers, nor selecting the preferred bidder. The sale process will be run by RedBird IMI alone. My decision on any further derogation from the order that RedBird IMI will need to receive to complete the sale of the call option agreement will be made according to my powers and obligations under the Enterprise Act 2002, and it will be based on the public interest, rather than a qualitative decision on who should buy the titles. Any transfer to new ownership will also potentially be subject to the media mergers regime, as set out in the Act.

It is appropriate for me to say a few words about the underlying matters. I initiated this process under the powers I have under the Enterprise Act to protect the accurate presentation of news and the free expression of opinion in newspapers. These powers are vital. The freedom of the press to express opinions, to criticise and to hold power to account are all a fundamental part of our democracy. It is often said that the freedom of the press protects not the press's freedom but ours.

[Lucy Frazer]

It would not be appropriate for a foreign state to interfere with the accurate presentation of our news or the freedom of expression in newspapers. Although these powers under the existing media merger regime are broad, the Government have taken action to rule out newspaper and news magazine mergers involving any influence, ownership or control by foreign states. We have done that by amending the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, which will shortly return to this House.

As a nation, we are a proud, open democracy and a strong trading power with a vibrant economy. Although we are rightly limiting powers to interfere with our democracy, as many other states do, in terms of foreign investment more generally we remain open for business.

I end by recognising the strength of feeling in this House and the other place, and by recognising the work done by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, and in particular by the right hon. Baroness Stowell of Beeston.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.15 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.

From the very start, Labour had questions about the proposed sale of some of our country's most highly influential and historical news publications. We share legitimate public interest concerns about the accurate presentation of news, free expression of opinion and fair competition. We cannot take those freedoms for granted.

It is disappointing that this weak Government did not do the right thing from the start. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is not about singling out the United Arab Emirates, our important partners? She said that it is not appropriate for a foreign state to interfere with the accurate presentation of news, and I am glad that she has come round to that point of view, but surely no Government anywhere in the world, including ours, should own any news publications.

Labour will always act to safeguard the UK's strong and independent free press, regardless of any publication's political persuasion. We will champion its right to hold us to account. We will safeguard the freedom to scrutinise, to expose wrongdoing and to speak truth to power, because this is about protecting our democracy.

We, of course, welcome investment that makes a valuable contribution to our diverse media landscape, so we will closely follow this auction process. Can the Secretary of State give us more information on the timescale for the auction? What discussions has she had with trade unions representing the staff of the Telegraph Media Group? What steps will she take to ensure that this is a free and open sale, and will she keep the House updated? What will she do to ensure a competitive media landscape into the future?

It is important that the Secretary of State gets this right. Especially in an election year, our democracy is too precious to leave to chance.

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming this statement on the position in which we now find ourselves. I reiterate her point that the UAE is an important trading partner. The legislation relates to all foreign states. We welcome our relationship with the UAE.

The hon. Lady says that this is an important point, and I have been very conscious of this matter since it first fell on my desk. From the outset, I have raised and dealt with the concerns in this case. Although she raises it now, and I am not looking at the complete record, I do not recall any occasion on which she has raised this matter either directly with me or in this House.

Freedom of the press is an important principle that we are upholding. As I said in my statement, I was already taking steps under the broad powers in the Enterprise Act in a quasi-judicial fashion, which limits the other measures that one can take.

On the timescale, I understand that certainty is needed for the publication and for those who work for it. I expect and hope that this process will be concluded in short order, understanding, of course, that it is important for the sale process to take place. This is a regulatory process, and I will update Members and the House at appropriate stages.

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

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the decision of RedBird IMI, in effect, to withdraw from purchasing the *Telegraph*. Freedom and plurality are, of course, cornerstones of our media, and political interventions should always be the last resort, but I agree with her that it is absolutely unacceptable for foreign states to have the potential to interfere with the independence and freedom of our press. What is RedBird's role during the period it takes for a prospective buyer to be found? Will it be able to hold a non-controlling stake in the *Telegraph* at the end of this process?

Lucy Frazer: The position on the governance of the *Telegraph* during this period is the same as it has been since I started this regulatory process. I have been concerned at all times to ensure that the independence of the directors, the managers and the editorial team remains. That is why I brought forward a pre-emptive order, which would restrict any changes in that regard. A sales process will now take place, and it will have to follow any regulations that are in force and that will govern it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and the SNP more widely are pleased about the decision and today's announcement. It feels as though the protection of the independence and legitimacy of the media is something people feel strongly about across the House, no matter which party they represent. I am pleased that everybody is speaking with one voice on the blocking of foreign interference in our media outlets.

I wonder about the way in which this process has happened. Is she going to have a look at how it worked and whether or not RB Investco and the UAE were able to exploit loopholes to ensure that the process took longer than it could have taken in order for this decision to be made? Will she look at whether there are ways of tightening up the Enterprise Act and the legislation to ensure that those decisions can be made more quickly and loopholes cannot be exploited?

Legacy media outlets are struggling in a lot of ways, and many of them may be looking at alternative ways of funding what they are doing. Will she make it clear that, like us, she feels that that freedom of the press from foreign interference is incredibly important, no matter what the financial situation of the companies in question?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady talks about tightening up the process. We significantly tightened it in the amendment that the Government tabled in the Lords and is coming back to this House today. That will indeed make sure that there can be no ownership, control or influence by a foreign state, because, as she makes clear, that is an important part of our democracy.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware that at the end of this week we have World Press Freedom Day, so her statement is particularly welcome. I congratulate her on the scrupulous way in which she has undertaken her responsibilities. She will be aware that the Enterprise Act was written before the internet existed and that it is six years since Ofcom said that there needs to be a fundamental review of our media merger regime. Will she therefore say what progress has been made on bringing the entire regime up to date to take account of the massive growth of online news distribution?

Lucy Frazer: I am very grateful for all the support my right hon. Friend gave me when he was in the Department and for the expertise he brought with him on the wider media and so many other matters. He makes an important point: the media landscape is changing. That is why we are looking at whether online news should be included in the scope of Ofcom's powers.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): A number of staff at the Telegraph Media Group will be worried about their jobs, so what conversations has the Secretary of State had with trade union representatives of staff at TMG? I have just met the amazing bright, talented students at Luton Sixth Form College who are visiting today, some of whom may want a future in journalism, so will she say what impact this statement may have on media jobs and our ability to ensure a competitive media landscape in the future?

Lucy Frazer: One measure I took when issuing the public interest intervention notice and the pre-emptive order that followed it was to ensure that, whatever decision I took ultimately on this case, TMG was not prejudiced by the potential purchase. The pre-emptive order has always said that there should be no changes to the management or the editorial team of the *Telegraph* without my consent, to ensure that any changes in the interim would not be prejudiced by any ultimate sale, so I can give the hon. Lady the reassurance that measures

are already in place to protect the staff at TMG in terms of this purchase. By the order today, I have highlighted that that pre-emptive order in relation to those staff continues.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for coming forward with this statement and for making the right decision. Does this whole process not demonstrate what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) said earlier, which was that we are dealing with a digital world with analogue tools and it takes far too long? It also led to the peculiar situation whereby both she and the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) have had to come to the Dispatch Box despite being unable to say anything in answer to any questions, which was slightly unfair on them. I know that an amendment is coming through on another Bill, but we really need to speed this process up by saying simply that no foreign state could own any of our media. We now need to look at the online elements of that as well if we can.

Lucy Frazer: Let me offer my right hon. Friend reassurance, because that legislation is coming to the House today. I know that a lot of Members of this House and of the other place raised those concerns, and it is right that we brought forward an amendment to put absolutely beyond doubt that fact that it would be inappropriate for a foreign state to own our news media. That is why we built on Baroness Stowell's amendment to put that beyond doubt and to put it in a form that works well. I am grateful to Baroness Stowell for the work she is putting into her amendment. I recognise the other point my right hon. Friend made about online media and it is absolutely something we are looking at.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Thanks are due to the Secretary of State for this decision. *The Spectator* will be free from foreign influence and can carry on describing me as, "A languid old gent who represents a craggy constituency somewhere near Norway." As she says, that is freedom of speech and one must put up with what one must put up with—good luck to these eminent publications. Does she realise, however, that also fundamental to democracy and freedom of speech is the continued survival of our myriad local newspapers the length and breadth of this sceptred isle? They are in difficulty and if they go down, we will be the poorer for it. I do not expect an answer now, but may I at least ask her to look at this issue as one that is important?

Lucy Frazer: I absolutely understand that and I have done a number of roundtables where I have talked to the local media sector. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in the past we have had a local news fund. He will also be aware of the measures we have on business rates for local news media. I am very conscious of the need to support our local media, which play a vital role in ensuring that we have local democracy. He will also know that one measure we put in at the mid-term review was to ensure that where the BBC took steps in spaces where there was already a competitive media market, it should engage more widely with those it was affecting.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's clear statement of policy that foreign states should not be allowed to take over press and media in this country, which is a welcome development. I hope that in the proposals for amending the law it will be clear that the policy relates not only to Governments but to nationalised industries, public authorities or companies in which states have significant influence because of their shareholdings. If that is not set out, such bodies may try to find ways around the law. I am sure my right hon. and learned Friend is up to that, but can we please have an amendment that absolutely nails press freedom in the way we want it to exist—free of influence from foreign states?

Lucy Frazer: I understand my right hon. Friend's points. When we bring forward legislation, it is important that it does not have loopholes. As a Department, we thought very carefully about how we can protect against that. When the Bill comes back to this House this afternoon, he will see that we have defined foreign state ownership very broadly. We have extended the definition to include not only ownership but control and influence.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), may I press the Secretary of State? In her statement, she said that the order prohibits parties from making significant organisational and staff changes without her consent, and that the restrictions remain in place. Will she agree not to consent to any deal that involves significant job losses?

Lucy Frazer: Obviously, it would be entirely inappropriate to say what decision I might take when exercising a quasi-judicial function without looking at the evidence, which is exactly what I would do.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement, not because of the UAE—after all, the UAE is a great diplomatic and trading partner of the UK—but because it gets rid of foreign involvement in our media. Will the Secretary of State say more about how online and television media will be affected by the order, because those are the growing media outlets? We have talked about freedom of the press, but will she advise us of how we can get rid of disinformation? In the UK, we have outlets such as Press TV and China Daily, which are propaganda arms of quite nefarious regimes, operating and working here. What are the Government doing to stop those nefarious activities poisoning the minds of our young people?

Lucy Frazer: There is so much that one could respond to in my hon. Friend's question. I remind him that we are looking at the online news space, which is vital. It is important to emphasise that Ofcom already has significant powers in the broadcast space. It has already taken actions in relation to foreign involvement in our broadcast media and banned certain entities from operating. We always need to look at how we tackle misinformation, and we are doing so across Government as a whole.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her positivity in her responses. Will she highlight what steps can be taken to ensure that the scrambling that took place to protect freedom of British

speech and media from international corporations is not replicated? Will she consider providing legislative protection to that effect, which is vital as outside influencers seek to sway public perception for their own ends? That has to be recognised and protected against.

Lucy Frazer: It is important that we always have freedom of the press and that external forces do not interfere with that freedom. I will be making a speech to the Society of Editors this afternoon that the hon. Gentleman might wish to read, after I have delivered it. I am happy to consider the points he has made.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the statement and the decision by the Secretary of State. It is in our national interest to protect our free media. My question is about transparency and understanding the logic behind the decision. The Secretary of State said that she has taken into account the evidence. What key evidence did she take into account? What were the pertinent aspects of the evidence that led her to make that decision? Knowing that would give people outside the opportunity to look at the reasoning and rationale behind the decision.

Lucy Frazer: The first decision I took was that the threshold had been passed. I was concerned about interference with the accurate presentation of news and the freedom of the press. The evidence I saw enabled me to say that the threshold had been passed, and to ask Ofcom and the Competition and Markets Authority to look at the matter more broadly. They did that and they took some time to give me a very detailed report, which I further considered. In my letter sent in March, I set out the evidence from that report and my decision that I was minded to send the matter to phase 2 investigation. The letter in which I set out the evidence on which I relied has been published, I believe.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As a former journalist and a former member of the Society of Editors in Scotland, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement because press freedom is vital in a democracy, as she says. The insidious influence of foreign states has to be protected against, not just in newspapers but, as we have heard, online and in television and radio. Does she agree that the matter is not settled with this step? We have to be continually aware of the danger of foreign interference and the insidious growth of that influence in our media by all means. Will the Government take that on board and continue to monitor the situation on a regular basis?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, the Government always keep matters under review. I can reassure the hon. Member that we have a robust system to deal with interference with press freedom. We had that in the Enterprise Act; my powers as Secretary of State under that Act in relation to interference with the accurate presentation of news and the freedom of the press were clear and robust. I took various decisions at each stage to ensure those matters were fully investigated. The hon. Member can also take reassurance from the fact that the legislation that will be coming back to the House this afternoon will put beyond that doubt, and set out that a foreign state cannot interfere with our newspapers. Every hon. Member who has expressed a view across the Chamber

is of the view, which I share, that a foreign state should not be able to control, influence or own a British newspaper.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I welcome this intervention that means that the UAE cannot own Telegraph Media Group through RedBird IMI, but there is a suggestion that foreign Governments could potentially interfere with free speech at universities that host institutes partly funded by them. The Government-appointed director for freedom of speech and academic freedom has warned that foreign interference at universities is going on in the UK. What lessons, if any, will be instructive for the Government's so-called university free speech tsar?

Lucy Frazer: I am wholly in favour of free speech and ensuring that people are not shut down for their views. The hon. Member needs to take up his points with those responsible for universities.

Points of Order

1.38 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As our constituents look ahead to the May day bank holiday, in addition, on 1 May, Gujaratis and Maharashtrians in Harrow, across the UK and globally celebrate Gujarat Day and Maharashtra Day, marking the formation of the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra in India back in 1960. The day is a moment of pride and celebration for all Gujaratis and Maharashtrians. It is a chance to honour the rich history, culture and traditions of both states, and, crucially, the often remarkable contribution of those of all faiths in both communities here in the UK. Mr Deputy Speaker, have you had notice of any intention by the Government to mark the contribution of both communities here in the UK?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I have not had any indication that the Government intend to make a statement on this subject, but he has placed his point on the record.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In almost nine years in this House I have never before raised a point of order, but I am obliged to do so now because of my exasperation with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. On 6 February, I wrote to Lord Cameron, the Foreign Secretary, asking for information about the UK's decision to withdraw funding from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. To date, almost three months later, I have had neither acknowledgement nor response. Given what is happening in Gaza, the urgent need for humanitarian aid and the role of UNRWA in that, I find that quite unacceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know that there is widespread disquiet in this House about the fact that we cannot question the Foreign Secretary here in the Chamber. Now, not only is he not prepared to answer oral questions, but his Department is not answering written questions in a timely manner. Can you please advise me of what action I and other Members might take to get a response from the Foreign Secretary and to hold that Department to account?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving the Chair notice of his question. He will understand immediately that the Chair is not responsible for ministerial correspondence. I have noted what he has said, and of course it is the case that all Members should be entitled to receive timely replies. I trust that point will have been taken on board by those on the Government Front Bench.

PRESENTATION OF BILL

TENANT FARMING COMMISSIONER

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron presented a Bill to establish a Tenant Farming Commissioner; to make provision about the powers and duties of the commissioner, including powers in respect of payments under an Environmental Land Management scheme in cases where a tenant farmer has been evicted; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 208).

Public Amenities (Adoption by Local Authorities)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.14 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require local authorities to adopt public amenities in certain circumstances where specified minimum standards are met; and for connected purposes.

People living in Harrow View West in my constituency have faced a huge increase in their service charges since they purchased their properties. Built by Persimmon on part of the old Kodak site, neighbouring the beautiful Headstone Manor Park, the start of the River Crane, home to the only moated manor house in London—now Harrow Museum—and with good transport links, Harrow View West should be a great investment for the many young families who have moved into homes on that development.

Many residents, however, have been left very frustrated by rising service charges,

their powerlessness and inability to secure clear and transparent information about those service charges and other dreadful customer service. Persimmon Homes and its management company, Residential Management Group, are as a result the source of considerable dissatisfaction among the residents for their more than doubling of the service charge since the residents took ownership of their properties.

Not surprisingly, the residents now want Harrow Council to take over the ownership

of the public spaces on the development—the roads and the estate park—and the maintenance costs that are being forced on to their service charges. The residents note that others not living on their estate can access and enjoy the public spaces on the development for free, while they are being charged. Anyone can use the roads in the development to park on, to access Headstone Manor or the surrounding roads.

Despite the extra cost for the upkeep of these public spaces, residents point out that they still have to pay their council tax on top of the rising service charges. I am concerned that other developments being planned in Harrow, or built now, will see residents facing the same problems if new rules are not brought in urgently.

As the law stands at the moment, the decision as to who is responsible for the public spaces in big new developments is resolved at the planning stage. Councils all too often, and for understandable reasons after 14 years of funding cutbacks, are wary of taking on responsibility for new public space. Their negotiations with developers about how maintenance costs for any new roads, parks or playgrounds are funded often end with cash-strapped local authorities wanting those costs to be paid for first by the developer and then ultimately by the residents of the new developments. This form of leasehold has been labelled “fleecehold”, because it leads to higher costs for those living in newly built homes than for those faced by people who buy an older home on roads for which the local authorities are already responsible.

The Competition and Markets Authority has looked at this issue in detail during its market study into house building and has made it clear that it thinks that councils should have a legal duty to adopt the public spaces in new developments such as Harrow View West—the roads, pavements, play areas and open spaces. Crucially, it thinks that developers should have clearly set out responsibilities to meet high standards for those public spaces before they are handed over.

I understand why, after years of austerity, local councils want to avoid ownership of new estates and the responsibility for new public open spaces. Too often, they simply do not have the money to feel able to do the right thing. But that is not fair on those living in newly built estates who move in with great hopes, often with promises of low service charges, only suddenly to see rising service charges, which too often they have zero control over in practice. They have to deal with often unaccountable estate management companies, yet still have to pay often rising amounts of council tax.

Like, I expect, every Member in this House, many leaseholders in my constituency find themselves stuck, facing unjustified administration fees and charges, and ever-rising ground rents. Leaseholders find themselves dependent on developers, freeholders and their managing agent to take action, which often takes far longer than it should, particularly given those rocketing service charges.

At Trident Point in my constituency, residents were subject to regular and extended periods of lift outages. One constituent in the building is a wheelchair user. For him, lift outages meant that he was confined to his flat, deeply concerned about what would happen in an emergency. Leaseholders were initially told by Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing that residents would have to cover the costs of the lift refurbishment, which caused significant stress and worry. Eventually, the housing association accepted that the lifts were still under warranty, so no costs were passed on. The lifts were eventually refurbished and completed earlier this year. It took far too long to sort out, but we got there in the end. I thank Harrow Law Centre, which supported residents on this issue at the time.

In another example in my constituency—this time, Kinleigh Folkard & Hayward were the developers—leaseholder residents waited more than three years for action to be taken by the managing agent, despite, again, rocketing service charges. Another developer, Jaspar development group, has caused difficulties for my constituents. Its managing agent keeps changing, service charges keep going up, and there is still no resolution of residents’ concerns.

This is also not the first time that I have seen leaseholders finding themselves financially responsible for the upkeep of what one would reasonably assume are public parks and public amenities. In my constituency, Fairview has built another development that includes a playground bordering the main road. It is managed by a management company on behalf of the freeholder. Residents are worried that there is no fencing between the playground and the road and some have witnessed children going into the road to retrieve footballs. It would seem sensible that all options, such as signage and fencing, should be considered to keep children safe in that playground, but residents have been told that it is not the local council that should undertake this work and that it is leaseholders who would have to foot the bill through their service

charges. The playground is not just for the children of residents but, rightly, for all children to enjoy, so surely that should mean that the playground is adopted by the local council.

I recognise that there has been some progress since the Law Commission published its three reports in July 2020 on leasehold reform. The Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022, which applied only to new lease agreements, was a step in the right direction, but it still leaves my constituents stuck in unfair leasehold arrangements. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, currently making its way through Parliament, is very limited in scope. Although I welcome that Bill, it does not go far enough: it does not ban leasehold; it does not enact the recommendations of the Law Commission in full; and, crucially, it does not tackle the problem that my constituents have faced with unadopted roads and public facilities.

We on the Opposition Benches are clear that a future Labour Government would make commonhold the default tenure for all new properties. Indeed, as my Front-Bench colleagues have made it clear, we support enacting the Law Commission's recommendations on enfranchisement, commonhold and right to manage in full.

In addition, my Bill would deliver the recommendations from the Competition and Markets Authority that, where specified standards have been met with regard to public spaces, councils would then be mandated to adopt those public spaces. It is time for Ministers to come off the fence and implement those recommendations, for the benefit of my constituents on the old Kodak site and all those who are currently locked into this "fleecehold" model of housing. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gareth Thomas, Bill Esterson, Yvonne Fovargue, Sir Stephen Timms, Matt Rodda, Anna McMorrin, Dame Diana Johnson, Clive Efford, Ruth Cadbury, Matt Western, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi and Andy Slaughter present the Bill.

Gareth Thomas accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June, and to be printed (Bill 209).

DIGITAL MARKETS, COMPETITION AND CONSUMERS BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 17 May 2023 (Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill: Programme) as varied by the Order of 20 November 2023 (Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill: Programme (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after their commencement.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: Lords Amendments 9, 12, 13, 19, 26, 27, 28, 31, 32, 38, 104, 1 to 8, 10, 11, 14 to 18, 20 to 25, 29, 30, 33 to 37, 39 to 103 and 105 to 148.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Mark Fletcher.)

Question agreed to.

Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 35, 36, 42, 112, 117, 128 and 132 to 134. If those Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Clause 19

POWER TO IMPOSE CONDUCT REQUIREMENTS

1.51 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 9.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendment 12, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 13, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 19, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 26, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 27, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 28, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 31, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 32, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 38, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendment 104, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 1 to 8, 10, 11, 14 to 18, 20 to 25, 29 to 30, 33 to 37, 39 to 103 and 105 to 148.

Kevin Hollinrake: It is a pleasure to bring this groundbreaking Bill back to the House. It will drive innovation and deliver better outcomes for consumers across the UK by addressing barriers to competition in digital markets and tackling consumer rip-offs. We believe it strikes the right balance, not deterring investment from big tech while encouraging investment from challenger tech. I thank Members of both Houses for their careful scrutiny and I commend the collaborative cross-party approach taken during the Bill's passage to date.

I will start with the amendments that the Government made in the other place. They add vital new provisions to the Bill and I hope hon. Members will agree to them. Part 1 of the Bill establishes a new pro-competition regime for digital markets, which will be overseen and enforced by the Competition and Markets Authority's digital markets unit. Following engagement with Members

in the other place, we have bolstered transparency provisions to require the CMA to publish more of the notices provided to firms designated with strategic market status, or SMS.

All interested parties will now be able to access the information contained in those notices, ensuring that there is greater clarity on the DMU's decisions relating to SMS designation, conduct requirements and pro-competition interventions. A number of hon. Members have called for provisions addressing asymmetry of information to be introduced to the Bill, so we hope this change will be welcomed.

On part 2 of the Bill, which deals with wider competition reforms, hon. Members will recall that on Report the Government added a provision on litigation funding, whose purpose was to restore the previously held understanding of the status of litigation funding agreements under the Competition Act 1998. Those provisions were important in providing a route to justice for groups with limited resources—for example, our sub-postmasters.

That step was taken in response to an earlier Supreme Court judgment that had made litigation funding agreements unenforceable. The Government have since acted by introducing the Litigation Funding Agreements (Enforceability) Bill, which will deliver on our commitment to addressing the impacts of that judgment in all types of proceedings. Consequently, the provisions in this Bill have been removed, as they are no longer required.

We also introduced new measures to part 2 to address concerns about the potential ownership of UK newspapers and news magazines by foreign states, as we heard very recently from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The Government know that we cannot overstate the importance of those publications to our democracy and have therefore taken decisive action to preserve the freedom of the press. By establishing a new regime within the Enterprise Act 2002, the Bill will prevent foreign states from having ownership of, or control or influence over, a UK newspaper or news magazine.

The Government are extremely grateful for the support offered by Members of both Houses in the development of these new measures. In particular, we thank Baroness Stowell of Beeston and Lord Forsyth of Drumlean for their engagement, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who first secured a debate on the issue in January.

Parts 3 and 4 make important updates and improvements to UK consumer law. Having consulted on a series of reforms at the end of last year, the Government amended the Bill in the other place to introduce new measures that address fake reviews and drip pricing. Many hon. Members called for the Government to address those harms through the Bill, and I am pleased to say that we have been able to do so, following our public consultation.

We have also made amendments to further strengthen the ability of public bodies to enforce consumer law. We did so by extending so-called take-down powers to a wider range of enforcers. There has been a healthy debate in both Houses about the measures in the Bill aimed at tackling subscription traps. We listened carefully to the concerns expressed in the other place about the potential impact of those measures on charities and their ability to claim gift aid. In response, the Government amended the Bill to enable the Treasury to update gift

aid rules. That mitigates any concerns about the Bill's impact on charities. We are grateful to Lord Mendoza for highlighting the issue and for his engagement.

We also made a series of amendments to provide greater assurance and clarity for businesses about the new subscription measures, including addressing concerns about exiting contracts, cancellations, reminder notices and cooling-off periods. I hope that hon. Members agree that the amendments improve the Bill.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the fact that the Government are finally acting on the CMA's recommendation, but will the Government support amendment 104, which is backed by the Liberal Democrats? It is about imposing requirements on secondary ticket sites. Often, people purchasing tickets from the sites do so at huge mark-ups on the face value of the ticket, and the ticket in question does not actually exist. The amendment would address those issues, reducing the risk of fraud by requiring proof of purchase. Does the Minister agree that we must do everything we can to ensure that this legislation is as robust as possible, to crack down on this type of fraud?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and for the amendment, which I will speak to in a moment. The Government have agreed to undertake a review of both primary and secondary markets, and I will deal with those issues later in my remarks. *[Interruption.]* I hear from the shadow Front-Bench spokespeople, but I think that is something that Labour proposed in earlier amendments, so obviously they have changed their position on that issue—not for the first time.

Finally, the Government made a number of minor amendments to the Bill in the other place. The majority are tidying-up measures, or otherwise small tweaks to the Bill, to ensure that it achieves its policy intent as effectively as possible.

I will now set out the Government's position on the 11 non-Government amendments that were made to the Bill in the other place. The majority of the amendments seek to reverse or alter amendments made to the digital markets part of the Bill on Report in this House. There were three aims behind the Government's package of amendments on Report in the Commons: first, to provide greater clarity to parties interacting with the regime; secondly, to strengthen the regime's safeguards for the extensive new regulatory powers; and thirdly, to enhance the accountability of the regulator. The Government tabled the amendments following careful consideration of the views expressed by hon. Members across the House. We remain convinced that our amendments struck the right balance between the accountability of the CMA's regulatory decisions and the flexibility to allow for targeted and proportionate action that tackles the unique competition challenges in digital markets.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that the amendments that were agreed on Report in this House struck the right balance, and I am afraid that on this occasion I wholly disagree with the way their lordships characterised the matter in their debate. We are not arguing for a wholesale replication of the telecoms regime; we are simply making sure that,

particularly with regard to penalties, which will be pretty onerous—and rightly so—there is proper discretion to allow a reviewing tribunal and reviewing court to consider the matter carefully, in a way that balances out the need for rigour and for temper when it comes to the power of the regulator.

2 pm

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his intervention and his earlier engagement, when he made his position on that point clear. He is right to say that penalties can be significant—up to 10% of global turnover—so it is fair that we allow organisations to challenge penalties on the merits of the case, but maintain the ability to impose pro-competition interventions and conduct requirements on platforms. The amendments made in the other place risk undermining that careful balance. For example, amendments to revert the appeals standard for fines to judicial review principles, to which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) referred, would remove a valuable safeguard on the significant new powers that the Bill gives the CMA, as would the removal of the requirement on the CMA to act proportionately. Meanwhile, amendments to the countervailing benefits exemption risk making the exemption less clear for stakeholders. Consequently, the Government have tabled a motion to disagree with those amendments.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The point about a “proportionate” response is relevant. In the original drafting of the Bill, the word used was “appropriate.” The Government changed that to “proportionate” on Report in this House, and the Lords have sought to reverse that change. What does the Minister think was disproportionate, if you like, about the word “appropriate”? What about it struck the wrong balance? Ministers keep saying that they think things strike the right balance, but they never really explain why.

Kevin Hollinrake: We have engaged significantly, throughout the Bill's passage and before it was introduced, with large tech and challenger tech. Our understanding is that all those cohorts are happy with where the Bill is today. Certainly, during that engagement, concerns were raised about the term “appropriate,” but the clear position that we expressed to those who raised that concern was, “Of course, there is a requirement on the CMA to act proportionately.” Putting that in the Bill does not undermine its basic principles. In fact, we understand from the situation in the European Court of Human Rights, and the property rights emanating from it, that all those things are baked in anyway, so we do not feel that the wording weakens the legislation at all, but it does strike the right balance between those two different courts.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is clearly important that we understand what “proportionate” means in this context. Is the Government's position that proportionality implies that there is more for the CMA to think about than just how effectively the imposition of a conduct requirement would fulfil the CMA's requirements? If so, what can the Government do to make that clear, so that courts and tribunals that

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

consider such cases do not fill in the gaps themselves? The words “appropriate” and “proportionate” could be interpreted quite widely if the Government are not clear about what they mean by them.

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. and learned Friend will know from his legal background that the term “proportionate” is well established in law. Of course, the courts play an important part here. We do not prescribe everything in our legislation; there is quite rightly the opportunity for people to challenge certain decisions by the CMA. Clearly, we are trying to reduce the ability of large tech to prevent investment from smaller tech. That is the balance that we are striking, but we do not want to discourage investment from big tech, so the requirement for the CMA to act proportionately is reasonable.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Minister suggested that stakeholders were now satisfied with the Bill. I can tell him that there is concern about the change from “appropriate” to “proportionate.” The fear is that it will enable the courts to look more broadly, and will allow more scope for challenge than was intended when the term “appropriate” was used. Can he confirm that that is not the Government’s intention?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is not our intention. Our intention is to strike a balance. As I have said, the courts’ approach to proportionality was set out by the Supreme Court in *Bank Mellat v. Her Majesty’s Treasury (No. 2)*, when the Court described the elements to be considered, including, most notably,

“whether a less intrusive measure could have been used”

and whether there is a fair balance between the intended objectives of the measure and the effects on the business that the measure applies to. That is a sensible balance to strike. Of course, some stakeholders want to go further in certain directions, while others do not want us to go as far, and we are trying to strike that balance. We welcome big tech’s investment in the UK, but we also welcome investment by challenger tech, and through this groundbreaking Bill—the only one of its kind in the world—we are striking that balance.

We have listened carefully to arguments relating to the Secretary of State’s approval of CMA guidance. Lords amendment 38, which was tabled by Lord Lansley, adds a timeline for the Secretary of State approving CMA guidance relating to the new regime. In response, we have tabled amendment (a) in lieu, which would achieve a similar effect by introducing a statutory 30-working-day timeline for the Secretary of State to approve the necessary guidance. We believe that that addresses concerns about the ability of the digital markets regime to start tackling competition problems without delay. We hope that hon. Members will support amendment (a).

On secondary ticketing, a non-Government amendment—to which the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) referred—was made in the other place to the consumer part of the Bill. Amendment 104, which was tabled by Lord Moynihan, seeks to introduce additional regulatory requirements on ticket resale sites. Those requirements would cover proof of purchase, ticket limits

and the visibility of certain required information, such as the face value of a ticket. Both Lord Moynihan and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) have spoken passionately on that topic during proceedings on the Bill. We are hugely grateful for their work highlighting the malpractice in the resale market.

To be clear, the Government are absolutely committed to protecting consumers from fraudulent activity in the secondary ticketing market. However, it is our view that protections for consumers are already provided by existing consumer law. The law imposes specific information requirements in relation to secondary ticketing that go above and beyond those in general consumer law. That includes the requirement for all resellers—be they traders or consumers—and secondary ticketing platforms to inform a buyer about the face value of a ticket and the restrictions on its use. The Government’s position is therefore that the secondary ticketing market is already suitably regulated. That said, we recognise the strength of feeling on this matter, which has been expressed by Members of the other place and in certain quarters of this House, so we commit today to undertaking a review of ticketing practices and how they impact on consumers. The review will look at both primary and secondary markets—in other words, sellers and resellers. We believe it important to consider both markets together.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. I know that we have debated this point before, and I will discuss it further in my contribution, but I make the point again that there may be legislation, but it is not working. There have been only two prosecutions in all the time since the Consumer Rights Act 2015 was passed. If further legislation was not needed, why did we bring in legislation to protect tickets for the Olympics?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is not right to say that there have been only two prosecutions—

Mrs Hodgson rose—

Kevin Hollinrake: I will just finish this answer. There have been two sentences. Two people got a £6.1 million fine. There were four more successful prosecutions in Leeds Crown court only very recently, and sentence is due to be imposed on those individuals. The hon. Lady raises important points, and did great work on the all-party parliamentary group, and I will always listen to her. We are undertaking a review looking at primary and secondary markets, and she will have every chance to give her input to that review, just as anybody else will. I look forward to hearing her representations.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Government claim that they are doing enough, but that is just not the case. Here is an example for the Minister: on secondary ticketing sites, three tickets for the Taylor Swift show on 21 June are going for £72,000. They had a face value of £170 each. How is the market working?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree that some of the examples are shocking. The key question is what measures we will put in place to address them. Ireland, for example, completely banned secondary sales, yet the prices seen

on the internet are equivalent to what the hon. Lady describes, so there is no perfect solution that has already been tried. However, we are very happy to look at the evidence, look at what might be done, and do something that is effective, rather than crowd-pleasing. That is what we are committed to doing.

The reality is that some organisers are simply much more successful than others at preventing large-scale unauthorised resales. The ticket market is clearly evolving rapidly. Our review will therefore consider evidence from businesses and platforms operating in ticketing and resale markets, as well as venues, artists, enforcers and consumers. The Government intend the review to take place over nine months, after which we will consider any appropriate further action. [HON. MEMBERS: “You won’t be there.”] Members who are commenting from a sedentary position should beware of overconfidence.

I very much hope that hon. Members will support the Government’s position today. I especially hope that Members in both Houses will note our movement in two important areas: the Secretary of State’s approval of CMA guidance for the new digital markets regime, and secondary ticketing. These changes are considered and balanced, and I urge Members in the other place to consider their position on the other amendments that our motions today seek to reject. Throughout the Bill’s passage, the Government have listened carefully to the arguments presented, and in response, we have made a series of significant changes where we recognise that improvements could be made. It is important that we now reach full consensus on the Bill’s final form, so that it reaches the statute book without further delay.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to my much-loved neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who led for Labour during the last round of proceedings on the Bill, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who led for us when the Bill was introduced.

Might I say a few words about the Minister? I do love the Minister. Members sitting on the Government Back Benches will not have been able to see the little wry smile playing on his face as he made his speech. Unfortunately, *Hansard* is not able to record that element of the way he presented his case. I will let the House into a secret: there are two versions of the Minister, or rather the Member. There is the Back-Bench Member, who I passionately agree with on nearly everything, and then there is the Government Minister, who has the Back-Bench Member sitting inside him somewhere, but has managed to lose him while taking on corporate and shared responsibility on the Government Front Benches. I bet that if he were in the Parliament that follows the next general election, and we debated these matters all over again, he would be articulating what I am about to say almost word for word, but today, he has articulated the Government position.

Sir John Whittingdale: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: Of course I will, to the right hon. Gentleman—another gentleman for whom I have a great deal of respect, and with whom I occasionally disagree.

Sir John Whittingdale: I just wonder whether the transformation that the hon. Gentleman describes, which occurs when somebody moves from the Back Benches to the Front Bench, applies equally to the Opposition and the Government.

Sir Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman knows more about bobbing between the Back Benches and the Front Bench than most Members of Parliament in history, I think. It is obviously a problem; I do believe in shared responsibility of Government—we want Governments to act as a single body, and not irresponsibly—so I understand, but none the less, it is perfectly appropriate to tease the Minister when he has such a wry smile on his lips.

This Bill is a classic instance of how the Tory chaos of the past few years has been bad for Britain. It is long overdue, as the Minister said: it started in the Commons more than a year ago, on 25 April 2023, and it is so delayed that the carry-over motion had to be carried over. I cannot remember that happening for many years, but the Government had to do it last week. The Bill used to strike the right balance between the needs of different parts of the market, but the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) was absolutely right to say that many stakeholders are certainly not happy with where the Government have landed. Intense lobbying of Downing Street from some parts of the market has led to the Government tabling amendments that would fatally undermine the Bill’s purpose and make it impossible for the CMA to do the job that we want it to do, namely, ensure fair competition in digital markets in the interests of consumers, investors and wider society.

2.15 pm

I remind Members of what the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) has said—it is good to see him in his place. He said that this is

“a market that is vulnerable—and, some would say, prone—to monopolistic abuse of market power.”—[*Official Report*, 20 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 58.]

During the first Second Reading debate on 17 May last year, the Minister said that

“competition must work hand in hand with consumer protections.”—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2023; Vol. 732, c. 880.]

That is spot on, so why ruin the Bill? This is the nub of the matter. The hon. Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) said on Report that

“a small number of firms exert immense control across strategically critical services online because the unique characteristics of digital markets, such as network effects and data consolidation, make them prone to tip in favour of a few firms.”—[*Official Report*, 20 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 51.]

Again, he was absolutely right, but what the Government are doing today helps to tip the legislation back in favour of those few firms. It is a mistake. They pretend otherwise—the Minister has said that the amendments will not make any difference. In that case, why table them?

In an attempt to save the Government from themselves, the Lords have tried to return the Bill to its original shape with four sets of amendments, which I will now go through. The first set, Lords amendments 9 and 19, deals with proportionality. The original Government

version of the Bill said that the CMA's conduct in regulating digital markets had to be "appropriate". The Government then changed that to "proportionate". Lords amendment 9 would change it back to "appropriate". I believe that the Government version would, in effect, render any challenge to the CMA's conduct a test of the merits, rather than a judicial review, and provide big tech firms with limitless legal budgets with even more scope to tie the CMA up in lengthy legal wrangling. *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* in the Court of Chancery would have nothing on the CMA in the High Court. The Government seem to be deliberately clipping the wings of the CMA, and Labour agrees with their lordships that in this area, the Bill should be returned to its original form.

Sir Jeremy Wright: How would a tribunal consider the appropriateness of a CMA intervention without considering the detail and merit of it?

Sir Chris Bryant: The point is that either the change is necessary because a new and different measure is being adopted by the Government, in which case it is a lower threshold and therefore inappropriate, or the change makes no difference whatsoever, in which case it is unnecessary. The normal standards for deciding whether an amendment is appropriate would lead us to ask, "Is it necessary, or does it provide a good remedy?" I do not think that either is the case, which is why Labour does not support the Government's wording.

The second set of amendments, Lords amendments 12 and 13, deal with countervailing benefits. Just to prove that Labour Members speaking from the Dispatch Box are very consistent with one another, my next sentence was effectively said by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd in a previous debate: the countervailing benefits exemption allows the Competition and Markets Authority to close an investigation of a breach of a conduct requirement if a firm can demonstrate that its anti-competitive conduct produces benefits that outweigh the harm and are therefore indispensable. On Report in the Commons, the Government significantly reduced the threshold for that exemption, removing the word "indispensable" and merely requiring that "those benefits could not be realised without the conduct".

It sounds the same, but it is different—subtly but importantly different. The Lords amendments would remove that paragraph and alter the next line so that it reads

"the conduct is indispensable and proportionate to the realisation of those benefits".

I will make two points in this area. First, as I think everybody accepts, the "indispensable" standard is a well-understood concept in UK competition law: it is used in the Competition Act 1998, which I do not believe to be as outmoded as some Members have suggested. Secondly, the courts would interpret Parliament's deliberate move away from an existing, well-understood standard as intending to create a new, lower threshold, which again will inevitably allow the big tech firms greater scope to launch complex legal challenges.

If the Government really do not see any distinction between the two thresholds, the most obvious compromise would be to reinstate the word "indispensable" alongside the Bill's new wording and to clarify, today at the Dispatch Box and in the Bill's explanatory notes, that

the "indispensable" standard and the new form of words inserted by the Government have an identical meaning. Otherwise, there is a risk that the courts will seek to explore further whether Parliament has deliberately created a new threshold and standard.

I simply say to the Minister that I remember, when he was on the Back Benches and we had lengthy discussions about the powers of Companies House, that he was very keen on making sure that Companies House had the powers it needed to do proper investigations. He regularly made the point that lots of people have very deep legal pockets, and that does not necessarily mean that the consumer always wins out. I would argue that it is the same in this case.

Lords amendments 26 to 28 to clause 89 and Lords amendments 31 and 32 to clause 103 relate to appeals. The Bill originally had judicial review as the appeal standard for all CMA decisions under part 1, but in the Commons the Government moved to merits appeals for penalty decisions. I accept that this is only about penalty decisions, but I none the less believe that it is dangerous because, while the new regime is intended to be collaborative, it is ultimately the threat of fines that will incentivise big tech firms to comply with the CMA's decisions. If there is no prospect of a fine, whether large or small, those large tech firms may well decide to be less collaborative.

There is the even greater danger that merits appeals on penalty decisions bleed back across the Bill into regulatory decisions, giving big tech firms greater scope to frustrate and challenge the CMA's decisions. While it is correct that the courts are generally able to distinguish between judicial review and merits elements of appeals—that point has been made in previous debates by the former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright)—it does not eliminate the concern about the two bleeding into each other, especially if the two streams take place together in the same case. If the Government are unable to reinstate judicial review appeals across part 1, as we would prefer, a clarificatory amendment should be inserted in the Bill to provide certainty that appeals on penalties cannot impact on other regulatory decisions to eliminate scope for speculative challenges.

It is worth bearing in mind that the chief executive of the CMA has made it clear that the authority wants the judicial review standard to apply. She welcomed effective judicial scrutiny of its decisions, but said:

"We think that the JR standard achieves that."

She went on to say that her experience of merits appeals was that they result in

"very protracted litigation",
making it

"a lot harder to reach constructive, collaborative outcomes",
because

"all eyes are on that litigation process."—[*Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee*, 13 June 2023; c. 7, 8, Q4.]

Let me come on to the matter of ticket touting, and Lords amendment 104. I start by thanking Lord Moynihan—a Conservative peer, of course—for tabling this amendment and for his significant work across many years. When I have not agreed with every sentence from my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on this subject, I have sometimes felt the scratches on my back from her

very elegant fingernails, but she has also done enormous work, and I think she is much to be praised for it. There are many others in the House of whom that is true as well, including all those sitting next to her on the back row, who I am sure will catch your eye later, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I start from a very simple principle: the value of a ticket—whether for the rugby, the football or a gig at the O2—is created by the artists, the promoters and, above all, the fans. Yes, the secondary ticketing market can help all three, because sometimes people buy more tickets than they need or are unable to attend for whatever reason, but the abuse of the secondary market can lead to artists, promoters and fans all losing out, and abuse is rife.

I will take an example of a case that has already been through the courts. It is that of Lynda Chenery, Mark Woods, Maria Chenery-Woods and Paul Douglas, who bought and resold concert tickets worth £6.5 million. They bought them on primary sites, including Ticketmaster, before reselling them on secondary ticketing platforms, such as Viagogo, at inflated prices. They used endless tricks, including sending customers ripped envelopes to imply that the tickets had been lost in transit or using fraud juice, which involved the use of Tipp-Ex correcting fluid or more sophisticated digital methods, to amend tickets. They held their customers in open derision. Having scammed one person into paying £535 for a ticket for the Harry Potter west end show, they referred to him in an email as “another idiot”. These people are despicable parasites preying on fans, and we need to go far further to address this issue.

This practice prices many fans out of the market and adds no value whatsoever to the creative process, at a time when creators are in desperate need of making a living out of their craft. In 2016, one ticket for Adele at the O2 arena in London was listed on GetMeIn for £24,840, which is 290 times the face value of the ticket. Nobody in the Rhondda would be to afford such a ticket. Incidentally, Wimbledon faces exactly the same set of problems.

Viagogo is today selling two tickets for Pink at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff on 11 June for £498 each. I think the fans could perfectly legitimately start shouting:

“What about us?”

What about all the plans that ended in disaster?”

It is not obvious what the original price was for those tickets. On Viagogo, people can get one ticket for Peter Kay at the O2 on 4 May for £302, or tickets for “The Book of Mormon”—it has been in the theatre for several years, and is a wonderful, hilarious show—on 4 May at £420 each. In a way, the one that upsets me the most is that tickets for the ballet “The Winter’s Tale” at the Royal Opera House on 3 May—a Friday night—are £1,006 each, but people can buy those tickets from the Royal Opera House for £140, because there is taxpayer involvement in supporting the Royal Opera House.

We could say the same of StubHub, on which two standing tickets for Doja Cat in Glasgow on 11 June with a face value of £162 are selling at £1,002. This is a pernicious industry. It is parasitical, it does nothing for the creative industries in this country and we must tackle it.

Mrs Hodgson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: I feel the fingernails.

Mrs Hodgson: I waited until my hon. Friend got to the end of all those disgraceful, abhorrent examples. Will he clarify for me a fallacy that the touts often put around about me and my hon. Friends—they will say the same about him? They say that we want to stop people being able to resell their tickets when they cannot go—they have bought them in good faith and genuinely cannot go. Will he clarify that that is not what any of us seeks to do? I of course want people to be able to resell their tickets, but at face value. Does he agree?

Sir Chris Bryant: I completely agree, and that is Labour party policy. I am used to fallacies being written about me, and I have seen many written about my hon. Friend as well. I am sure we will all get over it. Incidentally, that is why, as I shall come on to say later, it is very important that we have a free press that is able to say what it wants, free from the intervention of state owners from other countries.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, it is perfectly legitimate for somebody who has bought a couple of tickets for Saturday night and who suddenly finds that they are ill, that they have to go to a family engagement or that they have bought tickets for the wrong night to be able to sell them on at face value, or perhaps for a little bit more simply to cover the cost of administration and things like that. However, this is a market that is not working. It is an example of market failure, not an example of market success.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Sir Chris Bryant: I feel more fingernails.

Barbara Keeley: My fingernails are nothing like as bad. Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem is actually worse than just the prices he quoted, of which he gave some really good and powerful examples, because of the selling of tickets that do not actually exist—fraudulent tickets? I have heard from a number of venues about the selling of tickets that should go to carers or young people. People are turning up at events such as those at the O2 and other venues with these tickets and being turned away, often when they have travelled to London and paid for hotels. So there is all the disappointment and the financial loss of that on top of the ticket prices.

Sir Chris Bryant: I completely agree, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are terrible instances of all sorts of different scams, and—this is the honest truth—remarkably few prosecutions. Whether the number is two, four or five, it should be in the hundreds. *[Interruption.]* Six—half a dozen—great!

The truth is that we all know instances from our constituencies of people who have faced precisely these problems. I have had constituents say to me, “I feel too embarrassed to own up to having bought these tickets.” I remember going past the Millennium stadium in Cardiff, or Arms Park in the old days, and we all despised the ticket touts, just as we did outside a Kate Bush concert or whatever. Sometimes, however, we were just so desperate that we bought the tickets, and they of course turned out to be fraudulent or non-existent, or they were allocated to specific kinds of people that did not include us. All those points are worth making, and I would add this one: all local authorities have trading

[Sir Chris Bryant]

standards offices but many are now so depleted because of the state of local government finances that it is very difficult for anybody to get proper recompense and a deal.

2.30 pm

The Lords amendment—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, I am not sure whether the Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), was seeking to intervene. [*Interruption.*] Indeed, he is not allowed to, poor thing; he is silenced. Lords amendment 104 does the bare minimum. It would require facilities to accept postings only if they provide evidence of purchase from the primary market, it would limit the resale of more tickets than a single customer can buy on the primary market, and it would require clear information on the face value and trader's business name and address on the first page of a secondary ticketing facility. That is simply not seen on any of these sites today.

If the Conservative Government refuse to act, Labour will. We will bring these measures in and go further, restricting the resale of tickets at more than a small set percentage over the price the original purchaser paid, including fees. Fans have been waiting for far too long. A Labour Government would end the pernicious and predatory ticket touting and put fans back at the heart of music, cultural and sporting events, where they belong. And if I might just say so, the idea of a review—

Kevin Hollinrake: It was your idea.

Sir Chris Bryant: Well, we have moved on and it is about time the Government moved on—in fact I look forward to the day when the Minister moves on from Government Benches to here on the Opposition Benches. The idea of a review at the dog end of a Parliament and at the end of the regime is absolutely pathetic, and I am glad the Minister is laughing at himself for even presenting the suggestion today.

Let me end with an area of agreement. We were glad that the Government, under pressure, tabled Lords amendment 117 on mergers involving newspaper enterprises and foreign powers along the lines of measures that we and others, including a large number of Conservative MPs and peers, had called for. Of course the UK must remain an open economy; we welcome foreign investment in many sectors in the UK. But we agree that in this limited area, the state ownership of UK newspaper and media companies must be a matter for concern, which is why we support the Lords amendment. We will need to make sure in future years that it is adequate to the situation we find, not least bearing in mind many of the comments made earlier by Members on both sides of the House regarding the rather fluid world we are moving into, where newspapers are a rather outdated concept and social media and other forms of online media are far more significant. We will keep that under review, therefore, but we welcome the amendment the Government have tabled.

This long-delayed Bill could go forward with strong, unanimous support if the Government abandoned their tilt towards the few potentially monopolistic companies

and set aside their objections to the Lords amendments. Those objections are either completely otiose or they are dangerous. The Minister says they make no difference, I say they do, but on either grounds they should go, so we support their lordships in their amendments.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): May I start by saying that this was and still is a good Bill? It does an enormous number of very important things and I am glad to see that it has broad acceptance and agreement on both sides of the House, although with some minor points of disagreement. It contains many of the measures that I personally called for in my Government-commissioned review of competition policy called “Power to the people” a little while ago, and it definitely updates and makes some much-needed changes to our competition and consumer laws. However, I share some of the concerns raised today about the Government's opposition to four of the amendments that have come back from the Lords.

I do not have worries about the Lords amendments themselves because, as we have just heard from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), they mainly seek to restore the effect of clauses that were in the Bill when it originally came to this House. What worries me is that the wrong people are clapping. The changes that the Government have made, in many cases by seeking to resist Lords amendments, seem to many people to be on the side of the big tech firms rather than on the side of consumers, of sharper competition, of more consumer choice and of standing up for the man and woman in the street. I therefore earnestly hope that the Minister will be able to channel his historical zeal for these things in his closing remarks and reassure me, and I am sure others as well, that that is not the Government's intention and that they remain committed to those things—that the fire still burns brightly in his eyes to make them happen.

I start by saying that the Government have already done some of that work with amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 38—they have replaced the Lansley amendment with a version of their own—dealing with the amount of time that the Secretary of State can take in dealing with guidance put forward by the CMA to make sure it is not unduly delayed. That is extremely welcome and a very good measure, and I enthusiastically support it. However, we have already heard about two other things in particular. One is the role of judicial review in dealing with penalties. I share the concern that in moving away from a judicial review standard for penalties to a full merits review we may get bleed-across—that clever lawyers working for big tech firms may effectively be able to broaden the scope through clever use of legal techniques to prolong their attempts to walk backwards slowly and prevent justice from being done. I therefore devoutly hope that my good friend the Minister will be able to clarify that he expects to be able to show to us—either from the Dispatch Box now, or in guidance or another kind of clarification in due course—that it will not be possible for bleed-across to happen and he will be able to take any steps that may be needed.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to make that commitment. We believe the Bill draws a clear distinction between infringement decisions and penalty decisions. After taking legal advice on this matter and looking at

previous competition case law considering similar issues, the Government consider that neither the Competition Appeal Tribunal nor the higher courts will have any trouble making that distinction for digital markets appeals. We have clarified that in the explanatory notes, which I hope provides reassurance that there is little risk of bleed-back from the merits appeal standard for penalty appeals to appeals on other types of decisions.

John Penrose: I thank the Minister for that intervention and, emboldened by my success so far in getting him to front up, I move on to my second point, which has similar concerns around it: the issue of countervailing benefits. We have heard from the Opposition spokesman about that, so I will not go through it all again, but it would be enormously helpful if, either now in a further intervention or in his closing remarks, the Minister could be clear about the new wording, which we have already heard about in his speech. I hope he will make it clear—again, either through clarifications now or in guidance—that it is not intended to be in any way a lower standard than what we had before when this Bill first came to the House, and that it is either the same or tougher. I am pausing just briefly to see whether he wants to intervene.

Kevin Hollinrake *rose*—

John Penrose: He does, which is marvellous.

Kevin Hollinrake: The revised wording did not change the effects of the clause. Strategic market status firms will still have to prove that there is no other reasonable and practicable way to achieve the same benefits for consumers with less competitive effect.

John Penrose: We are making marvellous progress and ending up with changes being confirmed on the Floor of the House in a way I do not think I have seen before, so let us keep going.

Sir Chris Bryant *rose*—

John Penrose: I am sure this will be an equally constructive intervention, of course.

Sir Chris Bryant: Would it not be even more helpful if the Minister were to say he would change the explanatory memorandums as well?

John Penrose: I am sure the Minister will grab that opportunity in his closing remarks, if he so wishes. At least he has taken the opportunity to stand up and give us public reassurances on the record about the standard that is intended. It is clear that it is no lower than it originally was, which is an important change.

Kevin Hollinrake *rose*—

John Penrose: And again.

Kevin Hollinrake: The shadow Minister and I are having this debate vicariously, but I just note that the wording in the explanatory notes has not changed.

John Penrose: I am on a roll here.

The final of the four issues in question is proportionality. We have had the debate already, so I do not propose to repeat the concerns, but it would be helpful if the Minister, either now or in his closing remarks, clarified that the new and amended standard that is to be applied is no lower. I think he said something to that effect

earlier to the former Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), but it would be helpful just to nail that one down and drive the nail home, if the Minister can. It is important for everybody to understand whether that new standard is any lower at all; it should be the same or higher.

Kevin Hollinrake *indicated assent.*

John Penrose: The Minister is nodding, but I do not know whether he intends to intervene again.

Kevin Hollinrake *indicated dissent.*

John Penrose: We will have to preserve our souls in patience for the Minister's closing remarks. I will declare victory very shortly. It has been a helpful set of interventions, and I thank him for that.

My final point is not related to these Lords amendments, but to a commitment that the Minister made at the Dispatch Box on Report in response to an amendment on better regulation that I had tabled with the support of a great number of parliamentary colleagues. He made a commitment that a set of conclusions, matching a set of standards whose wording he and I had agreed in advance, would be in place before the Bill receives Royal Assent. Clearly we are getting close to that date—I hope very close—and I understand that a Government White Paper may be in the offing, but I am not sure whether that will arrive before Royal Assent. My point is intended not to delay Royal Assent, but to bring forward the White Paper or whatever document the Government may be thinking of.

Based on conversations I have had so far, I am also concerned that not all the commitments the Minister made from the Dispatch Box may be in that White Paper. I therefore urge him to make sure that between now and Royal Assent, he works assiduously with his fellow Ministers to make sure they have got the memo that should gone round after he made those commitments.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Scottish National party Members continue to support this Bill, and we support each of the Lords amendments. Notwithstanding the rather dizzying pinball rattle of interventions that went on between the Minister, the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), I will be a bit of a traditionalist stick-in-the-mud and stick to the wording in the amendments and the Bill, no matter what references might be made subsequently to the ghosts of debates past in *Hansard*.

On Lords amendment 9 and “proportionate” versus “appropriate”, it might seem to people outside this Chamber that we are dancing on a pinhead, but such distinctions matter. It is important that decisions of the Competition and Markets Authority should be allowed to stand wherever they deserve to, but that means not allowing unnecessary wriggle room to creep in for entities with deep pockets to challenge decisions not on the basis of principle, but on the grounds of what those entities consider proportionate. We consider that replacing the word “proportionate” is appropriate in this case, and we support the Lords amendment on that basis.

Lords amendment 13 reinserts the word “indispensable”. As the shadow Minister said, that term is well understood in competition law, but it also happens to be proportionate

[Richard Thomson]

and appropriate in this case. It is entirely possible to envisage anti-competitive behaviour that can bring about consumer benefit either as a direct or indirect consequence, but we are clear that any benefits that arise should be such that they cannot be done without or forgone and that the test should be set accordingly.

With Lords amendments 26, 28, 31 and 32, we have believed throughout the Bill's passage that the judicial review level is the appropriate appeals standard, rather than a full merits review. That is why we support those Lords amendments.

2.45 pm

Finally, amendment 104 would introduce new requirements on secondary ticketing. We have heard in a number of interventions about the frankly astronomical, larcenous, almost confiscatory charges that are put on some tickets for certain events in the secondary market. It is important to note that it is not just about the price of the ticket; a considerable set of other economic choices go on around the purchasing of a ticket, including travel to and from the gig, the other tickets that people are buying, accommodation and food and drink. It is a huge financial and emotional investment for many families to go to some of those events, whether they are the highest profile events or something just of particular interest to that family or friendship group. We should be doing our utmost to provide the best protections for people who seek to achieve these experiences when spending their hard-earned money.

The Minister has announced a review of secondary ticketing to report in nine months' time. I will not be as churlish as the shadow Minister; I can muster at least two cheers for that, although the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) was right that this Government are unlikely to be in place to carry through the recommendations if they report on a nine-month timescale. The House should be in doubt that the course of action before us today that could have the greatest impact on the secondary ticket market would be to pass the modest, reasonable recommendations before us in Lords amendment 104.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I hope that this is the last time we see this Bill coming through this Chamber. As I say, we support the Bill, but it is not beyond improvement, even at this late stage. In our view, it could certainly be improved, were the Government simply to do the right thing and accept the amendments before us today.

Damian Collins: I will speak briefly on the question that I raised earlier in the debate about the change of language from “appropriate” to “proportionate” and follow on from the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). On one level, what the Minister is saying now—similar to what the Minister in the House of Lords, Lord Camrose, said in the debates there—is that proportionality is implicit in the law anyway and that the rights an organisation would have under article 1 of the European convention on human rights would apply anyway. Ministers are saying that bringing this language into the Bill is therefore a tidying-up exercise that re-emphasises rights that people already have. On another level, Ministers are also saying that this change creates a better balance, which means

that there will be some change in how things work. It is important at this point that the House is clear about what is intended with this change.

There is a concern that the change effectively opens up a full merits appeal basis, which we have been keen to avoid doing in all the debates on this Bill as it has gone through both Houses. The Government have rightly resisted calls from big tech companies to bring that in, because it is a recipe for multiple and lengthy litigations, just as with every single measure of tech regulation that exists as a whole. That is not the intention.

Let us say that a company may be guilty of overcharging in an app store, but the cost to the consumer is relatively low. Would an intervention from the CMA be proportionate? Overcharging in the mobile app market may exist, but ultimately companies are happy to pay it and it is a relatively small charge. Would a big intervention by the CMA be a proportionate response? There are so many competing priorities, and often the individual consumer cost of some of these measures would be low, but there is the business significance of a company self-preferencing a service to the exclusion of other companies from the market. The company might say, “There is no particular consumer detriment to this, because the price is relatively low”, but it drives strategic market status. We have already seen in the European Union with the Digital Markets Act that the companies are challenging the designation of strategic market status, and they are looking for grounds to challenge at every opportunity, and we must expect that they will do the same thing here as well. That is why we should be clear that we are clear about what we mean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare invited the Minister to say that effectively, in terms of enforcement and how the courts should interpret it, the change should not make any difference from the original drafting. He invites the Minister to say that we should not be concerned that moving from “appropriate” to “proportionate” is moving from saying that the regulator should do what is within its rights to do—it is appropriate because it has the power to do it and it has made an intervention based on that power—to saying, “Even if it was appropriate for it to do it, it should not have done it, because it was disproportionate.” What would the grounds for that disproportionality be?

It is really important that the guidance to the legislation makes clear what we should expect on how the CMA can determine to find what it believes are proportionate responses, with that not being easy to dismiss on the grounds that the cost to consumers may be relatively low or the impact limited to a certain area of business.

Sir Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is, as ever, making a good case. As he knows, I agree with him about the need for the Government to be clear about what these terms really mean. One thing that we are not talking about today but which is linked to the question of definitions is what we mean by “consumer benefit”. Does he agree that there may be a difference between benefit to the current consumer and a benefit to the future consumer and that we should be clear in the Bill, should we not, that “consumer benefit” includes future consumers as well as current ones?

Damian Collins: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point. We could have a digital service provided for free, self-preferenced by a big company,

offering a new service to its customers—how could there be a consumer detriment in that? But a consequence of that could be constriction of the market and the driving out of other businesses. The mobile mapping market is a really good example: Google Maps and Apple Maps totally dominate a market that used to have multiple competing companies in it. Now it does not, and there could be future consumer detriment in that.

That is why it is important that this is an ex-ante regime, which anticipates not just the detriment that may exist now, but future consequences. That is such an important principle for digital markets, which have tended to see the consolidation of market power in the hands of a relatively small number of players, who often do not compete against each other directly but dominate certain sections of the market, be it through the mobile ad market, search and retail.

There are only in effect two app stores, and given the lack of interoperability, they are virtually monopolies. We see those things already, and the development of large language model systems and the massive acquisition of data required for AI to run them is consolidating that market largely into the hands of the five or six companies that have enough data to be effective operators within it. That means that, in the future digital market world, any challenger tech developer will have to access its market and customers through the services provided by a relatively small number of companies. That is important.

I would be grateful if the Minister said in winding up whether he believes that the Bill offers a better balance. Has that balance changed, or has it not, and it is just a question of language and interpretation of meaning? What does it mean? I hope we all agree that, through making this change, we are not seeking to open up the legislation to wider judicial challenge, with more ruling through the courts, more lengthy delays and costs to try to bring forward the CMA's interventions.

Barbara Keeley: I rise to speak against the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendment 104. As we have already heard, the amendment seeks to safeguard fans from fraudulent abuse, which is rife in the secondary ticketing market. It is an important amendment on an issue that, as we have heard—it is worth saying again—has had much work invested in it by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and her colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse. It also had great attention in the music industry, which is loud in its support for tackling ticket touting. Anyone who has tried to buy a ticket for a popular concert knows the frustration of losing out on tickets, only then to see the same tickets at 10 times the price on the secondary market.

Touting goes deeper than mere frustrations: it prices fans out of attending music, cultural and sports events; it damages the relationship between venue, artist and fan; and it undermines confidence in our live music industry. Yet, despite the calls of major UK music industry bodies, including UK Music and Live Music Industry Venues & Entertainment, the Government have consistently failed to act.

Last year, the Government rejected the recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority to strengthen legislation and protect UK consumers from illegal practices

in the secondary ticketing market. At the time, the CMA warned that unless there was reform, illegal reselling prices would become worse. Lords amendment 104 would implement the recommendations of the Competition and Markets Authority to provide safeguards for consumers. Those are basic protections, such as ensuring that a reseller cannot sell more tickets than they can legally purchase on the primary market, and ensuring that tickets cannot be sold without proof of purchase. It is deeply disappointing that the Government cannot commit even to those basic safeguards.

Under the Government's watch, the situation has become much worse. In 2007, there were an estimated 150 full-time ticket touts in the UK. Now there are about 4,000 touts attacking ticket systems for UK events, using bots to harvest tickets in bulk. Instead of being used as a resale platform for fans who can no longer make it to an event, ticketing websites are increasingly being used by large-scale touts who harvest tickets on the primary platform—using bots to skip the queue—and sell them on at many times the original price, sometimes speculatively. Ordinary fans do not stand a chance against that; they are the ones who are losing out. The situation has become so bad that police forces in some areas are having to launch public awareness campaigns warning about ticket touts after hundreds of reports of ticket fraud.

Lloyds Banking Group was recently forced to issue a warning to its customers about the risk of buying resold tickets after 600 of its customers reported being scammed when they tried to buy resale tickets for Taylor Swift's Eras tour. It has been estimated that resale for the UK leg of that tour alone has led to more than £1 million being lost to fraudsters so far. That is happening despite clear messaging from the promoters of the tour that resale tickets bought outside approved channels will be turned away at the door.

As I said earlier, the Government can claim that they are doing enough, and the Minister seems happy with that, but he should look again at those secondary ticketing sites, where he will see three tickets for Taylor Swift's show on 21 June going for over £72,000. That obviously shows a completely malfunctioning, dysfunctional market.

The Minister cannot claim that the market is functioning for fans and artists—it is actually functioning for touts and the platforms they use. Lords amendment 104 is just one measure that would begin to counter the damage done by ticket touts. I am glad to say that Labour has now committed to going a step further.

Labour would significantly strengthen consumer rights legislation to restrict the resale of tickets at more than a small set percentage over the price the original purchaser paid for it, including fees. Labour would limit the number of tickets that individual resellers can list to the number that individuals can legitimately buy via the original platform. Labour would make platforms accountable for the accuracy of information about the tickets they list for sale, and would ensure that the Competition and Markets Authority has the powers it needs to take swift and decisive action against platforms and touts in order to protect consumers.

The Minister cannot keep sticking his head in the sand. As the Competition and Markets Authority warned in 2021, illegal reselling practices have become worse due to a lack of action. We are now getting to a situation where artists and venues are on the cusp of

[Barbara Keeley]

losing the ability to sell tickets to genuine fans at an affordable price, and working families are being priced out of seeing their favourite artists or their favourite sports team.

Music, culture and sports events must not just be for the elite—the people who can afford thousands of pounds. How can the Government and the Minister justify their opposition to Lords amendments that would keep open access for fans to sport, to arts and to culture? I hope that he will listen to Opposition Members and not press the motion to disagree with this reasonable and modest amendment.

Mrs Hodgson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is doing some great work in this area, formulating our policy for when we will hopefully be in government after the election. I am speaking in the debate in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse and to support Lords amendment 104, which relates to the secondary ticketing market.

Before I begin, I reiterate that the sole purpose of the amendment is to protect British consumers from organised crime and to reduce the harm caused by the unlawful and exploitative activities of online ticket touts. Aspects of the amendment have already been recommended by the Competition and Markets Authority, which recognised back in 2021 that the UK needs stronger legislation to tackle the resale of tickets. It is not just me who has been banging on about this since forever—the CMA is also calling for it, having looked at the market for many years.

It has to be said that Lords amendment 104 will not come with any cost to the UK taxpayer either. If it fails to become law, the only beneficiaries will be scammers, fraudsters and the overseas websites that they operate from. So Members will be voting either in the interests of the British public or in the interests of ticket touts.

The Minister said in his opening remarks that all Opposition Members are doing is crowd-pleasing; I am sure I heard his words correctly. I think he will find that the crowd all have votes. This has been a fan-led campaign. Perhaps pleasing the crowd is not always a bad idea. We are here to represent the people, after all. For too long, this Government have allowed an online black market for ticket resale to thrive via websites such as Viagogo, StubHub, Gigsberg, Ticombo and Seatsnet. The public—the crowd, as the Minister called them—are sick to death of it.

3 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for all her work over a very long period on this important issue. It is important to support the Lords amendment because so many of our constituents are deprived of even the chance of getting a ticket for a sports match, pop concert or whatever, as they cannot beat the bots. Is that not the inherent unfairness?

Mrs Hodgson: It absolutely is. It is not a level playing field at all. I was going to come to the bots, and the fact that nobody has yet been put behind bars for having used bots, even though they are illegal, and are the tool

that touts use to harvest tickets, so that they can scam the rest of the population and all our constituents. I am happy to stand here and crowd-please—I will do it until my dying breath—because that is what we are here to do. We should do the right thing for the public, and they are calling for us to regulate this market.

Sir Chris Bryant: I do not want my hon. Friend's dying breath. Did she notice that the lovely Minister did not even present a single argument against any of the elements in the Lords amendment? He did not make the argument on why the Government do not support it, even though it is a patently obvious and sensible measure.

Mrs Hodgson: That is a good observation. To hazard a guess, the Minister probably agrees with the Lords amendment. He is a decent chap, and I think he sees the right in it, but he is sitting on the Government Benches. He is always welcome to come and join us on these Benches—it is quite a popular thing to do lately. If he wants to come over here, we will sort this out. It would be great if he was part of that, which is probably deep down what he would like to do.

All the websites that we are talking about are based outside the UK. They employ, essentially, no British staff—maybe a handful at most, but it is hard to check. They all masquerade as marketplaces where fans can buy and resell with other fans, but we know that is not true. All are dominated by large-scale online touts committing criminal offences to harvest tickets in bulk, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) said in his excellent intervention. That has led to a highly lucrative resale market worth hundreds of millions of pounds.

This is not small fry anymore. Face-value tickets are syphoned away from genuine fans and sold back to them at highly inflated prices. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) said in her excellent speech that the number of touts has gone from hundreds to many, many thousands. It is getting out of proportion. This is best summed up by Chris Allison, the former deputy assistant commissioner at the Metropolitan police. Following a four-year investigation of touts post the Olympics—those tickets were protected in law, as I mentioned earlier—he stated:

“Touts are part of organised criminal networks often involved in other crimes”.

In recent years, enforcement bodies such as the CMA, National Trading Standards and the Advertising Standards Authority have tried, with varying degrees of success, to intervene in this broken market, either to prosecute the touts who are unlawfully defrauding music and sports lovers, or to force the ticket resale websites to comply with consumer protection legislation. And, oh my, the CMA has tried so hard to force those websites to comply, using the measures that it has to hand, which are not enough. It has even asked for further measures; as we heard in the last debate on this subject, the Government rejected that.

This has become an increasingly complex situation to sort out. That is why the Labour party is seeking to follow the examples of countries such as Ireland, France and Australia by capping the price at which tickets can be resold. Let me draw the House's attention to my private Member's Bill in 2011, which sought to do just that: cap resale at face value plus 10%, as the shadow

Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), said. That would allow someone reselling tickets to reclaim extra costs, such as booking fees.

Contrary to what has been written about me over many years, I do not want to stop any fans from reselling their tickets if they can no longer go to the event. I just want the industrial-scale, parasitic scalping to stop. However, until we get to that point—and while the Conservatives are still in government—it is important that current legislation is made as effective as possible. They could ensure that now. The small measures that we are talking about do not go as far as we plan to go, but they would be a start in preventing consumer harm and making it harder for bad actors to thrive.

I support Lords amendment 104, introduced by my friend and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse Lord Moynihan, with the assistance of Lord Clement-Jones, Baroness Jones and others. We have Lord Moynihan to thank for the amendments to the Consumer Rights Act 2015 that got through small measures that we hoped would be the panacea for all the problems in the secondary market, but nine years later, that Act has not fixed this broken market. That is why we need this amendment.

In the amendment, proposed new section 92A(1) of the 2015 Act would compel touts to provide proof of purchase to the ticketing facility, or evidence of title to the tickets offered for resale. That is common sense, pragmatic and cost-free. The provision would target traders and businesses only, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South said, would eliminate the speculative selling that is endemic on platforms such as Viagogo, and the emotional devastation and physical risk that comes with it. I have seen numerous cases of what she spoke about: people being turned away, after having travelled from one end of the country to the other at great expense, and having booked overnight accommodation. They find that they cannot get into the theatre, the O2, the concert or whatever it may be, because they have invalid tickets.

Someone wrote to me recently who got in touch with Viagogo before the event because they feared that they had an invalid ticket. They were told to try their luck on the door, regardless of the fact that it was an invalid ticket. They knew that they would be turned away at the door with this Taylor Swift ticket, but were told, “Just try your luck. If you can’t get in, we’ll give you a refund.” They would have to fight for it first, and it would take six months if they were lucky. This person was also told, “Why not sell it on? List it again, and we won’t charge you a fee.” It is outrageous that she was supposed to pass it on. I have emails between her and Viagogo to back this up. She was being encouraged to sell on a ticket that she knew was invalid, causing more victims. Those are the sorts of practices that these websites use.

In August 2022, an ITV investigation based on data from FanFair Alliance found that two thirds of festival tickets on Viagogo were fraudulently listed by just three individuals. These resellers are relatively few in number but account for 90% to 95% of the tickets sold on platforms such as Viagogo. Let us think about that: just three major touts were selling 90% to 95% of festival tickets. Other platforms, such as Gigsberg, are 100% reliant on businesses and traders, many of whom my APPG and the CMA believe are acting illegally.

Subsection (2) of proposed new section 92A would crack down on the industrial harvesting of tickets by preventing resellers from selling more tickets to an event than they can legally purchase from the primary market. That is just common sense, surely. This was first recommended by the CMA in August 2021, almost three years ago. It made the proposal after a six-year enforcement investigation that concluded, as I said, that the CMA needed “stronger laws” to tackle illegal ticket resale. This change would make it easier for genuine fans to access tickets instead of professional touts looking to make a parasitical profit.

Despite the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish said, using bots and other malicious software is illegal, touts do so without fear of prosecution, as no one has yet been prosecuted for using bots for the industrial harvesting of tickets. Artists such as Ed Sheeran and Taylor Swift have repeatedly stated that they do not wish for their tickets to be touted. Artists get upset when their loyal fans blame them for not protecting them from touts, even though they do try. Both Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran have gone to great lengths to try to protect their fans from the touts.

Subsections (3) and (4) of proposed new section 92A force touts to clearly state the face value of any ticket listed for resale—again, surely that information should be provided—and to ensure

“the trader or business’s name and trading address are clearly visible, in full, on the first page the ticket is viewable on.”

The information

“must not be hidden behind an icon, a drop down menu or other device”,

which is what actually happens. The Consumer Rights Act states explicitly—these are Lord Moynihan’s reforms, which were added to the 2015 Act—that platforms must legally provide buyers with seat locations, face-value prices and restrictions, for example. They should be provided

“in a clear and comprehensible manner”

and

“before the buyer is bound by the contract for the sale of the ticket.”

Before they purchase, consumers have a right to know what they are buying, and who they are buying it from. That is in current law, but Viagogo has a track record of hiding face value behind what we call “hover text”, or small, tiny icons marked “FV”, so you have to know what you are looking for to find it. It obscures trader identities behind a tiny star icon, and only reveals a trader’s identity after the user enters their credit card details and has gone through the CAPTCHA process, so the user has often committed to buying before they know who they are buying from and what the face value is. That is in straight contravention of the 2015 Act.

On 99.9% of other websites, CAPTCHA is used to protect consumers. On Viagogo, it is used to protect the identity of its commercial suppliers—in other words, touts. Details of any ticket restrictions—for example, the information that resale is only allowed at face value—are provided in an unclear and incomprehensible manner, and are often buried in the middle of other small print, and then negated by claims about Viagogo’s “guarantee”—that is a very loose term if you are on Viagogo’s website.

[Mrs Hodgson]

Those practices are purposely misleading for most, but even more so for those who are visually impaired, tourists who do not speak fluent English, or older people without niche technical skills, who could be buying tickets for a grandchild's birthday. I have had lots of grandparents in touch with me. As someone said—I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South—they then feel stupid. I have had such a number of emails from people saying, “This is my fault. I was stupid. I should have known better. I should have checked.” We should not allow companies to exist that do this in such a big way. They say, “Buyer beware”; that is Viagogo's motto, I think. It is probably hidden on its website. What is happening is not right, and it is up to us to protect consumers; that is what Parliament is for. We should not allow this to happen on such a scale.

Furthermore, experts involved with the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse have found that large numbers of sellers are based abroad, or have links to forms of organised crime all the way up to convicted drug dealers, money launderers and bank robbers. The secondary ticketing market is not full of “classic entrepreneurs” as a former Chancellor and former Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sir Sajid Javid), would have us believe. They are serious criminals. If Members want to see when he said that, it was in 2011 when he was helping to talk out my private Member's Bill.

3.15 pm

However, convictions are extremely few and far between, despite thousands of professional touts operating. It is important for the Minister that I clarify the numbers. There have been only two major cases, involving six convictions, against touts. When I spoke of two cases, that is two court cases with six convictions. It is not six cases. I just want to make sure that that is clear on the record.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is making a really important point. She rightly points out the degree of criminality at the highest end of the organisations that are responsible for the touting industry, and the lack of prosecutions. It is actually quite a good business proposition for them, is it not? It is relatively risk-free. They are probably more likely to get sentenced for being an international drug dealer than for selling the tickets.

Mrs Hodgson: It is very interesting that my hon. Friend has come to the same conclusion I have. I have made that exact point in many interviews over the years: why would anybody go out and rob banks or do any sort of crime for which they might get caught, when they could just be a ticket tout? They'll make a fortune and nobody will come after them, not even the taxman. There will be no hand of the law on their shoulder. There have been only two cases and six prosecutions in all the time I have been campaigning on this issue. So yes, it is time we sorted it out. It is just not acceptable.

The recent case that I think the Minister referred to earlier involved individuals being convicted for buying and reselling tickets worth £6.5 million—£6.5 million. They have been caught, but that is because they are right up at the top end. There will be people making

£1 million, half a million pounds, £2 million or £3 million who have not been caught. There are so many touts. The case involved using multiple, often fake, identities to buy large numbers of tickets with multiple credit cards. However, convictions are extremely few and far between, despite thousands of professional touts operating.

Finally, those who trade in the UK must be subject to UK laws—surely we all agree with that. Subsection (5) of proposed new section 92A states:

“A secondary ticketing facility must make it clear to traders and businesses based overseas that sell tickets to UK consumers and target UK consumers through paid or sponsored advertisements”—

in some cases using Google and trusted publications, or even sponsoring podcasts by trusted influencers—

“or paid infomercials that they are subject to UK legislation.”

The vast majority of suppliers to Viagogo and other secondary platforms are commercial businesses. A significant proportion are based outside the UK, as I said, but they target UK events to derive the highest possible profit. Likewise, none of the websites have offices in the UK. There are no UK jobs at stake, apart from a handful. It has been quite hard for me and my team to check and be sure of the numbers, as these companies are all registered in tax havens and overseas. However, the damage and exploitation occur in the UK at the expense of artists, athletes and fans, without any fear of the current toothless UK law.

Viagogo has already had its wings clipped, partially, by CMA orders over the years, but in my opinion it is nowhere near enough. It has repeatedly shown that it cannot be trusted to mark its own homework. For instance, elsewhere Viagogo was fined 7 million Australian dollars for misleading consumers, €20 million for breaking the law in Italy and €400,000 in France for breaking the law around rugby world cup tickets. Yet we heard the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries, spouting the Viagogo lines of defence from the Dispatch Box just a couple of weeks ago—go figure! This is all on the record, because my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South raised it in a point of order a couple of weeks ago, just after the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries did it.

Unless legislative action is taken to stop this black market, it will continue to grow and cause further damage. This modest amendment effectively plugs loopholes in legislation, and ensures that music and sport fans of all ages have the information that they need before they make that purchase. I implore everyone here today to please support Lords amendment 104 and start putting fans first—or else move aside so that we can do so.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is an absolute privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—my good friend—who has been a tenacious campaigner on this issue for so many years, and I implore Ministers to listen to her and note her expertise. I ask them please to back Lords amendment 104. A review is not good enough in the dying days of a failing Government; we desperately need action now.

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I proudly saw this Bill through part of its Commons stages in my previous role as the shadow tech and digital economy Minister, and it is fantastic to see it so ably steered

through the House today with the support of my good friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant).

As we have heard, what was draft legislation for so long has been woefully slow to materialise. It had sat on the shelf since 2018, so it is nice to finally see it brought back to the House today and to see the Government taking action. I welcome it, as does the Labour party more widely, having led the way in calling on the Government to ensure that large tech companies are governed by proper regulations to allow for competition in our digital markets. Labour has long called for measures to protect consumers, enhance innovation and promote competition in digital markets in order to unlock growth and level the playing field for smaller businesses. In the midst of a Conservative cost of living crisis, this measure could not be more timely, and the need for it has been constantly confirmed in conversations I have had with constituents in Pontypridd.

Let us not forget that it is been over a year since the legislation was first proposed here. Owing to internal chaos and conflict, the Tories have long delayed the Bill, and it is disappointing that we are now being given a watered-down version of the original Bill and that its delay is causing us to fall behind our European partners. The UK has the potential to lead the way, but the Government have instead chosen to take a back seat and to be led. To say that the Bill is overdue is an understatement. Since it was promised, we have seen the digital world continue to change, grow and expand at an incredible and exponential rate. We have seen a significant growth in artificial intelligence technology hitting the mainstream, and tech is becoming more and more central to our homes, jobs and social lives. Our post-covid world has adapted to hybrid, tech-dependent working styles, and jobs in all sectors have accommodated that preference.

Whether it be for work, shopping or our social lives, we are all spending more time online. I see that—sadly—in my own habits, as well as those of my colleagues and constituents. I believe we can all agree that a thriving digital economy in which all sectors and all businesses become digital is vital for the UK's economic growth, but the Government have nevertheless failed to keep up. Now that they have finally decided to deliver this albeit watered-down legislation, it is up to them to ensure that it survives and, if it does, to protect it from further watering-down changes. So far, I am not convinced that that will be the case. The Government have tabled an amendment in lieu of one of the Lords amendments, but they are ignoring the remainder. While most of the disagreement relates to different semantic interpretations of the wording, it is important that we get the wording right so that the Bill works in practice and not just on paper.

I am afraid that these frustrations are not new. Many of them are not dissimilar to those that my colleagues and I raised during the Committee stage of the Online Safety Act 2023. Let us be clear: while big companies have a significant impact on our economy, that power should never be extended to our legislative process. The process of forming and scrutinising legislation should be entirely independent from any private company interest. Parliamentarians and our Government should not be influenced in any circumstances, because we as public servants should be here for our people—our constituents—

rather than being here to promote and advance the interests of big companies and big tech. What is more important to the Government: appeasing big companies or acting for the good of the people they are supposed to represent? If it is not appeasing big companies, why will they not revert to ensuring that the CMA's interventions are appropriate rather than proportionate?

We all know that this change will have a significant impact on the scope of the big tech firms to challenge CMA decisions under judicial review. Given that courts have to navigate these new and broader grounds for judicial review appeals against those decisions, big tech firms are provided with huge, limitless legal budgets and bottomless pockets to tie up the CMA in lengthy legal disputes. It is imperative that the Lords amendments remain in their original form to hold big tech firms accountable, to limit their scope to appeal and to reduce the ambiguity in relation to court interpretation about which we have heard today.

Moving beyond those concerns, this Bill is still absolutely necessary, which is why it has the support of the Labour party, as do the Lords amendments. We all know that the digital economy has opened new markets for businesses and has given consumers access to new information, but with rivals unable to compete with the world's most powerful global companies, they do not sit on an equal footing. Google has a more than 90% share of the 7.3 billion search advertising market in the UK, and Facebook has over 50% of the £5.5 billion display advertising market. That is completely unfair, and constitutes both a challenge to businesses and a detriment to consumers.

This means that everyday consumers have little to no autonomy over their online choices, or in how much data they have to give out. As for businesses, this is limiting their innovation, as their ideas are likely to be quashed by an algorithm and they are therefore unable to compete by any reasonable and fair means. For example, Amazon's use of its position as a marketplace, a publisher and a bookseller has been detrimental to the potential and work of independent booksellers who are pushed aside because they cannot compete with these huge companies and the advantages that the marketplace affords them. I am glad to see that the Lords amendments recognise the importance of user choice, autonomy and independence from the big companies that are pushing an agenda and escaping scrutiny.

Why, then, have the Government shied away from this? If, as they claim, the wording maintains the same high threshold, why will they not clarify the fact that the "indispensable" standard and the new standard are equal? What exactly are they afraid of? Big tech must be held accountable, and must not be able to complicate legal proceedings and escape scrutiny. Surely that point should not cause disagreement. Why have the Government again moved to a merit appeals approach to penalty decisions? This is completely unworkable. Proceedings must take a judicial review approach, which means that a decision will be judged on the basis of its lawfulness rather than its correctness or the views of a tribunal. This approach will fail to incentivise big tech firms to comply with CMA decisions.

While the Tories' watering down of the Bill may initially appear trivial, in fact it will only encourage big tech to challenge the decisions of the CMA. If we want the Bill to be workable—to be worth the paper on which

[Alex Davies-Jones]

it is written—we must ensure that it is clear, precise and unambiguous. Given that the judicial review and merits elements of appeals could bleed into one another—which is causing concern—ambiguity is already rife in this Bill.

The Government must reverse their watering down of this all-important legislation or, at the very least, clarify exactly what the changes to the wording represent. That is exactly why the Lords amendments are so necessary. I urge the Government to reconsider them with the seriousness that they deserve and, at the minimum, to make efforts to compromise, as they have done with one of them. The same must be done for the other three in question.

The Lords amendments would bring small businesses on to a level playing field, and protect the autonomy and pockets of our consumers. If the Bill fails to do that and is watered down any further, it will not be worth the paper it is written on. The Government can do the right thing. They should take the opportunity to do so, and I implore them to do so.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Today I want to speak in support of Lords amendment 104 and the Lords amendments relating to foreign state ownership of UK newspapers, and I will raise some questions about the Lords amendments relating to consumer protections against unfair subscription practices and the use of fake reviews. I will start by setting out my overall support for the Bill and establishing a bit of context for why it is so important to get the regulation of the digital economy right.

Over the past decade, our economy has obviously been transformed by digital change. In many ways this has brought benefits but, equally, it has brought new harms—new ways that unscrupulous individuals and companies can exploit us all. People in our communities are affected by the failures of existing digital regulation, and I would argue that it is often communities like mine that bear the brunt. In Newham we have significant digital exclusion, and massive damage has been caused to family finances by the cost of living crisis.

3.30 pm

It is all the more damaging for someone to be ripped off when their income barely manages to pay the bills already. It is more than that, because in times of stress and when people are working long hours to make ends meet, they hardly have the time or the energy to read through often opaque terms and conditions before purchasing. They are less likely to have the capacity to go and search for all the deliberate barriers that can be set up in order to find out how to cancel a subscription that is costing them dear. I have to say that, even with assistance from younger members of my family, I have personally failed to cancel a number of subscriptions that I was absolutely assured had gone. We have to get this right—not for me, but for others—so that people have the capacity to search for all the deliberate barriers that can be set up in order to find out how to cancel their subscriptions.

This Bill and many of the Lords amendments make welcome progress on some of these issues. I will start with ticket touting, which, as we know, is one of the most egregiously exploitative practices. I think we can

all agree that it is simply wrong to buy tickets in bulk and then charge a huge mark-up fee for resale. It creates massive barriers to accessing culture, particularly for people on lower incomes, and the revenues go not to our hard-pressed musicians and venues, but to grifters who add absolutely no value of their own.

Andrew Gwynne: It comes back to the point about bots. Even the most tech-savvy person cannot beat the bots, and once those bots get going, they sweep away all the tickets and genuine fans cannot get them. That is so unfair—almost as unfair as the extortionate prices that these companies charge for the tickets they have swept up using those bots.

Ms Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have families struggling to buy tickets for their children who are desperate to go and see x band or y band, and then they find themselves ripped off and unable to have that treat, which was massively looked forward to.

I give huge credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for her years of dedicated campaigning in this area. Her work has helped to bring this issue to the forefront of debate, and to make it clear that legal change is necessary to protect our cultural industries and consumers from the touts. We on the Opposition Benches have a clear policy to stamp out ticket touting so that no one is able to charge a large mark-up on resold tickets.

Sir Chris Bryant: Is it not important to emphasise that this issue needs legislation? Lots of venues have tried their level best to get it right. For instance, the O2 Arena only endorses the use of its reseller, AXS, which is only allowed to sell tickets at 10% above the original price—precisely what we are saying should be available to everybody else—but the venue cannot stop other companies effectively nicking all the tickets because of the use of bots. That is why we need legislation.

Ms Brown: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We have tried to nip this in the bud by bringing it to the public's attention, putting pressure on individuals and encouraging action to be taken, but we need legislation to stamp it out.

I like the fact that in Labour's proposed legislation there will be an upper limit on the number of tickets that an individual can resell, in order to make organised ticket touting an unprofitable practice. People who honestly buy tickets and then find that they cannot attend should absolutely be allowed to sell their tickets on—that is in the consumer's interest and the best interests of our constituents—but culture and sports fans should no longer be gouged and exploited. Thankfully, there is a Lords amendment before us today that would ensure that very thing. It was put forward by none other than the Conservative Lord Moynihan. It would go some way to implementing these protections, but despite that the Government seem determined to oppose change and go no further in protecting consumers from ticket touts, even though they acknowledge that the problem persists.

Frankly, I know that my constituents will want to understand why the Government appear determined to stand in the way of greater protections even when they are being put forward by one of their very own noble

Lords. Why are the Government ignoring the voices of fan organisations and creatives who want a fair, properly regulated market in event tickets? I think the Minister might have a job of work to do in convincing my constituents that this is about sound regulation rather than the failed free market ideology of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). We in this House must not forget the importance of protecting Britons from unfair practices, and we must always remember to put them first.

We know that this is far from the only area where poor regulation of our cultural and media markets poses serious risks to consumers and communities alike, so I want to say a few words about the large number of Lords amendments on the state ownership of our newspapers. I thank my Opposition Front-Bench colleagues for demonstrating leadership and pressing for action on this issue, and I welcome the Government's amendments in the other place following those calls. It is important that there is now something like cross-party consensus on this, because we live in a world where distrust is stronger and misinformation thrives.

I know that many of us share the fear that genuine, honest journalism is becoming a rare commodity, and the impacts of that are massive right across our society. Failure to promote a trustworthy media landscape fuels conspiracy theories and extremism, and it distracts attention from the genuine, massive challenges that face us as a country and as a world. We should all fear becoming a society that is riven by division, because all our communities lose out from that. I believe that only scammers, extremists and tyrants ultimately benefit.

I am not saying that foreign state ownership of UK newspapers would lead directly to those media outlets spewing division, hate and lies, but I am seriously worried about the further impact it would have on public trust in our media. We all need to recognise the greater potential for interference in our democracy from foreign states if they own media outlets directly.

We cannot just act to block foreign state takeovers of papers—our agenda needs to be wider than that. We need to support impartial and independent public interest journalism through the BBC, including the fabulous World Service, which is so important and currently in significant financial difficulty. We need, obviously, to continue acting to improve the regulation of online social media spaces where, as we know, trust is near extinct and where so much harm is done to the most vulnerable in our communities. Amendments against foreign ownership of newspapers are only a tiny part of the solution, but they are a step forward. I welcome the action taken on this issue in the other place, which has improved the Bill.

Finally, I will speak to some of the wider amendments made in the other place to better protect consumers from scams and exploitation. As we know, the abuse of subscription services by hiding cancellation options affects people in every part of our country. People are steadily losing money, month after month, to services that they do not want but do not know how to cancel. Citizens Advice estimates that £300 million a year is being spent on unwanted subscriptions. Obviously this is of even more concern where people are not completely digitally literate, so I hope the Minister might tell us more about what work is being done to monitor and

update the digital inclusion strategy. It is a bit of a shock that there has been no update for about 10 years. According to Age UK, nearly 6 million older people, including many of my constituents, cannot use the internet.

One constituent recently told me about how they missed a hospital appointment because they lost the message telling them about it. We all know that this is all too common, and that it creates unnecessary and unfair barriers to accessing so many of our public services and just taking part in everyday life.

Frankly, the examples I have seen show that anybody can be impacted, because it is often massively harder to cancel a subscription agreement than to enter one. That is just blatant and egregious, and it is difficult for any of us to navigate. Additional protections in law simply cannot come soon enough, and there is widespread recognition that greater clarity is needed in regulations. Regulators will obviously need to be more active in holding the providers of subscription services to account where they use exploitative tactics against consumers. The test is whether the Bill will deliver that.

I welcome the debate in the other place on how this will be implemented in law and, slightly unusually, I give credit to the Minister in the other place for rightly engaging with probing amendments and for seeking to maintain stronger protections for consumers. I hope the Minister here today will say more about where the Bill ultimately stands. Will the regulator have the clarity and confidence it needs to start enforcing against exploitative practices, or will we be back here in a few years after the regulations have been tested and found sadly wanting?

I argue that the lack of a clear prohibition on creating fake reviews was an omission from the original Bill. Shadow Ministers and Opposition colleagues have called for greater clarity on that since Second Reading, almost a year ago, so I welcome the measures that have now been included. In our everyday lives, when we look for goods and services online, many of us have little alternative but to rely on reviews. Fake reviews are clearly a massive threat to genuine competition, and they are effectively an open door for scammers and cowboys to rip people off further. Again, I hope the Minister might say a little more on the final position.

There was significant debate in the other place on probing amendments that questioned whether stronger provisions were needed, particularly on the responsibilities of platforms and internet service providers that host fake reviews. Is the Minister absolutely confident that those platforms are clear about the actions they must take to stop their services being abused by fake review scammers?

3.45 pm

I am not entirely happy with everything in this Bill. I remain seriously disappointed by the Government's inaction on ticket touting. I hope that the Minister will look again and find it in his heart to support amendment 104. I echo many of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda about some of the ways in which the general enforcement and appeals provision in the Bill have been weakened. I fear that there has been some heavy lobbying of the Government by big tech companies, which has had an impact. The people of West Ham will not be pleased to hear that, as it generates

understandable concern that the provision might prove too weak and riven with loopholes to do the job that Members on both sides of this House want to see, although the Bill has been improved in other areas by hon. Friends and colleagues here and in the other place. It contains welcome provisions that will help to protect my constituents from exploitation online. I hope we will see it in force as soon as possible.

Kevin Hollinrake: With the leave of the House, I will respond to some of the points raised in this fruitful, constructive debate. I reassure the shadow Minister that I have lost none of my mojo or ambition to ensure a fair and level playing field for businesses. That is a vital part of this legislation. At times I may smile when I am at the Dispatch Box and there are a couple of reasons for that; not only am I generally a happy guy but I am pleased to see this groundbreaking legislation being brought into effect. It is probably one of only two major pieces of legislation around the world that does what it does. We should welcome that and the fair and level playing field that will result from it.

I do not accept what the shadow Minister says about the Government having caved in and weakened some of the Bill's provisions. It is fair to say that some of the platforms would like us to have changed the Bill radically from how it was when it was presented to Parliament. We think we have very much held the line on its provisions and how it will ensure that consumers and smaller businesses get a better deal. We do not accept that it will bring about "bleed back", as he puts it, between the on-the-merits provisions of penalties and other regulatory decisions. We have been clear on that and our legal advice is of the same mind.

Secondary ticketing is a key part of the debate, having been raised by various Members. We absolutely see that there is good practice in some primary markets, where there is control as to resales. We should learn from best practice, such as ID requirements on the resale of tickets. That is within the gift of those in the primary markets, so we are keen to develop the review to ensure that we look at both the primary and secondary markets, as the Opposition called for in an amendment tabled earlier in the Bill's progress.

Sir Chris Bryant: I am grateful to the Cheshire cat for giving way. Does he oppose the Lords amendment on ticket touts because of the proposed new subsection stating that there needs to be "proof of purchase" for secondary ticket marketing, or because details of the "face value" of the ticket have to be provided? It is difficult to determine why the Minister opposes the Lords amendment other than because it is an inconvenience to government.

Kevin Hollinrake: We believe that those measures, such as on the face value of the ticket, are already covered by the current legislation and enforcement. The Government have certainly gone a lot further than previous regimes have: we strengthened the terms and guidance in 2017; we banned ticketing bots—the hon. Gentleman mentioned that but did not seem to understand that it had been outlawed in 2018; and we improved enforcement action by the regulators, as we have seen six successful prosecutions under the new regime. I remind him that where other jurisdictions have supposedly gone further in banning resale, such as in Ireland, no

prosecutions have taken place. We are trying to ensure that we have a balance and that our provisions work well.

Mrs Hodgson *rose*—

Kevin Hollinrake: I will address the hon. Lady's points in a moment, as I am keen to respond to some of them.

Sir Chris Bryant: If the Minister goes to the Viagogo website and tries to buy a ticket, he will see on the first page that it says the ticket is £420 or whatever. Can he see the original value of the ticket? No. Can he see whether it is a validly purchased ticket? No. That is the problem that the amendment would solve. It would be simple for the Government to agree to the amendment and then we can get the Bill through.

Kevin Hollinrake: We believe those provisions are already there. I have quite happily used Viagogo on many occasions, as other people have when reselling tickets. Of course we will keep looking at the primary and secondary markets, and at the interaction between the two, so that we can develop the right way to regulate the market, in a future Parliament.

Barbara Keeley: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Kevin Hollinrake: I will come to the hon. Lady's points in a moment.

On the things we are doing to hold big tech to account, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) that the fire burns brightly in me. I do not think we have moved away in any material way from ensuring that this legislation is fit for purpose and does what it sets out to do. As I said in response to his earlier intervention, we do not believe there is any bleed-across between the merits-based approach to penalties and other regulatory interventions. The revised wording about the countervailing benefits exemption did not change the effects of the clause and did not change the guidance in the explanatory notes.

As my hon. Friend is aware, we are doing a lot of work on regulation. We have engaged on regular occasions to ensure that gets to where he wants. On costs and benefits, he will have noticed we brought forward the growth duty for our economic regulators quite recently, as well as the smart data road map. I know he waits with bated breath for the White Paper that will come forward shortly.

I thank the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) for his support for the legislation. We do not think the change from conduct is indispensable to the benefits; benefits could not be realised without the conduct materially changing the position in any way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) said that we had moved to a different balance. I do not think I said that; I am happy to clarify my remarks about proportionality. We have provided more certainty and clarity around that position, which we always thought was part of the way the CMA would make its decisions. He made points about how the regulator would view, for example, the significant charges made across the Xbox platforms, which both charge 30% to the people who have e-commerce through those payment systems. As he said, businesses might not think that is too much, but we both know that it is

not businesses that pay that ultimately, but consumers. The requirement for the CMA to make interventions for the benefit of consumers is in its very DNA, so I think it would act in those situations.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) talked about the secondary ticketing position. I hear her points, and the points raised by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), very clearly.

Barbara Keeley: I counsel the Minister against what he is doing. As his colleague in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport team did recently at oral questions, he is repeating the arguments that the platforms use. It is sad to hear Ministers repeating the same lines that a global chief officer of Viagogo came out with when they were over here. In Ireland, fraud activity has not increased—because the legislation is working, and that is why there are no prosecutions in Ireland. We would be in that situation if we had that legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West probably wants to point out, it is alright to say that the use of bots is illegal, but nobody is being prosecuted for the illegal use of bots to wholesale-buy tickets; it is happening, so I counsel the Minister and his ministerial colleagues' against their constant repetitions, which are not plausible to anybody outside.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady is right to say that there is a difference between legislation and enforcement. We urge the authorities that have responsibility to enforce those provisions to make use of them. In Ireland, where the resale of tickets has been banned, inflated prices are still a feature of the ticket markets. Tickets for Taylor Swift's Dublin shows are selling well in excess of their face price on the internet in Ireland, but no prosecutions have been made.

Mrs Hodgson *rose*—

Kevin Hollinrake: May I make it clear that I was not accusing the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South of crowd pleasing? As I said in my earlier remarks, and as I will say to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West before she intervenes, we should not simply take measures that are crowd pleasing in the hope they will work but they are ineffective. That is not to say that we do not think further measures are required.

Mrs Hodgson: On the point about Taylor Swift and whether any of her tickets have been sold on the secondary market in Ireland, I challenge the Minister to take another look at that rather than taking the word of his officials or whoever has told him. I have been told that no Taylor Swift tickets are on sale on Viagogo in Ireland. She has stated that her tickets will not be valid if they are resold on a secondary platform, so they will not be found on a secondary platform in Ireland.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes, I have just googled sellers of tickets in Dublin, and people can buy tickets well in excess of face value on the platform. I could not find them on Viagogo, but other platforms are selling those tickets. We are trying to do something that is effective. I am very happy to continue to engage with the hon. Lady, as she makes a very compelling case. I shall continue to look at what she says and continue to

engage with her. I am very keen to ensure that we get to the right place, so that we protect consumers, but allow a fair, free market to work properly.

Andrew Gwynne: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. I want to take him back to his comment that what was needed was not new legislation, but better enforcement. The enforcement authorities would presumably be trading standards. What is the reason there are not the prosecutions that we would all like to see? Is it because trading standards has been run into the ground and does not have the capacity to do the job that he is expecting it to do? Is it because of the complexity of the market? And which trading standards is responsible: the one where the platforms are based, the one where the person who bought the ticket is based, or the one where the concert is being held? That makes enforcing this measure really difficult.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Member for his points. I said not that legislation was not needed, but that there was no point in having legislation without enforcement. There have been six successful prosecutions by trading standards, but is he saying that he wants to fund trading standards to a greater degree? I understand some of the pressures on local authorities across the country; there are pressures on the public finances generally. If he has a solution to that and can provide lots more money to local authorities, he should have a word with his Front-Bench team, because that has not been Labour's policy.

Gen Kitchen (Wellingborough) (Lab): Unlike with trading standards, many cash-strapped families and young people fall for online scams, because they are on the hunt for bargains on Facebook Marketplace and, to a lesser extent, on eBay and Vinted. They are often at the mercy of being ripped off with very little protection and little to no help from local trading standards because of that confusion over whether it is where the buyer is or where the seller is. In particular, that is because they are for more casual and lower-value transactions. Can the Minister confirm whether that will be in the review as well?

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She makes a very good point. I am happy to look at the concerns that she raises. We will look at the concerns raised by all stakeholders, Members of this House and people further afield to ensure that, when we carry out this review, we get to the right place.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) seems to think EU legislation is stronger than ours. Let me point out that appeal standards consider the merits across the piece in the European Union; they do not in the UK, as they are confined to a very small element of it.

Finally, I am pleased that the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) supports the Bill and very pleased that she supports freedom of speech. Digital inclusion is very important. The Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) is working very hard on social inclusion and social tariffs of broadband through the cross-ministerial group. We are very keen to ensure that reminder notices for subscriptions are very clear for all our consumers.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

To conclude, I urge all Members on both sides of the House to carefully consider the amendment that I have proposed in lieu of those made in the other place. I hope that all Members will feel able to support our position.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Taylor Swift seems to be everywhere, even in the House of Commons, doesn't she?

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 9.

The House divided: Ayes 273, Noes 159.

Division No. 141]

[3.59 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Chalk, rh Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey

Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Dame Tracey
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Sir Philip
Davis, rh Sir David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
Mackrory, Cheryl
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie

Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morris, Anne Marie
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh Sir John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, rh Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, rh Sir Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond

Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, rh Michael
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles

Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, rh Craig
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote
cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-
Price*)
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Mark Jenkinson and
Robert Largan**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Ady*)
Ali, Tahir
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Doughty, Stephen
Duffield, Rosie
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Edwards, Jonathan

Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, rh Stephen
Foord, Richard
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kitchen, Gen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan

Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shanks, Michael
Sheerman, Mr Barry

Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast
by Gerald Jones*)
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, rh Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Twist, Liz
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
vote cast by Marion
Fellows*)
Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast
by Grahame Morris*)
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Tellers for the Noes:
**Jeff Smith and
Colleen Fletcher**

*Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 9 disagreed to.*

Clause 29

COUNTERVALUING BENEFITS EXEMPTION

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House
disagrees with Lords amendment 12.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)*

The House divided: Ayes 276, Noes 161.

Division No. 142]

[4.13 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy

Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw

Metcalf, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry

Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, rh Sir Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, rh Craig
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Jenkinson and
Robert Lagan

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Ady*)
 Ali, Tahir
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon

Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
Doughty, Stephen
Duffield, Rosie
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, rh Stephen
Foord, Richard
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kitchen, Gen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shanks, Michael
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, rh Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Twist, Liz
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:

**Jeff Smith and
Colleen Fletcher**

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 12 disagreed to.
Lords amendments 13 and 19 disagreed to.

Clause 89

PROCEDURE AND APPEALS ETC

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 26.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)

The House divided: Ayes 274, Noes 162.

Division No. 143]**[4.26 pm****AYES**

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kerni
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Chalk, rh Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Dame Tracey
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Sir Philip
Davis, rh Sir David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke

Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by Sir John Redwood*)
Mackrory, Cherylyn
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Robbie
Morris, Anne Marie
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh Sir John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, rh Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, rh Sir Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh

Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Ady*)

Ali, Tahir
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)

Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)

Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Doughty, Stephen
Duffield, Rosie
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion

Williams, rh Craig
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote
cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-
Price*)

Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Mark Jenkinson and
Robert Lorgan**

NOES

Flynn, rh Stephen
Foord, Richard
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kitchen, Gen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
McMorin, Anna

Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oswald, Kirsten
O, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shanks, Michael
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, rh Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Twist, Liz
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:
**Colleen Fletcher and
Jeff Smith**

Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Dame Tracey
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Sir David
Davison, Dehenna
Dinage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, rh Michelle
Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg

Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morris, Anne Marie

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 26 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 27 and 28 disagreed to.

Clause 103

APPLICATIONS FOR REVIEW ETC

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 31.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)

The House divided: Ayes 272, Noes 162.

Division No. 144]

[4.39 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Andrew, rh Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, rh Kemi
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, rh Mr Steve
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob

Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Chishty, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Theo

Morrissey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, rh Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh Sir John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richardson, Angela
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, rh Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Saxby, Selaine
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, rh Sir Mark

Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote
cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-
Price*)
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
**Robert Largan and
Mark Jenkinson**

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
AdDY*)
Ali, Tahir
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Bonnar, Steven
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)

Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Daisy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
Debonnaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)

Doughty, Stephen
Duffield, Rosie
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Flynn, rh Stephen
Foord, Richard
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, rh Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kitchen, Gen
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast
by Marion Fellows*)
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McKinnell, Catherine

McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote
cast by Marion Fellows*)
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Qaisar, Ms Anum
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rees, Christina
Ribeiro-AdDY, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shanks, Michael
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast
by Gerald Jones*)
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Twist, Liz
Wakeford, Christian
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
vote cast by Marion
Fellows*)
Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast
by Grahame Morris*)
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Tellers for the Noes:
**Colleen Fletcher and
Jeff Smith**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 31 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 32 disagreed to.

Clause 114

GUIDANCE

*Lords amendment 38 disagreed to.**Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 38.***After Clause 308**

REQUIREMENTS ON SECONDARY TICKETING FEATURES

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 104.—(Kevin Hollinrake.)**The House divided: Ayes 273, Noes 163.***Division No. 145]****[4.52 pm**

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, rh Kemi
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Choje, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert

Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Dame Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Doyle-Price, Dame Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duguid, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris

Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin

Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, rh Sir Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, rh Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth

Tuckwell, Steve
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John

Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William (*Proxy vote cast by Dame Jackie Doyle-Price*)
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Robert Largan and
Mark Jenkinson

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Ali, Tahir
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Barker, Paula
 Beckett, rh Dame Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bonnar, Steven
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Ms Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Sir Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cooper, Daisy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Daby, Janet
 David, Wayne
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Day, Martyn
 Debonnaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doogan, Dave
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Doughty, Stephen
 Duffield, Rosie
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Evans, Chris

Farron, Tim
 Farry, Stephen
 Fellows, Marion
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Galloway, George
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
 Hanvey, Neale
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Kitchen, Gen
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Linden, David (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonnell, rh John
 McKinnell, Catherine

McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Mishra, Navendu
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Owen, Sarah
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Rees, Christina
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Wakeford, Christian
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick (*Proxy vote cast by Grahame Morris*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Noes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 104 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 1 to 8, 10, 11, 14 to 18, 20 to 25, 29, 30, 33 to 37, 39 to 103 and 105 to 148 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 35, 36, 42, 112, 117, 128 and 132 to 134.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their Amendments 9, 12, 13, 19, 26 to 28, 31, 32 and 104;

That Kevin Hollinrake, Saqib Bhatti, Mike Wood, Steve Tuckwell, Sir Chris Bryant, Colleen Fletcher and Richard Thomson be members of the Committee;

That Kevin Hollinrake be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(Paul Holmes.)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Combined Authorities (Finance) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.—*(Paul Holmes.)*

Question agreed to.

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Contracts for Difference (Sustainable Industry Rewards) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.—(*Paul Holmes.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Goods Vehicles (International Road Transport Permits and Haulage Within the EU) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 4 March, be approved.—(*Paul Holmes.*)

Question agreed to.

EDUCATION

Ordered,

That Apsana Begum and Kim Johnson be discharged from the Education Committee and Jess Phillips and Gen Kitchen be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggins, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY

Ordered,

That Adam Holloway be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Paul Bristow be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggins, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Maria Eagle and Karl Turner be discharged from the Justice Committee and Bambos Charalambous and Yasmin Qureshi be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggins, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Protection of the Amazon Rainforest

5.7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk on the protection of the Amazon rainforest. The deforestation of the Amazon is a considerable environmental threat to us all and it is contributing to the forest's inability to recover from drought, fire and landslides. The petitioners

"therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Brazilian Government to protect forest land and end large-scale deforestation, to prevent nearly half of the Amazon rainforest from collapsing and that these irreversible consequences for the Amazon and the planet are avoided."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and makes up half of the planet's remaining tropical forests, home to about three million species of plants and animals and 1.6 million indigenous people; further notes that the forest is the world's largest natural carbon sinks, absorbing and storing an amount of carbon equivalent to 15 to 20 years of global CO2 emissions from the atmosphere; and further declares continued deforestation of the Amazon is contributing to the forest's inability to recover from droughts, fires and landslides.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Brazilian Government to protect forest land and end large-scale deforestation, to prevent nearly half of the Amazon rainforest from collapsing and that these irreversible consequences for the Amazon and the planet are avoided.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002964]

Popular Uprising in Iran

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I present this petition on the popular uprising in Iran on behalf of residents of Southampton North who wish to protest against the violent repression of women and young people in Iran by the Iranian regime. More than 500 of my constituents have also signed an associated petition. These petitions note that the atrocities committed have been categorised as crimes against humanity by the UN special rapporteur. The petitioners

"therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to condemn the Iranian Government's violent crackdown on protests led by women and youth, support democratic movements in Iran and put pressure on the Iranian regime to stop the repression.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that in response to protests and anti-regime uprisings led by women and youth throughout Iran, Iranian repressive forces have opened fire on protestors; notes that more than 750 protestors have been killed including 83 women and 75 children, as well as more than 30,000 protestors arrested; further notes that Amnesty International has reported that child detainees have been subjected to horrific torture, including beatings, flogging, electric shocks, rape and other sexual violence; further declares that the regime's deliberate poisoning of schoolgirls across Iran is to take revenge on young girls for participating in demonstrations, with the number of executions increased to over 400 this year; further notes that the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran has categorised the atrocities during the uprising as Crimes Against Humanity; and further declares opposition to the killings and arrests of protestors, and support for the Iranian people's uprising to achieve democracy and freedom.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to condemn the Iranian Government's violent crackdown on protests led by women and youth, support democratic movements in Iran and put pressure on the Iranian regime to stop the repression.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002969]

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents regarding the recommendations of the infected blood inquiry. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). She has done tremendous work and she has been a motivation for us all, and I thank her for that. There are 100 people that I know of in Northern Ireland awaiting compensation, and with each month that passes, so too does their health fail. The act itself was regrettable, and the continued paralysis in implementing the compensation scheme is reprehensible and must be rectified as a priority for this House.

[*Jim Shannon*]

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Strangford,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002960]

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I rise to present the petition of my constituents in Worcester. My petitioners include a constituent who lost her mother to this scandal; a dear friend of mine, who is a long-standing councillor and former chairman of my association, who lost his beloved wife and the mother of his children; and a constituent who was infected as a child with HIV and hepatitis, but went on to found the Tainted Blood campaign.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Worcester,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002967]

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of North East Fife. In common with those presented by the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*) and other right hon. and hon. Members, the petition relates to the recommendations of the infected blood inquiry. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (*Dame Diana Johnson*) for her work on the issue.

Two of the families directly impacted in North East Fife came into my office on Friday to sign the petition. One lost his father to hepatitis C as a result of the scandal, and the other's husband was infected as a child at school.

The petition states:

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

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002968]

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am proud to also present a petition to show my support for all those who have been impacted and continue to suffer as a result of the infected blood scandal. I pay tribute to the tireless campaigning of those affected and the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (*Dame Diana Johnson*) in the fight for justice and compensation.

This issue is of particular importance to my constituents in Pontypridd, both for those who have got in touch with me to advocate for justice and for those who were sadly victims of the scandal. I have the utmost respect for *Gerald Stone*, *Meinir Elin Gooch*, *Jodie Sugar*, *Owain Llŷr Harris* and *Tony Lane*, to name a few. They have waited far too long and they demand justice.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002970]

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I join a number of right hon. and hon. Members in presenting a petition on the same terms, on behalf of constituents in Worsley and Eccles South, who are seeking justice for families affected by the NHS infected blood scandal. I too pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (*Dame Diana Johnson*) for her wonderful work.

I also pay tribute to my constituents *Claire Dixon*, *Ian Dixon* and *Olivia Dixon*, who are seeking justice on behalf of *Claire's* late mother, *Nora Worthington*, who was infected with HIV through a routine blood transfusion in 1982 and who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1993. They, like other families, have waited far too long for redress.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Worsley and Eccles South,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited far too long for redress.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to implement the recommendations in the Second Interim Report of the Infected Blood Inquiry without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002971]

Heathrow Airport: Western Rail Link

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

5.15 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to your good self, Mr Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the House authorities for granting me today's Adjournment debate on the western rail link to Heathrow.

I was elected to represent the good people of Slough in 2017. In 2018, realising the immense importance of this rail link, I established an all-party parliamentary group with like-minded colleagues from across the Chamber. The House will therefore be aware that I have long championed the western rail link to Heathrow, which would link Great Western Railway's network, and constituents in the Thames Valley region and beyond, to the rest of the world via Heathrow airport. This is not just a project for the Thames Valley or for the south-east of England; it is a levelling-up project that would benefit local, regional and national economic growth.

I wish to place on the record my gratitude to the western rail link to Heathrow stakeholder steering group, Heathrow airport, the Thames Valley chamber of commerce, Great Western Railway, Slough Borough Council, Network Rail, BAE, Transport for London, the Department for Transport, Slough Estates Group, Atkins and others for all their hard work, expertise and invaluable advice to our all-party group over several years. Indeed, as eloquently explained by the Thames Valley chamber of commerce, the proposed four-mile rail link to London Heathrow airport would connect 20% of the UK population to within one interchange of our nation's main hub airport. This strategic development would facilitate more direct access for travellers, allowing constituents to travel direct to Heathrow, eliminating the need to travel first to London Paddington and then back out again.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on the work that he has done on this for a number of years. Does he appreciate that the project would benefit not just Slough and that area of England, but the west and Wales in particular? Many constituents of mine have done that journey to Paddington and then back out. I wish him well with the project and hope that interest from the Government will be forthcoming.

Mr Dhese: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He has eloquently put on record how the Welsh Government themselves have strongly supported the link. I know that he is a strong champion for his constituents, and he has been doing that work on a plethora of issues, but in particular within our all-party group. Importantly, greater connectivity to Heathrow would bolster jobs, growth, trade, tourism, education and regeneration.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I have been a member of the all-party group since 2018. Does the hon. Member also recognise that the rail link would benefit everybody from Bath to beyond? It would also have many

environmental benefits, as people could choose the public transport option rather than travelling by car, which is what many of my constituents do.

Mr Dhese: I thank the hon. Member not just for her support and her membership of the APPG, but for her alliteration—as she said, the project will be of huge significance for Bath and beyond. I also want to outline the cross-party composition of our all-party parliamentary group. Whether we are members of the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative party, the Labour party or other parties, we realise the collective benefits to our constituents and the environmental benefits, which I will elaborate on shortly.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He makes the essential point that this is not just a south-east issue; it affects Swindon, which I represent, and the western gateway. I rise in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the western gateway, which links Wales and the west. We fully support his efforts and the work of the Thames Valley chamber of commerce. He is to be commended for his work on this issue and has my full support.

Mr Dhese: I thank the right hon. and learned Member, whose membership of our all-party parliamentary group has given it strength. He illustrates how the benefits will have significant impact in not only the immediate Thames valley region, which of course benefits me, but Wales, the south-west, the midlands and the wider south-east.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has not yet mentioned the benefits that the train link would bring to Bristol, but I hope that it will make it easier for people to make the journey. Heathrow has an impact on the local environment, with surface transport playing a big role in contributing to air pollution and so on. If an easier train link can dissuade people from the west country from using their cars to drive to Heathrow, that would be very advantageous.

Mr Dhese: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head, because this has significant environmental benefits. She has done a great deal of work on the need to reduce our carbon footprint and get our constituents to access our main airport via public transport rather than by car.

Damien Egan (Kingswood) (Lab): I add my support for my hon. Friend's debate. Kingswood does not have a train station, but Bristol stations such as Bristol Parkway and Bristol Temple Meads would be well served by the western rail link. Constituents tell me that in some cases they are getting taxis up to Heathrow. Does he also acknowledge that the rail link could open up more areas for employment, because it would be a big employer, as well as helping more people to get to Heathrow?

Mr Dhese: I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a strong champion for his constituency since being elected. I had the distinct pleasure of conversing with many of his constituents while I was out in his area. The constituents of Kingswood do not have a train station, but the benefit of a direct rail link would be that it avoids individuals from as far away as Kingswood getting a taxi. That would reduce journey times and, as he points out, have a huge economic benefit for the wider region. I thank him for his support.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Dhesi: I give way to the co-chair of our all-party parliamentary group.

James Sunderland: As the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, I commend the hon. Member, my neighbour and friend, for all the work that he does to make this happen. The rail link is about jobs, economic growth, boosting travel opportunities across the UK and boosting Heathrow airport. Does he agree that, in the year 2024, it is almost perverse that passengers coming from the west of England and Wales cannot travel directly to our major international airport hub? Does he also agree that the rail link will bring huge benefits to London itself?

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman undersells himself. He was the vice-chair of our all-party parliamentary group, but he has recently been elevated to co-chair, taking on the role of the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), who was herself elevated to the Government Front Bench. He highlights that the link would benefit people not just in the south-east, the west, Wales and the south-west, but in London, because it would decongest roads, as well as London Paddington, as I will explain shortly.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Dhesi: I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Adam Afriyie: We are in danger of having a love-in here, but I will not disabuse the House of that notion, because across the House, on the Conservative and Opposition Benches, there is agreement on this. My constituents would join this love-in were the western rail link to go ahead, because it would remove congestion from the roads of Windsor, as far afield as Ascot, and even in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland). I think it is a really good move and one on which the House can unite, because it will help all our constituents, it will help the environment, and, most of all, it will unlog Windsor.

Mr Dhesi: I hope that the Minister is hearing the unanimity of support—or the love-in, as my constituency neighbour has pointed out. It is important to decongest our roads. People in Windsor and Slough get in their cars, or get a taxi, to go to Heathrow—that is predominantly what happens—so it is important that we provide this four-mile rail link. Indeed, my Slough constituency, which is home to more UK corporate headquarters than anywhere else outside London, is a huge business hub, and for those key industry leaders, this vital four-mile rail link remains the No. 1 infrastructure priority. In fact, it is the No. 1 infrastructure priority for the whole of the Thames valley region.

The scheme, which has been identified as a nationally significant infrastructure project by the National Infrastructure Commission, promises to decrease train travel times, offer a consistent service of trains in each direction, vastly improve connections from across the great western network, and bring destinations within the “golden hour” for foreign direct investors. The western rail link to Heathrow would provide four trains per hour to the great western main line; significantly

enhance accessibility for millions of people, from Swansea to Swindon, Cardiff to Exeter and Reading to Bristol; offer direct links to Heathrow; and shed half an hour off many journey times.

Delivery of the western rail link scheme holds the key to overcoming the barriers to growth that currently face the region, and would drive investment and unlock huge economic benefits. According to analysis from Heathrow airport, the western rail link is projected to add £800 million to the gross value added, create 42,000 new jobs and facilitate an estimated 20% shift from road to rail, as many hon. Members have highlighted. Additionally, it promises £1.5 billion in efficiency savings for businesses through reduced travel times and costs.

When Conservative Ministers announced that they would build the four-mile western rail link to Heathrow and that it would open in 2020, the excitement in Wales was such that the then First Minister Rhodri Morgan described it as

“one of the most important announcements in the last 50 years.”

But it was yet another broken promise. The Government had invested £47 million into planning western rail before the pandemic, and, having committed to it more than a decade ago, it is about time that they built the western rail link to Heathrow for the benefit of the local, regional and national economies.

Let me outline the environmental benefits that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) touched on. The extensive benefits of this pivotal rail initiative extend beyond stimulating growth, inward investment and connectivity; it will also play a crucial part in our carbon reduction efforts. The western rail link to Heathrow is a carbon reduction project that will take cars off roads, reduce carbon emissions, and diminish passenger overcrowding at London Paddington.

The increased rail options for commuters in the Thames valley region would significantly reduce congestion on some of the UK’s busiest roads, including the M4, M3 and M25. That would reduce carbon dioxide emissions equivalent to those generated by approximately 30 million road miles per year. By helping to shift journeys from private cars to public transport, the western rail link initiative will underpin our transition to net zero and help to deliver the UK’s climate change and carbon reduction targets, as well as being a key support to levelling up in the region.

The proven business case for this project is predicated on a two-runway scenario. If a third runway were to be built, the scheme would become critical to providing surface access to the airport. The western rail link to Heathrow is a scheme of considerable importance to hon. Members in various regions of the UK and their constituents, as we have heard from the invaluable contributions to today’s debate.

Indeed, there have been various apologies from hon. Members who hoped to attend this debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), a former treasurer of our APPG, and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), a former vice-chair. They have also expressed their support for the scheme, but as we enter the 12th year since the Government first committed to building this vital four-mile rail link, disappointingly, not a single spade has yet been dug into the ground.

Despite the Government's failure to deliver on their promise, there remains robust cross-party support for the scheme in Parliament, as well as from business chambers across the UK. The all-party parliamentary group on the western rail link to Heathrow is a strong advocate for the economic merits of this critical infrastructure and its importance in enhancing the connectivity of residents of the Thames valley region to the UK's main airport via rail. It is in the interest of all hon. Members to deliver tangible results for our constituents, and as MPs representing diverse constituencies, we are all acutely aware of the considerable advantages that our constituents stand to gain from this project.

I commend the leadership of the Thames Valley chamber of commerce; in partnership with key stakeholders, including our APPG, and without any public subsidy, it is co-developing solutions, and sustaining its efforts to ensure that the project remains at the forefront of all minds. That private sector commitment should speak volumes to all of us in this esteemed House. It is the private sector that has subsidised, and continues to subsidise, the Department for Transport's work. That should be a wake-up call to the Government, showing them that this rail project simply needs to be funded and built.

There was a significant financial commitment from Heathrow airport prior to the pandemic, but the Government's lethargic approach over the years has squandered that vital investment opportunity, bringing us all back to square one. The Government must go beyond the hollow words of support spoken over several years—words that Ministers have failed to take tangible action on. They must finally step up and make the financial commitments that will ensure the timely delivery of their promised western rail link to Heathrow. Just a few months ago, the Minister assured me in the Chamber that

"The Government remain committed to improving rail access to Heathrow"—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 955.] He claimed to "recognise the importance" of the western rail link. I convey my gratitude to him for recently taking invaluable time out of his day to meet members of our APPG, but the shocking fact remains that in the 12 years since the Government first pledged to fund this vital piece of infrastructure, not a single spade has hit the ground.

James Sunderland: Does the hon. Member agree that there is strong cross-party consensus across the House, which includes colleagues I have spoken to from Wales, western England and the midlands? It is great when the House comes together. They are all as one in wanting this project to happen. Does he share my hope that, in a minute, the Minister will outline at the Dispatch Box the preconditions for the Government taking the bold step of underwriting the project?

Mr Dhesi: That was very eloquently put, and that is what we hope for from the Minister, who is, I know, a good chap and a great champion of rail, but unfortunately for several years we have faced an impasse. I have been a Member of this esteemed House for the last seven years, and there have been lots of promises. Indeed, my first ever Prime Minister's question to my constituency neighbour the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was on this very issue. There have been many promises, but

we are yet to see a timeline, and I do hope we will hear one from the Minister. Indeed, that is what the business community is expecting.

In conclusion, the importance of building the western rail link to Heathrow cannot be overstated. It would open up significant opportunities for growth, and enhance the travel experience and connectivity to Heathrow. The scheme will bring evidenced returns on investment to the Exchequer, help boost the UK's productivity, and improve economic stability. After 14 years of consecutive Conservative Governments, and the plethora of broken promises and economic failures along the way, we need—my Slough constituents need—this vital stimulus more than ever.

Twelve years after the Government first committed to funding and building the western rail link, we are unfortunately no closer to the goal. When will the Government stop obfuscating, and provide the people of my Slough constituency, the wider Thames valley region and beyond with a clear timeline for when we can expect the project to be finally set in action? We have had various consultations over the years, we have run through various rigmaroles, and it seemed as if we were getting to the promised land, but we are still very far away from it.

The western rail link initiative is about more than just improving journey times. It signifies the strengthening of UK-wide and global links, and of our Union; a firm Government commitment to levelling up; significant steps towards reducing carbon emissions; and the unlocking of immense potential.

5.37 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate—or cross-party love-in, as he put it, albeit with a few digs into my heart—on a western rail link to Heathrow. He has been a strong supporter of this scheme for some time, particularly, as he referenced, in his capacity as chair of the western rail link to Heathrow all-party parliamentary group. I know that the scheme is of great importance to him, his constituents, the hon. Members who have intervened, and their constituents.

I turn first to Heathrow airport, which has a key role to play in boosting our global connectivity and the UK economy. It was ranked as the second busiest airport in the world for international passengers in 2023, handling an estimated total of 79 million passengers travelling to 214 destinations across 84 countries on 89 airlines. In 2024, this number is expected to increase to 82.4 million passengers. The Government remain supportive of airport expansion where it can be delivered within our environmental obligations. However, we have always been clear that Heathrow expansion remains a private sector project that must meet strict criteria on air quality, noise and climate change, as well as being privately financed, affordable and delivered in the best interests of consumers. The Government also recognise the economic benefit that airports can bring to their area. Increasingly, airports are becoming regional transport hubs that support multiple businesses, labour markets and population centres. Reliable and efficient surface access connections are an important part of achieving that.

[*Huw Merriman*]

The Government are committed to improving access to Heathrow airport in ways that work for passengers and address decarbonisation objectives. For example, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Elizabeth line services now run from Reading, through Maidenhead, on to Paddington and through central London to the City, Canary Wharf, Shenfield and Abbey Wood further in the east. Passengers from the west on the Elizabeth line can change at Hayes and Harlington for services to Heathrow airport, and in a few years' time, they will be able to connect to the airport, once the Old Oak Common HS2 interchange station is built and becomes operational; that will become the largest new station we will have built. That will enable even faster journey times and more connections than ever. These improvements are on top of Piccadilly line and Heathrow Express services, which connect the airport with London's public transport network, enabling journeys from across the country.

Although I have so far talked about connections for passengers, I appreciate that the issue is also important to local stakeholders, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It is an issue not only for passengers, but for the many thousands of people who work in and around Heathrow or provide services to the airport, many of whom will be constituents of Members who spoke this afternoon. The airport provides direct employment to 76,000 people. It is important that the transport network can get those people to work, as well as millions of air passengers away to their destinations.

Let me turn to the western rail link to Heathrow scheme and the question of Government support. We have always recognised the potential benefits of the proposal, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. The western rail link scheme proposes a four-mile link between the Great Western main line and Heathrow airport. It is promoted by local authorities and business groups in the area. It is important to note that the Government's position has always been that any Government funding would be subject to agreement on a significant third-party financial contribution. The position pre-pandemic was that only 50% of the cost would be funded by Government. Moreover, the scheme complemented the planned construction of a new third runway and the expansion of Heathrow, forming part of the proposals to deliver better surface access and addressing the environmental impacts of a busier airport—the airport would of course have been busier if the third runway had been built.

However, Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd is now not actively pursuing expansion, given its focus on recovery following the impact of the pandemic on the aviation sector. That has of course had an impact on the financial contribution from the private sector. As I understand it, promoters—primarily the Thames Valley chamber of commerce—are keen to revive the scheme as a majority privately funded proposal. Officials continue to work with stakeholders to support them in updating the business case for the scheme. This work is focused on updating the designs for the scheme, refreshing the cost estimates to take account of inflationary pressures over the last few years, and understanding whether there is demand, given changes in travel patterns following the pandemic and the current economic context. I expect to receive an update on that work later in the year.

The Government remain committed to investing in rail, as demonstrated by the Prime Minister's Network North announcement, which detailed an unprecedented number of commitments. We are taking forward affordable yet transformative growth plans to increase connectivity and capacity on the railway, and have spent £2 billion a year upgrading the railway across England and Wales, including reopening previously closed sections of the network.

Given the hon. Gentleman's points about rail investment, I remind him that since 2010, the Government—the taxpayer—have put forward over £100 billion of investment in rail. Of course, as rail Minister, I am very proud of that and support it. However, the significant changes to travel patterns after the pandemic and the challenging fiscal environment rightly require consideration of the rail infrastructure investment portfolio. Just running our railways over the last few years has cost every single household in this country £1,500, so it is absolutely right for taxpayers that we ensure that all schemes are affordable. The prioritisation of schemes and the allocation of funds in the portfolio is managed and updated on an ongoing basis.

I thank the hon. Member once more for securing this debate. Heathrow airport is an important international travel hub for the country and one of the busiest airports in the world, as I have said. That is why this Government recognise the airport's requirement for good surface access connections.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for his response. He referred to "later in the year". We do not seem to have a timeline, or urgency. Because of the lethargic approach taken by his predecessors prior to the pandemic, a significant contribution from the private sector was not realised. We then had the pandemic and went back to square one. Can the Minister outline a more precise timeline than just "later in the year"?

Huw Merriman: It is important to recognise what has occurred over the past few years. First, we have had the pandemic, which means that rail finances are 80% of what they were pre-pandemic. An awful lot of money is being put in. When we talk about delivering new railway, we have to take into account how to fund the existing railway. Other matters have changed. As a member of the Transport Committee, I was heavily involved in the scrutiny of Heathrow. The decision of the House was that the third runway could proceed, but after the pandemic, that decision moved. A lot of the benefits of the scheme are wide, as the hon. Gentleman has detailed, and I support them, but they also go towards the mitigation that a third runway would need. Obviously a third runway is now looking as though it will not go ahead, which makes the business case for the scheme that bit harder.

To reassure the hon. Gentleman, I hope that the case can be made, funding from the private sector is found, and we can give positive news to him and all the other Members who have spoken in this debate, and who champion this project. I end by giving him another commitment. If he, the members of the all-party parliamentary group and the Thames Valley chamber of commerce want to meet me, we can set out a timeline for the decision and what needs to be done. I can set out what is required from a private sector financing perspective, because I need to know that the money will be there if we are to do the work within Government. Let us all

work together, and let us sit down and have that meeting. I will be open and transparent with him and other Members, as I always am, and we can work out whether we can get this project delivered. It has great merit, and I like to see projects like this, where the private sector and the taxpayer work together to succeed for the betterment of the whole country.

Question put and agreed to.

5.47 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 30 April 2024

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

Glaucoma and Community Optometry

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered glaucoma and community optometry.

First, a special thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for selecting the debate for this morning. I am my party's health spokesperson—it is no secret—and am particularly interested in health issues. As such, I secured this debate off the back of a number of people who had contacted me. What I am particularly pushing for—I am sorry for the short notice; I put the request in the Minister's hand only two minutes ago—is that we do something now so that we can save sight further down the line. If I were pushing for one thing only, that is the one thing I would wish to have.

Optometrists in my Strangford constituency—I will send them a copy of this debate in *Hansard* afterwards—asked me to secure this debate. A number of bodies here on the mainland asked me the same thing. That is my purpose, but the issue of sight and sight-loss problems affects every constituency equally throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Therefore, the approach to making the system more fit for purpose must also be UK-wide.

I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), in his place. We are sparring partners, although when I say that I do not mean that we hurt each other—we fight things together. I am also especially pleased to see the Minister in his place. He has a deep interest in this subject, as well as a deep interest in Northern Ireland, which I much appreciate. He has told me about his times in Northern Ireland in the past month or so, and how much he loves going there. Indeed, every MP who visits Northern Ireland—including you, Dame Caroline—always comes back with the most wonderful memories of the occasion and of the people they meet. Just this morning, a Conservative Whip was telling me that he was in Hillsborough two weeks ago, and about how much he enjoyed it.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I want to place on the record the fact that a month ago I made my first visit to Belfast. I had an incredible time meeting Members of the Assembly at Stormont, and going to Harland & Wolff, around Belfast and to an inclusive school. It is a remarkable place, and I just wanted to add, as the hon. Gentleman is putting on the record that everyone else has been to Northern Ireland, that so have I—although I know that is not the subject of our discussion, Dame Caroline.

Dame Caroline Dinenge (in the Chair): Order. I gently remind Members that, charming as it is to hear about Northern Ireland—we are all wildly in favour of going there at every available opportunity—this is a debate on glaucoma.

Jim Shannon: Thank you for bringing me and us all back to focus, Dame Caroline. The reason why I said that is that the Minister has been to Northern Ireland and always has an interest in health issues, and I know that his journey was to Queen's University to explore such issues. That is the connection. The fact it is a lovely place is just wonderful, but that is not the reason why we are here.

The approach to making the system more fit for purpose must be UK-wide. Whenever we ask for what we are going to ask for at the end of this debate, I know that the Minister and the shadow Minister will have similar ideas to mine. I understand that health is devolved in all the regions, but it is clear that we need joined-up thinking to a joint problem. That is what I wish to highlight this morning.

Visual impairment and sight loss cost the UK economy some £36 billion each year, yet we allow 22 people to lose their vision to preventable causes each week. That is the thrust behind what I am aiming for today: to stop 22 people losing their eyesight this week. We can work alongside the optometrists and the opticians, and have a partnership whereby people can have their eyesight tests done more often. I will give some examples. Maybe people do not think of having their eyesight tested regularly, but they should. Optometrists in my area have told me that they are happy to work with the NHS or the health and personal social services in Northern Ireland to make that happen.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the frequency of eye testing, does he agree that the issues we are discussing today are symptomatic of other parts of the health service? People ignore eye problems and get to the point where problems could have been solved had there been earlier detection and more frequent eye testing. Even if nothing else transpires from this debate, if we do a little to try to ensure that people have regular eye tests, we can prevent some of the problems we are discussing from getting worse.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and say to the Minister: that is the thrust of this debate. If nothing else comes from this debate but the answer was along those lines, I would be more than happy. That does not mean that I will sit down now, Dame Caroline—I want to give a wee bit more background and a couple of examples.

Visual impairment and sight loss cost the UK economy £36 billion. The loss of sight is the loss of independence and confidence, and for many it is the loss of their life as they know it. If it can be prevented, it must be, so it is about prevention, early diagnosis and checks. This morning my focus—excuse the pun—will mainly be on glaucoma, a group of eye diseases that damage the optic nerve, usually due to changes in pressure inside the eye, or ocular hypertension. Data from Specsavers revealed that there have been some 30,000 referrals for glaucoma in people aged 40 to 60 just in the last year. Many more have been missed, accounting for nearly a third—30%—of all glaucoma referrals.

Some years ago I spoke at an event in Cambridge. I was asked to come along as a health spokesperson to an eyesight and visual impairment event that took place at a university in Cambridge—not the University of

[*Jim Shannon*]

Cambridge but one of the other ones. They were doing tests and I got my eyes tested for glaucoma. It was rudimentary, but the guy said, “I don’t want to worry you, but I think you need to go and have your eyes tested when you get home.” Whenever I got home I went to my optician right away. I could not understand it, because I had seen the optician a month before and was sure that my eyesight was okay, but the Cambridge guy had given me a wee graph that seemed to show that there were issues relating to glaucoma that needed to be addressed fairly quickly. Why is that important? Because my father had glaucoma, and they say it needs to be checked because it is hereditary and passes from generation to generation.

When I got home I went to see my optician right away and told her what was going on. I explained the circumstances and took her the graph. She said, “Look, Jim, I checked your eyes. I do not see anything wrong with them, but do you want them checked thoroughly?” I said, “Yes, definitely.” So she sent me to the eye clinic in Belfast’s cathedral quarter and I got my eyes checked. Everything is done there, 24/7—all the eye checks that are humanly possible. For ages after, my eyes were stinging. The guy came out after an hour and said to me, “I have done every possible check on your eyes. There is nothing wrong with them.” That was good news after a very thorough check. Since then, my optician has done a thorough check for glaucoma on my eyes, simply because it is hereditary and to ensure my peace of mind. I tell that story because it worked out well for me, but it does not work out well for everyone.

Typically, there are no symptoms to begin with, as glaucoma develops slowly, affecting the periphery of the vision at first. That means that hundreds of thousands of people in the UK currently have glaucoma. Betty in my office gets an annual eye test because her father had glaucoma and she was aware of the issue. When I asked my younger staff when they had last had their eyes tested they said, “Not since school. I don’t need glasses so why should I get an eye test?” I immediately asked them to book a test, and told them that it is like an MOT that needs to take place. The MOT tells us if our car runs okay and what repairs we need; it is the same when we get our eyes tested. The eyes may be known as the window to the soul, but they are also undoubtedly the window to the view of overall health that can be found in an eye test. Eye tests are imperative for finding an early diagnosis of diabetes, for example, and a host of other health concerns.

I remember two occasions when opticians saved the lives of gentlemen who came to see me in my office. One guy I know well came in and he was a terrible colour. I said, “Are you okay?” and he said, “To tell you the truth, I don’t feel at all well. I have been to the doctor who told me to see an optician, and I’m going there now.” I said, “I hope you’re okay.” He was as grey as a badger and it was really quite worrying to see him. He went straight from the optician, who referred him, just up the road to the Ulster Hospital. He had a tumour close to his eye and brain, which was removed in an urgent operation. The other person, who went to a different optician in Newtownards, had the same problem, was also referred to the hospital and also had a tumour removed.

Tests at the optician’s are incredibly important. They can diagnose not only glaucoma but many other things, so it is important to have them. Optometrists have a key role to play because they can spot the early signs of glaucoma during routine tests. For patients with stable glaucoma, optometrists have a role in monitoring eye health and helping them to manage their condition.

Alarming, a fifth of the population—some 21%—still do not know how often they should visit the optician for a routine check-up. The same percentage either cannot remember their last eye examination or have never had one. Opticians in my Strangford constituency, and particularly in Newtownards town, have told me they are anxious and keen to ensure that people have regular tests. It is about how to ensure that can happen. I hope the Minister will respond to requests, including from the shadow Minister, and is able to reassure us on how we can encourage a UK-wide method to help.

For those with glaucoma or suspected glaucoma who are referred to hospital, long NHS waiting lists, exacerbated by the pandemic, remain a problem. Alarming figures show that around 650,000 people are waiting for NHS ophthalmology appointments. Will the Minister indicate the steps that can be taken to reduce that number and help those 650,000 people to retain their eyesight? There are steps that we can and must take. I always try to be constructive; it is important to come with a positive attitude on how to do things better. We should be big enough to accept that changes need to be made, and then we can do it.

Although optometry services remained open for urgent care during the covid-19 pandemic, the number of sight tests dropped by 4.3 million in 2020—my goodness—which was a 23% decline compared with tests administered in 2019. In respect of that dramatic drop and the need for improvement, perhaps the Minister could suggest methodologies to address and target those who have fallen out of the system. The drop in the number of eye tests resulted in large reductions in referrals from primary care to hospitals. That is where the fall seems to be, and perhaps where it needs to be addressed. As a result, sight loss has increased hugely since the pandemic.

How can we increase referrals from primary care to hospitals? If we do that, we will have moved a long way. I will give some examples from Northern Ireland—not about how nice it is to visit, Dame Caroline, but about the issues of vision and health. In Northern Ireland there are two glaucoma referral and refinement pathways. By contrast to England, they are available at all community practices, as long as clinicians have the right accreditation in glaucoma care. It is fortunate that my GP service and many others have such access. Through the services, patients have their glaucoma tests completed in the community, and the results are then shared securely with the patient’s ophthalmologist. This joined-up approach helps to streamline the experience for the patient and ensures that optometry practices and ophthalmologists work together for the benefit of the patient. I always try to be constructive in my comments and give examples of what we do, because if we do something well, others need to know, and if the Minister does something well here on the mainland, we need to know about that in Northern Ireland as well.

There is also an ocular hypertension monitoring service in the community across Northern Ireland. The scheme allows optometrists to manage in the community patients

who would previously have been seen by the hospital eye services. A significant number of patients—some 2,000 to date—have been discharged to the scheme. That is an example of how it is proactively engaging and working. It has helped to free up the capacity in secondary care to manage more complex cases.

Those successful services show that community optometry, alongside other primary care providers, is responsible for delivering the shift from secondary to community care and is able to do so at almost no cost to the taxpayer, given that it uses existing capacity. What we have is an example of how things can be done—and perhaps spread across all of this great United Kingdom—in a better way. Those working alongside optometrists, who wish to ensure that people have their tests regularly, are keen to assist and to make changes. When the Minister speaks to the Association of Optometrists—as he probably already has—I believe he will find that he is pushing at an open door and that the ideas that he and the Department have are ones that optometrists have too.

Overall, Northern Ireland has shown how a model focusing on glaucoma care in the community can be effective. The challenge in Northern Ireland is that these services sit outside the general ophthalmic services—GOS—contract, which means that they rely on non-recurrent funding and are not subject to a regular uplift in fees; indeed, fees have never been reviewed. Given the success of these services, the push in Northern Ireland is for their funding to be put on a more stable, recurring footing and to be subject to the same process for fee uplifts as GOS. I have another ask to put to the Minister, in a constructive fashion: will he see whether the fees in place can be reviewed and how best the system could be used to improve things?

I know that the shadow Minister will make an incredible speech. By the way, I am not giving him a big head; that is what he always does, because he understands these issues incredibly well and brings forward his own ideas and his party's ideas to this process.

I want briefly to highlight the difficulties arising with cataract surgery. It is wonderful how cataract surgery can improve people's eyesight. I am a type 2 diabetic, but some years ago, before I was a diabetic, I went to see about surgery, not for cataracts, but to improve short-sightedness. I did not have the surgery, because I was not entirely confident about it, and shortly after, I became a diabetic. I tell that story because a good friend of mine in Greyabbey—I will not mention his name—was a type 1 diabetic and went for some corrective surgery to his eyes. Unfortunately, he ended up losing his eyesight; that is not the fault of anyone, but the diabetes complicated the issue, and he is now registered blind. Again, there are complications in relation to eye surgery for those who are diabetic, just by the nature of what happens.

Cataract surgery is currently the most common NHS elective surgical procedure, accounting for the majority of the large ophthalmic backlog facing the NHS. My mother has had one of her cataracts removed; she has a second one to remove, but I suspect that, unfortunately, her state of health means that the second procedure will not be done. Between 10% and 15% of those with cataracts suffer from concomitant glaucoma, and I am bringing the issue into the debate because cataracts are

often treated separately. I suggest that we consider how we could do the two together—the glaucoma and the cataract surgery.

I have been informed by a company named Clarity that there is an opportunity to treat patients for cataracts and glaucoma at the same time. It is obviously more cost-effective, and although I know we should not always dwell on the cost, we cannot ignore it. If there is a way of doing simpler, easier and cheaper surgery more effectively, let us look at that. I am ever mindful that the Minister has four competent members of staff behind him, who will clearly keep him right, so might they be able to do some research on that?

Treating cataracts and glaucoma together expedites patient backlog reduction and helps save people's sight by preventing the further progression of glaucoma. The treatment is quite innovative, new and effective, and it is important that we should do it. Micro-scale injectable therapies produced by Glaukos can advance existing glaucoma standards of care and improve patient safety by removing the need for invasive secondary surgery and tackling ophthalmic backlogs. So many people wait for their cataract operations and for improvements to their glaucoma. If we catch things early, we can save the sight, and that is a critical factor. Again, can the Minister look at that and ascertain whether the approach I have just referred to could be a cost-effective way forward? I am sure he knows about it, but if he—and indeed the shadow Minister and others—does not, I would be happy to have a response later. The treatment seems to me to be a win-win, so will the Minister confirm whether the Government will initiate it urgently?

Local optometrist services form a vital part of the eye care patient pathway and of directing patients to vital sight-saving medical technologies. It is incredible to live in an age when 50% of all cancer patients can survive and people's eyesight can be saved if it is checked and their problems with glaucoma are diagnosed. Are we not fortunate to live in this age? Although I am not the oldest person in the room—I suspect that my colleague on the left-hand side, my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), might just be a tad ahead of me by a couple of years—I have seen the great advances we have made in medical technology. We are doing great things, and we could do more. Is it not incredible that all we really need is to check? It is not terribly costly, but if we check, we make the difference.

Optometrists are the ones who are properly trained in the pathway. We must ensure that pathways are clear and that funding is available to ensure that, instead of 22 people a week losing their sight in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, no one at all loses their sight and their independent life—something that could have been prevented. I know that the Minister shares my goal and that the shadow Minister definitely shares it, as does my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry. As a result of today's debate, I hope we will have a progressive strategy going forward, and I am anxious to hear what the Minister and the shadow Minister have to say, so that we can feel that they understand the path towards achieving this goal and will focus on and direct it.

9.54 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I start by passing on the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill),

[Andrew Gwynne]

who leads for the shadow health team on the issues we are focusing on today. She is otherwise detained on the Tobacco and Vapes Public Bill Committee, which is taking place at the same time.

I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I know that the custom in this place would be for me to call him “the hon. Gentleman”, because he is not of my party, but he is a friend—for securing this crucial debate and for the positive spirit he always brings to these proceedings. Glaucoma is a common yet serious condition that, if left untreated, can cause real damage. Anyone is at risk of developing glaucoma at any age, but it particularly affects people as they get older.

I declare a bit of an interest here: my grandmother had glaucoma. Because my mum died at the age of 50, they do not if the condition was hereditary, so every time I go to my opticians I have to have the glaucoma test in case it is hereditary. However, it is really important that people are tested routinely, because it is a serious condition that, if left untreated, can cause real damage.

Several factors increase an individual’s risk of glaucoma, including a family history of the condition; being of African, Caribbean or east Asian origin; and having long or short sight, diabetes or blood pressure problems. Glaucoma tends to develop gradually, and it is often entirely symptomless for a long period. As a result, many glaucoma patients are diagnosed only during routine eye tests. The impact of glaucoma can vary greatly, ranging from misty or blurry patches in vision to struggling to complete day-to-day tasks such as reading, and permanent sight loss.

When it comes to accessing basic care, many glaucoma patients face significant challenges. Across eye care, more than 600,000 patients are currently on waiting lists for treatment. Given the risk that glaucoma poses if left untreated, such extensive waiting lists are a serious threat to patient outcomes. Sadly, that statistic shows no sign of changing, and demand for ophthalmology services is set to increase by more than 40% in the next two decades. Given an estimated annual cost to the economy from sight loss of more than £25 billion, the case for action could not be clearer.

I have a degree of frustration with the Government’s approach to the issue. Given the statistics, I would like to see the Minister commit today to turbocharge access to ophthalmology services and make eye tests more commonplace for people who do not routinely test their eyes, but also to get people access to eye care services once conditions have been diagnosed.

The next Labour Government are committed to reforming the system so that those with glaucoma and other eye health conditions can access care when and where it is needed. We will provide 2 million more operations and appointments on evenings and weekends, paid for by clamping down on tax dodgers, so that patients can be seen on time again. We will have a laser-like focus on prevention, tackling the social determinants of ill health and ensuring that eye conditions such as glaucoma are tackled at source. We will ensure that the NHS shifts from an analogue to a digital service, embracing the latest developments in technology and artificial intelligence to provide the best possible care and deliver the best possible patient outcomes.

Again, I declare an interest: being a bespectacled Member of Parliament, I obviously have routine eye tests. I am short-sighted, although age is catching up with me, and this is the first time that I have had varifocals for reading and for distance. However, my optometrist, Dr Shen of Boots opticians in Denton, has brought in and embraced some of the latest technological advances for testing different eye conditions. At my last eye test, I was amazed at the wizardry and machinery they have brought in, revolutionising the way they can diagnose.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is speaking very powerfully and I endorse those comments. What I have seen with optometrists in Newtownards in my constituency of Strangford is the amount of money and investment that they have put in. They have not asked for any help from the NHS for those things. They are doing it themselves. I think there is a wonderful opportunity for a partnership with optometrists who are investing money—all they need is the people to come in for testing—and that, I believe, is a role for Government.

Andrew Gwynne: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Boots Opticians in Denton is a franchise, and the owner of that franchise has invested in this remarkable technology. I have now seen parts of my eyes that I never believed it would be possible to be able to see. It is incredible digital technology, and it allows opticians to diagnose eye stroke. That is particularly important for people with diabetes, glaucoma, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. The technology can also be used to diagnose diabetic retinopathy, in which people’s retinas are leaky, which can lead to temporary vision loss, and age-related macular degeneration. That detailed eye care allows other eye problems, which ordinarily would have gone unchecked, to be found and the appropriate treatments to be provided. I have seen how transformative the use of modern technology by my own optician can be for testing for a whole range of conditions and eye health.

That is why this debate is relevant and why changes across the system are clearly needed. That is most evident in community optometry. There is a real potential to utilise, as the hon. Member for Strangford has said, the existing capacity on our high streets and in our town centres—crucially, where people are—to get a firm grip on the crisis in eye care. That is why the next Labour Government have committed to seeking negotiations with high street opticians to strike a deal to deliver more NHS outpatient appointments. That partnership, which the hon. Gentleman was rightly discussing, will underpin Labour’s eye care policy.

With 6,000 high street opticians serving communities across the country, we cannot afford to sit back and waste their incredible potential. We will work with high street opticians to beat the backlog and to get the system moving again. By utilising community capacity, we can free up specialists in the NHS to support those patients with the greatest need, providing greater accessibility, convenient care and, most importantly for all of us taxpayers, better value for money for the public purse.

This approach is backed up by evidence, proving the tangible impact of community-based eye care and eye health services. A 2014 study of the introduction of minor eye care services in Lewisham and Lambeth

showed how significant that impact is. GP referrals to ophthalmology specialists in Lambeth decreased by 30%, with an even greater reduction—75%—in Lewisham. Costs in areas without minor eye care services increased, while there was a drop in costs in Lewisham and Lambeth of 14%.

Given that the sector is in clear need of reform, with patient outcomes continuing to suffer, will the Minister back Labour's plan to unlock the potential of community optometry? With more than 550 patients suffering sight loss because of delays in the NHS since 2019, does the Minister accept that further inaction is simply not an option? These are people whose lives, and those of their loved ones, have been fundamentally changed through no fault of their own. We owe it to them to fix this system once and for all, working in partnership with the devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom, as the hon. Member for Strangford says, so that there is not a postcode lottery on these services, and we get the best outcomes for all British citizens across the United Kingdom. We owe it to them to ensure patients with glaucoma and other eye health conditions get the care they need, when they need it, and where they need it.

We will support the Government in the remaining weeks or months that they have to get this policy right, but mark my words: the next Labour Government see this as a priority and we will act.

10.5 am

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is always a pleasure to see you in the chair, Dame Caroline. Can I start by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising the importance of eye health to the wellbeing of people across our United Kingdom. No Westminster Hall debate is the same without him. I also thank the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for their contributions.

Losing one's eyesight can be devastating. I pay tribute to the charities that have done so much to help people living with glaucoma, or which are researching a cure: Glaucoma UK, the Glaucoma Foundation and the Royal National Institute for Blind People to name just a few. This morning, we are focusing on glaucoma and the role that can be played by community optometry. This afternoon, there will be a debate on the broader issue of preventable sight loss. I am responding to both debates on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who is the Minister responsible for primary and secondary eye care services. She is otherwise engaged, as she is a member of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee. I know she would want me to put it on the record and reassure Members throughout the House that that remains one of her top priorities.

As I am standing in today, I want to reassure Members that this is a subject close to my own heart. Glaucoma affected several people on my father's side of the family—my great aunt, Emily Stephenson, lost her eyesight in her 60s because of glaucoma. I remember visiting her as a child and seeing the RNIB talking book cassette tapes, which she loved, and I am delighted that that service continues today in more formats and with more titles than ever before. My mother, too, lives with glaucoma, so I take this issue very seriously.

Up and down the country, community optometry plays an essential role in protecting people's eye health. It also plays a key role in the early detection of glaucoma, as most glaucoma patients are identified through routine sight tests. Glaucoma cannot be felt—it does not cause any symptoms, and the eye pressure does not cause any pain. That is why regular sight tests are essential, so that problems such as glaucoma can be diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

As the hon. Member for Strangford suggested, everyone should have a sight test every two years. The NHS invests over £500 million every year in providing sight tests and optical vouchers. Between 2022 and 2023, we delivered over 12 million NHS sight tests free of charge. The tests are widely available for millions of people and the budget is entirely demand led, meaning that there is no cap on how many we will provide. We understand that some people may not prioritise sight tests compared with other healthcare, or they might not know that eye tests are recommended every two years. That is why we are always looking for opportunities to remind the public to have a test, through social media and other campaigns. Sight-test providers such as Specsavers and others on the high street display information about NHS sight-test eligibility.

We are committed to making greater use of community optometry to help to alleviate pressures in secondary care. Many integrated care boards are already commissioning a greater range of services on the high street, including minor and urgent eye care services, pre and post-cataract checks, and glaucoma referral filtering and glaucoma monitoring.

Glaucoma referral filtering schemes have delivered fantastic results, with additional tests that double-check whether a patient really needs to be referred to secondary care. These are tried-and-tested schemes that can save patients time and worry while freeing up space for those who most need specialist attention in hospital. Devon is a great example of that. An old Nightingale ward has been repurposed with equipment to screen large numbers of glaucoma and medical retina patients. The diagnostics hub has demolished the hospital's backlog from just under 4,000 in April 2022 to just below 500 in October 2023—almost a 90% decrease. In Milton Keynes, 70% of suspected glaucoma patients were discharged following refinement of initial referrals made on the high street. About 50% of integrated care boards currently have a version of those schemes in place, and we are assessing the potential for encouraging the roll-out of those schemes even further.

It is vital that patients who need secondary care have access to timely diagnosis and any necessary clinical treatment. The hon. Member for Strangford is right to say that those services suffered during the pandemic, just as they have across the NHS. That is why we have set an ambitious target to recover services through the elective recovery plan, supported by more than £8 billion of dedicated funding, and it is why we have expanded surgical hubs and harnessed the capacity of the independent sector, so that more patients can be seen more quickly. That has been particularly successful for cataract surgery.

Our plan is working and it is delivering results, as waiting times are falling. The number of patients waiting 78 weeks or longer for ophthalmology has been reduced by 96% since its peak, but we know that we have to go further. As well as cutting waiting lists today, we are

[Andrew Stephenson]

looking at how we can reform eye care services to meet the demands of tomorrow. NHS England's transformation programme is running seven projects across each integrated care system area, such as those that test how improving IT links between primary and secondary care could allow patients to be assessed and triaged virtually, saving them time and freeing up more hospital capacity for patients who need specialist face-to-face care the most. NHS England is gathering data and evaluating different interventions, looking to develop a convincing case on what works best and supporting further expansion.

We are going further and faster to free up hospital capacity. Today, many glaucoma patients often have their condition managed in hospital, but in some cases, where clinically appropriate, there is no reason why they cannot be seen somewhere else in their community that is more convenient for them. In England, it is up to ICBs to commission services based on local need, and some ICBs are already trying new ways of working to do just that.

Finally, on research, I want to recognise just how much potential there is for research and innovation to change the lives both of people who suffer from sight loss and of their families. The UK leads the world in research; we could not be more committed to pioneering new treatments and improving our understanding of sight loss. We put our money where our mouth is by awarding the Moorfields Biomedical Research Centre £20 million to carry out another five years of world-leading research in December 2022. Thirteen out of the 100 leaders and innovators in ophthalmology across the world who were included in *The Ophthalmologist's* "Power List 2023" were researchers from Moorfields, and we should be proud that that centre of excellence is right here in London.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his very positive and helpful response. The shadow Minister referred to ophthalmology services increasing by 40% over the next 20 years—those figures might not be entirely accurate, but I think that is what he said. That certainly indicates to me that we need to have a progressive and active programme to ensure that people can get tests in partnership with opticians. The Minister mentioned ICBs and how that will be done; I say this respectfully, but can we have some meat on the bones as to how that would work? I am ever mindful that the Minister wants to see that, but we wish to see that as well.

Andrew Stephenson: NHS England is looking at a range of different interventions across the country. One of the benefits we have across England, and of course across the United Kingdom, is that we can try different things, such as models of delivery, in different parts of the United Kingdom and learn lessons from one another.

The current strategy pursued by the NHS is to look at different programmes across England and evaluate them to see what delivers the best outcomes for patients. That will help us to improve access for patients and deliver quality treatment. We hope that that evaluation will enable us to suggest best practice. It will still be up to ICBs to commission services—we believe they should be commissioned locally—but we hope that by providing

an evidence base for them they can take decisions in the best interests of their local communities. To address the point made by the shadow Minister, that will address the growing demand for services. We recognise the fact that there will be more demand in the years to come. It will also help to address some of the backlogs with which we have struggled since the pandemic.

I hope I have said a few things to convince the hon. Member for Strangford that, while we still have much to learn from Northern Ireland, the Government take glaucoma extremely seriously. Community optometry is helping us manage the flow of glaucoma patients and it is already deployed effectively in many areas across the country to support patients.

We should be under no illusion about how many people watch Parliamentlive.tv. I think it was Stanley Baldwin who once said that the best way to keep a state secret was to announce it on the Floor of the House of Commons. Nevertheless, I wish to end with an appeal to anyone watching this debate at home: remember to take an eye test and please check the NHS website to see whether you are eligible for help. In preparing for today's debate, I decided to do just that and I will be having my eyes tested tomorrow morning.

Dame Caroline Dinéage (in the Chair): That is good to know; thank you very much. I call Jim Shannon to wind up the debate.

10.16 am

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister. That appeal was a wonderful way to end this debate. I began the debate today by asking that we move towards measures to getting more people tested. The Minister has just done that. He has thrown out a challenge to everyone across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to do just that.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) is well aware, as I am, of the merits of what we do in Northern Ireland, of the investment that optometrists are making personally and the need to work together. I am encouraged by the helpful contributions of the Minister, the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) referred to the fact that routine glaucoma testing can save eyesight. We all know that, and that is the purpose of the debate. We need more people to take the test—that is the purpose of the debate. The response from the Minister outlined a plan. I loved the term the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish used when he referred to turbocharging access to ophthalmology services. Wow! That is exactly what we need: a turbocharger. The Minister, in his response, turbocharged the challenge of eye tests and optometry.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish also referred to Labour's commitment to making eye care a priority, which I welcome. I think that is where we are, and that that will follow hard on what the Minister and the Government are doing. The hon. Gentleman also referred to the 6,000 opticians on the high street with whom we can have a better partnership, and he stated that inaction was not an option—how true that is. He said that it was important to ensure there was not a postcode lottery, and he said that Labour would act.

The Minister always tries to be helpful, positive and proactive in his responses. That is what I like in any Minister, and it is what I particularly like about this Minister. It is helpful to have something to be encouraged by. The Minister has grasped the modus operandi of the debate, and why it is important, even though the subject is not in his portfolio. He referred to the need for people to have an eye test every two years, and said that the Government were working with high street opticians to ensure ICB involvement. He also said that the Government were pushing to increase the number of ICBs engaged with that. He said that the pandemic had created some problems, but also referred to an increase in cataract surgery. I think that is positive. Another positive that is sometimes forgotten, to which the Minister referred, is research. Well done, Minister and well done to the Government.

The Minister referred to £5 million of pioneering technology from the United Kingdom. We lead, across the world, in relation to that. He also referred to a new model within the NHS: proactive, progressive ICB best practices.

Today, we have been encouraged by the Minister. We are very pleased with his response. I can tell people who watch this debate on Parliamentlive.tv or who read *Hansard*—people will get copies from me in my constituency—and want to know what we are doing that we do not need to do anything really expensive. We just need to be proactive.

I look forward to the implementation of the plan to which the Minister referred, and I very much welcome the turbocharged priority that the shadow Minister and his party are prepared to give to the issue. I thank you, Dame Caroline, as always, for your chairship. You make so much of these debates and we appreciate that.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered glaucoma and community optometry.

10.20 am

Sitting suspended.

Sport Horse Industry: Import and Export Controls

11 am

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I will call Helen Morgan to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up at the end.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of import and export controls on the sport horse industry.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. Horses are among the most travelled animals in the world, and in the UK we are lucky to have a thriving competition and breeding industry. My constituency of North Shropshire is home to a significant amount of that activity in the sport horse sector, with centres of excellence for both artificial insemination of mares and competition training.

Implementation of new import controls went live today. They have been causing consternation in the industry, with an additional issue around export controls for live animals and animal products, which are also having a significant impact. I will come to each in turn. I note that the issue of export controls is for the Department for Business and Trade and not necessarily for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. When I sought this debate last week, the former did not want to take it and advised that I speak to DEFRA.

I will focus a bit more on import controls because that is the Minister's area of expertise. I hope he will take on board some of my points about export, and work with his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade to consider some of the challenges being faced in the industry in that area.

First, on imports, we all recognise that there is a serious risk of disease, and that biosecurity is a top priority. I am not here to suggest otherwise. More than 95% of sport horse mares are artificially inseminated using chilled equine semen. It is important to have checks on that, so that we do not import unwanted diseases into the country. However, it is important to remember that these are high-health animals that are carefully monitored here and on the continent. There has never been an incident of disease imported in this manner. When looking at the type of checks that might be suitable, we can take that into account and consider what is proportionate to the risks. The logistical challenge of classifying those products as high risk at the border control point has the potential to cause havoc in the importing process.

I am grateful to Ministers in DEFRA, including Lord Douglas-Miller, who met me and one of my constituents who is affected by this problem. A pilot scheme is being run from today, with checks on those products carried out by the inseminating vet rather than at the border control point. I hope that pilot is successful, because it would remove some of the logistical problems of importing a product that has to be used within 48 hours of collection. It is collected in Europe and it takes time to transport it to the UK. The logistics of

[Helen Morgan]

getting it to its courier and destination are very tight. The pilot is a welcome development and I thank the Department for listening carefully.

It is important to note that getting to this point has been chaotic and that the change of process was made with only weeks to go. I understand, from speaking to the British Horse Council earlier this week, that that process is being piloted at East Midlands, though not at Stansted airport, where a smaller proportion of these goods come through. We now have a dual process, which is not ideal because there is scope for confusion and for the process to break down at Stansted. Businesses affected by this problem have wasted considerable time in getting ready, and expended much worry over the potential outcome, so the process has not been ideal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is outlining a specific case, but we in Northern Ireland also have a specific case, which the Minister will know, in terms of the protocol and the Windsor framework, which has curtailed the movement of livestock within the UK. Does the hon. Lady agree that while her case is specific to her and her constituents, we have a specific case too? Might the Minister in his answer also consider how movement of livestock, and particularly of horses, from Northern Ireland to Great Britain can be addressed?

Helen Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As always, it is highly relevant to the issue. There is an issue around Northern Ireland, because there is a risk that with different controls we compromise our biosecurity and that people use Northern Ireland as a back door to circumvent those controls. It is therefore important that we have consistency between all the devolved nations, including Northern Ireland.

We are talking about an £8 billion industry in the UK, so it is not such a niche issue and it is well worth ensuring that the industry can operate effectively. We have had a lack of clarity on charges. It is my understanding that both East Midlands and Stansted border control points are not Government-run and that there is a lack of clarity about the level of charges. Again, it is difficult for businesses to plan for a big change that is coming in if they do not know exactly what it will involve.

A lot of the effort has focused on the import of germinal products, but we have stallions in this country whose products are being exported. If we streamline and make the process of import cost-effective, which is very important, we are unfortunately putting our exporters at a disadvantage compared with European producers. This is therefore the point when I ask the Minister to work closely with the Department for Business and Trade to see if we can streamline the export process and put our own stallion breeders on a level playing field.

One of the reasons there has been concern about the process is that vets did not have access to the TRACES system—a database maintained by the EU and used to monitor health and travel documents in 90 countries. Will the Minister clarify whether the UK systems will be able to interface with that system and whether that has been properly tested? Also, out of interest, why did we not stick with the TRACES system, which might have reduced some of the cost in the process of moving horses in and out of the country?

We have talked about germinal products, but I also want to talk about live horses. As I mentioned at the beginning, sport horses are some of the best-travelled animals in the world. They go to Europe frequently to compete, and this is essential for breeders to prove their breeding and competition credentials; thousands of horses go every year. A couple of weeks ago, I was lucky to meet Safira from Springfield Stud in North Shropshire, who has been selected for the Brazilian Olympic team. She travels backwards and forwards to Europe regularly and it costs hundreds of pounds each time because she has to have export documentation and a veterinary check. That process is not streamlined and it is expensive.

That is also an issue for the thoroughbred industry, about which I confess I know less. Thoroughbred horses have to be naturally covered, which means a lot of international movement is required in the industry to ensure gene pool diversity, leading to a huge associated cost every time a horse moves in and out of the country. There has been an estimated 18% reduction in imports of thoroughbred horses, which shows the scale of the problem and its potential impact. There is also evidence of a reduction in the number of European horses coming here. UK businesses, such as Springfield Stud in my constituency, are considering moving to northern Europe to avoid some of the cost and red tape involved. That is hugely damaging to the industry and has the potential to affect North Shropshire in particular.

I want to return to the point that, in this debate, we are discussing high-health animals, whose health is continuously monitored. Many are held in quarantine before they are used to produce semen, and they must have high levels of documentation and accreditation to go and compete with other horses across Europe, so the risk around them is potentially quite low. I therefore ask the Minister: how can we slim down the process and reduce the cost and red tape involved so that breeders stay in Britain and continue to effectively compete in Europe?

The identification process, I am informed, is one such area for improvement. There are about 70 passport-issuing bodies in the UK feeding into a central database, and because there are so many bodies involved, the data is inevitably of variable quality. My understanding is that the Government have accepted that this needs to be simplified and improved and the industry is waiting on the statutory instrument needed to do it, but it has been repeatedly delayed. I wonder whether the Minister could give us a date on which that change will come in, so that we can see a more streamlined database for health and travel documentation.

I also want to touch on the point that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made about the importance of consistency. My understanding is that Wales is set to follow the same set of rules as England. Obviously, that is very welcome, but it is very important that the Government work with their Scottish counterparts to ensure that we have consistency throughout the whole United Kingdom and that we do not see people trying to get through loopholes and back doors because of a lack of joined-up thinking. When that happens, our biosecurity is put at risk. It is important to ensure that we have the same types of controls across the whole country.

We have a threat to the efficient operation of a valuable and thriving UK industry that we are all proud of. I have a particular interest in it, because eventing

and show-jumping horses are important and thriving in North Shropshire. DEFRA is moving in the right direction on some of these issues, but the process so far has been more chaotic than we would like. We want the Department for Business and Trade to be involved as well, because horses move backwards and forwards and we do not want to disadvantage our own breeders.

Before I finish, I would like to thank David Mountford from the British Horse Council, Claire Sheppard from the Thoroughbred Breeders' Association and Jan Rogers of the Horse Trust for making sure I was well informed before this debate. I also thank my own constituents, Tullis Matson from Stallion AI and John Chambers from Springfield Stud, for taking the time to explain their concerns and their issues to me in so much detail.

11.11 am

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Caroline. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing this important debate. I recognise the great economic, social and cultural benefits of the sport horse industry to this country, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the Government's support for it.

On the introduction of the new import controls under the border target operating model, the introduction of biosecurity controls on imports is not optional. Now that we have moved away from the EU's rigid biosecurity, surveillance and reporting systems, we are responsible for protecting our own biosecurity from threats such as foot and mouth disease, African swine fever and the African horse sickness virus, which we must remain alert to despite it never having reached these shores. Otherwise, such threats could devastate UK industries and cause significant damage to the environment, public health and the wider economy. We remember the impact of foot and mouth in 2001, which cost British businesses nearly £13 billion in 2022 prices. It caused massive disruption to many industries, including the sport horse industry.

Biosecurity controls are also essential to protect our exports and international trading interests. Our trading partners want to be reassured that we maintain the highest biosecurity standards. Maintaining our reputation for high biosecurity standards is in the interests of the sport horse industry, to ensure that we can continue to move first-class animals and germinal products in and out of the country.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) on securing this important debate. I declare my interest as a veterinary surgeon. The Minister will be aware that a couple of years ago the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published our report on the movement of animals across borders. There is a balance between allowing the smooth movement of animals and protecting the biosecurity of our animals in the UK. We looked at the key issues of trying to replicate the tripartite arrangement, which allowed for the smooth movement of high-health horses between the UK, France and Ireland, and progressing the digital identification system for horses, both of which would

allow smooth but safe movement. Government progress in those areas would help to protect our industries and our biosecurity.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his work in this subject area. He is very informed on these matters and the House benefits a great deal from his expertise. We will continue to work with the sector. We want to have as much freedom of movement as possible, but in a way that protects our biosecurity. I am sure there will be more opportunity for us to benefit from my hon. Friend's expertise as we find solutions to the challenges.

The new controls begin today. They require high-risk consignments, including equine germinal products from the EU, to enter GB via an appropriately designated border control post, where 100% documentary, 100% identity and 1% to 5% physical checks are undertaken. We are aware that the sport horse industry and its representatives, including the hon. Member for North Shropshire, have been concerned about the controls coming in during the peak season for the import of equine germplasm. We have been glad of their engagement on this topic and for their having drawn their concerns to our attention so that we can address them and make sure we get the implementation right.

The import of equine germinal products provides for genetic diversity and the rapid genetic improvement of British breeding horses. Using the chilled rather than frozen product enhances conception rates, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire pointed out. We know that the movement of these goods is highly time sensitive, if they are to be successful, so we have to consider appropriate measures that work for the sector. We have considered that in the context of the new BTOM controls.

Thanks to representations from the hon. Member for North Shropshire and others, we are aware that on some import routes logistical challenges mean that some checks required by the BTOM cannot currently be undertaken within the required timeframe for the products to reach their destination mare. DEFRA officials have therefore worked closely with the main importers of chilled equine germinal products, port health authorities and the British Equine Veterinary Association to develop and secure approval for a temporary contingency measure with an optional additional adaptation. That will facilitate trade while maintaining essential biosecurity controls.

The contingency measure temporarily reduces the requirement for official identity checks from 100% to 20%, and allows them to take place at a border control post or at the destination, using the optional temporary adaptation pilot process with the BEVA. As a result, the consignments, which also benefit from 100% documentary checks before arrival in GB, complete official import controls in the minimum time possible.

On the movement of live horses—which the hon. Member for North Shropshire was keen to address—in planning and implementing controls we aim to reduce any disruption or administrative burden as far as possible. We recognise that in the case of the sport horse industry we can often rely on robust industry processes that are in place to assure the health of the animal. For that reason, when new border controls on live animal imports come into force, we have developed and agreed, with the help of industry, an exemption for certain horses that meet a definition of high health. Verified equines used

[*Sir Mark Spencer*]

in racing, competition, breeding and sales can all qualify for that facilitation if arriving from the EU and sanitary group A countries.

We estimate that approximately two thirds of equine imports will be eligible for the exemption. They will be cleared for import on the basis of a documentary check, and their identity as a high-health horse will be verified with industry databases. That provision will allow them to avoid attendance at a border control post for a physical inspection unless a concern raised during the documentary check triggers such an inspection.

We are also focused on ensuring that the border control post infrastructure, which we will have in place for equines that must come through one, works as well as it can for the animals and their requirements. It is intended that the existing airport BCPs will be supplemented with Government-run BCPs at Holyhead and at Sevington in Kent, which will have the additional impact of assisting animals transferring from the island of Ireland and our friends in Northern Ireland. We are confident that we will have sufficient infrastructure, given the planned exemption for high-health horses, but we will continue to test that position over the intervening months.

We have already been fortunate to have had the benefit of the expertise within the industry to help to shape the physical design of the equine facilities at Sevington, and we have made many adaptations because of that advice. That co-design will undoubtedly make the site more effective in the way it operates. We hope to continue that joint work to test and challenge the operational procedures at the border control post in relation to the way horses travel to the site and are handled and inspected. Of course, that will be an area of focus for our work over the coming months.

We continue to welcome the open and supportive dialogue that we have with the sport horse industry. I again thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire for securing the debate. This is an important set of issues, and I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience: Khan Review

[*SIR MARK HENDRICK in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Khan Review on threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about this important topic. The UK's democracy is the oldest and most established in the world. We have set an example for countless countries to follow. Brave men and women from these islands and the Commonwealth fought and died in defence of the values that have shaped our great nation. However, as the Khan review sets out, we cannot get complacent. Advancing our democracy and ensuring that it is safe requires constant vigilance.

In the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and further afield, democracy sadly continues to be under threat. Elected representatives in this country are being threatened like never before. This year we have seen MPs from across the political divide intimidated and threatened by extremists intent on tearing apart our democratic framework. Very tragically, in the past decade alone we have seen two Members of Parliament, Jo Cox and Sir David Amess, killed by the far right and an Islamist terrorist respectively.

Across the western world we have seen a shocking rise in antisemitism and anti-Jewish hate in the wake of the 7 October terrorist attacks committed by Hamas. In the UK specifically, the House of Commons Library notes that police forces in Manchester, Yorkshire, the west midlands and Merseyside reported an increase in antisemitism. I am horrified by reports that the Jewish community are scared to visit the capital city of this country and that Jewish schoolchildren are hiding badges on their school uniforms for fear of being discriminated against.

In Stoke-on-Trent we have seen very real threats to our own democracy and social cohesion. At a recent fundraising event for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire's Conservative police and crime commissioner candidate Ben Adams, protestors hijacked a local Conservative party dinner in Shelton. Some protestors were known to have been supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which the Government have now rightly proscribed as a terrorist group. They managed to enter the facility, threatening local activists and behaving aggressively in the presence of children of the attendees. That is a clear example of malign actors threatening social cohesion. They are capitalising on tensions and unrest caused by events in the middle east to push their dangerous and divisive agenda at home.

As the Khan review points out, "freedom-restricting harassment" is threatening social cohesion and testing our democracy like never before. When the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street on 1 March this year, he made it clear that we have seen

"a shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality."

That is why the Khan review is both timely and necessary. The geopolitical environment has become increasingly unstable and unpredictable, which exacerbates the threat of social media to social cohesion. The tragic events of

7 October, when Hamas committed the worst pogrom since the holocaust, have presented us with an immense challenge.

On reading the Khan review, I was deeply concerned that the continuing activity of far-right and Islamist groups poses serious challenges to cohesion when they capitalise on the backdrop of geopolitical instability to stir division. These malign groups have sophisticated networks. Community spaces such as gyms are used as a recruiting ground, and vulnerable young people are targeted. If we want to tackle these challenges head on, we must be prepared to consider the findings of the Khan review and work constructively to deliver social cohesion once again.

On the steps of 10 Downing Street in March, the Prime Minister stated:

“Immigrants who have come here have integrated and contributed.”

I see that at first hand in Stoke-on-Trent, where we have a thriving migrant community who work in our NHS, schools and other civic institutions. However, our city’s multi-ethnic and multifaith community is being deliberately undermined by forces intent on tearing us apart.

Far-right organisations play on people’s real concerns about the economic impacts of migration to make the case for their narrow-minded and nationalistic worldview. In the same way, radical Islamist groups will use fear to stoke up division in favour of their nihilistic worldview and argue that institutions set out to undermine minorities’ personal freedoms and individual liberties. Soaring immigration levels currently make it virtually impossible for people to properly integrate into British society, and with huge unrest in our streets we cannot build a more cohesive society built around British values like democracy, the rule of law, respect, tolerance and individual liberty unless we control the number of people coming in from overseas.

As the Khan review points out, cities like Stoke-on-Trent will fall through the gap if there is no coherent approach to national security. That demonstrates the urgent need for stronger borders, which will help to facilitate social integration and stop malign groups exploiting the immigration question to push their divisive agenda. In April 2023, the deputy director of Prevent, Katherine Elsmore, informed me that Stoke-on-Trent City Council would no longer receive money to deliver Prevent strategies in Stoke-on-Trent; the Khan report suggests it would be useful to revisit that decision. My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and I have written jointly to the Home Secretary to make that case.

While I have time, it is worth while to put on the record what we believe to be the arguments for reintroducing Prevent funding in the city. First, as outlined in Dr Khan’s review, the far right puts social cohesion at serious risk in the city. Groups such as Combat 18 and Stoke-on-Trent Infidels always seek to exploit domestic and international instability to suit their own ends. In 2002, the city elected its first councillor from the banned far-right British National party, and by 2009 had nine BNP councillors. I am proud that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South led the fightback against them in the city, to offer a true centre-right conservatism option on the table. That led to the final expulsion of those extremists, and therefore allowed proper centre-right debate, alongside our colleagues in the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties and others, who are much more in the mainstream of party politics.

Alongside the clear threat of far-right extremism, radical Islamist groups also have a footprint in the city. The starkest reminder of that to me was when Usman Khan stabbed Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones on London Bridge near Fishmongers’ Hall in November 2019, tragically taking their innocent lives. Sadly, that terrorist was born and grew up in Stoke-in-Trent and Staffordshire, where he had links to Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and al-Muhajiroun, which has close links to Anjem Choudary, the face of militant Islamism and Islamic extremism in Britain. Given that 80% of counter-terrorism police networks’ live investigations are of Islamist terrorism, it is vital that we remain vigilant to the threat of other people who could be influenced by divisive and malign actors.

Earlier in the year, I welcomed the Home Secretary’s proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organisation. That vile antisemitic organisation encourages terrorism and praises the abhorrent terrorist attacks by Hamas on 7 October. Given that that vile group has a strong footprint in Stoke-on-Trent, where it runs local gyms and community centres, I fully support the Prime Minister’s decision to ban it. Sadly, that heinous group seeks to use events in the middle east to argue against values that underpin the UK as the world’s most successful multi-faith and multi-ethnic society.

To me, all that suggests that Prevent should review its decision to suspend funding for Stoke-on-Trent, because there is a clear threat to democracy and the rule of law from malign actors, from the far right and radical Islam, that needs attention in our city. Given that Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke have historically had some of the lowest turn-out rates for general elections in the UK, it is of paramount importance to help to ensure that people have trust in democracy, as well as in those who are elected to represent them. In part, that is about core issues such as levelling up so that people in our industrial heartlands no longer feel they are being left behind when competing with other areas, like London and the south-east.

The Khan review makes it clear that the financial vulnerability of one in five councils across the UK means that

“the potential impact on social cohesion in the short and long term could be destabilising to our country.”

Without doubt, that makes the case for levelling up, in respect of which we need continued investment, as we have seen recently in the Potteries, to improve socioeconomic conditions and regenerate areas that fall behind. Alongside boosting local economies and getting more people into work, we need to ensure that we have systems in place to stop people being influenced by malign groups that are intent on undermining our way of life.

The Khan review makes it clear that prevention is “far more effective than cure”.

Given the unprecedented threats posed to democracy and social resilience, I urge the Minister to ensure that Prevent is aware of the new challenges that Stoke-on-Trent faces, so that we can help to promote social cohesion in the Potteries. The review makes it clear that it is essential have a co-ordinated approach to support vulnerable people in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent. That involves rejuvenating the local economy so that people feel the Government are supporting them, and having adequate systems in place to ensure that people from all faiths and ethnic groups believe in our democracy and play a role in it.

2.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for leading this debate on an issue that is so important in modern society. It is also important that the lines on unity and solidarity do not become blurred.

I am blessed to represent my constituency of Strangford. We are a multicultural community. We have welcomed many people from Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, and in particular from Ukraine, as well as from Bangladesh, over the last number of years. Also, under the Government's scheme for Syrian refugees we took in a number of Syrian families. Those families have integrated into Newtownards with a real positivity, and the people of Ards and Strangford have embraced them as well.

Last Friday night I was invited to attend an event in St Patrick's hall, which is a Roman Catholic chapel hall up on the north shore in Newtownards. There is a very strong Indian diaspora in my area. I never realised how big it was until Friday night. More than 100 people are part of it, all of whom live in Newtownards. Every one of those people is here with a visa and the status that they have to have, and they contribute to our health sector in the hospitals in Ards and throughout Ulster, including the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. I make that comment because I see lots of positivity at the same time; it is not all negative.

I will give three examples. They do not necessarily embrace my constituency but do embrace the situation in Northern Ireland. I think they clearly illustrate what the hon. Gentleman referred to and the problems that arise. But last Friday was a wonderful occasion for us all, including elected representatives, to come together and have a really good and fun time. I cannot remember an occasion when I have laughed as much in a long time. It was wonderful and that is what communities can do if they come together.

At the same time, across the UK and indeed globally there are so many democracies and communities that face internal polarisation, so it is great that we can look at the Khan report and apply it to modern society, in order to assess what more can be done to ensure that all opinions are represented.

A large majority of the public—85%—believe that freedom-restricting harassment currently occurs in the UK, with 60% believing that the problem is worse than it was five years ago. I see a change in society and I am not quite sure whether covid was the main reason, but it was certainly part of it, when people were able to make comments at a distance, and interaction and social engagement were lost to a certain degree. Some 44% of people have witnessed freedom-restricting harassment online, and 44% say they have witnessed it in person, so there is something difficult in society. The issue the hon. Gentleman has brought forward is about social cohesion and democratic resilience, and it is really important that we try to encourage those things and do not dwell on the divisions.

There is absolutely no doubt that social media plays a massive role in the opinions that are gathered and eventually expressed, which often provoke controversy in society, and there is no doubt that a conversation must be had regarding people's disillusionment with democracy and about how we can restore confidence

in it. I think that is what the hon. Gentleman is seeking to achieve. Hopefully after the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)—and others have spoken, the Minister can give us some encouragement about the Government's way forward to try to make the situation better and to engage people in society.

We had a debate in Westminster Hall yesterday on assisted dying—or assisted suicide as I call it, and as many others also call it, by the way. I have a very clear opinion on that; other people have a very different but clear opinion on it. What I think we need, and what I always seek to achieve, is that we at least respect each other's viewpoints. "Agree to differ" is the terminology that I often use, because it is not always good to dwell on the things that we disagree on, and we must at least be respectful and understanding.

There are two main dimensions to social cohesion: the sense of belonging in a community and the relationships with others in that community. The event on Friday night was an example of what we can do if we commit ourselves. There has been a natural shift in societal norms, which is welcome, but those who hold what are seen as traditional opinions or conservative views, like me and many of my constituents, feel that they no longer have a right to express them—that it is no longer acceptable or welcome. I have tried all my life to be respectful of other people. I do it in this House—I never attack anybody in this Chamber or the main Chamber. I try to respect people, and even if I do not agree with them and they do not agree with me, we have an understanding of how to do things.

Everyone has the right to express their belief in a rational and respectful manner. In Northern Ireland, we recently discussed changes to the relationships and sex education curriculum. The legislation was passed here, and the Northern Ireland Secretary then reflected that in Northern Ireland. We expressed a lot of concern about how that was done, but now that the Assembly is up and running again we can, I hope, move forward. Last week, we discussed changes to the RSE curriculum proposed by the Alliance party, which many parents feel incredibly unsettled about; so many people have written or emailed me, expressing their concerns. A meeting was held to inform and discuss the issue with those parents, and Eóin Tennyson MLA of the Alliance party summarised the Let Kids Be Kids campaign as a "disgusting dog-whistle to the far-right"—

a disgraceful comment. We are not, and my constituents are not, on the far right. They are parents who have concerns about their children's education and teaching, and care about our opinions. I want to put that on the record, because the number of parents who have emailed me to express their concerns has been incredible.

I had a staff member sit in on the meeting and listen to every word that was said, and I can assure the public that those who have such concerns are not far right. They are parents, they are carers, who are invested in protecting the innocence of children, as is their right. I would expect every parent to do that with zest and enthusiasm, as they have a commitment to protect their children. The fact that freedom of speech allows those people to be called far right shows how far wrong we have gone.

The threat from extremism has been growing for many years, and what has been described as the pervasiveness of extremist ideology in the aftermath of the terrorist

attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 has highlighted the need for further action. At the outbreak of the Israel-Palestine conflict, I received calls and emails to my office about an incident that occurred at the city hall in Belfast. I remember it well. I reported it to the police; I was on to the police on a number of occasions about it. I say this because it is an example of how evil and wicked some people are in their intentions. There were pictures and videos going around on social media of Lasair Dhearg activists—those of a nationalist opinion—projecting on to city hall an image of Hamas fighters paragliding into Israel, alongside the words “smash the Zionists”. I think it was wrong, and I made a number of complaints about it. I contacted the Police Service of Northern Ireland to ensure that they took action to detain those involved and ensure that those who displayed those inflammatory comments on Queen’s University, the city hall in Belfast and other places were held accountable for their actions.

Some people displayed on the city hall the statement “From the river to the sea”. We all know what that means. That means death to Jewish people—death to Israeli people. That, I believe, is inflammatory; I believe that the police needed to take action. To be fair, the police did immediately take action, but the fact that it was allowed to happen in the first place—to the annoyance, the anger of many of my constituents who were in Belfast doing their shopping, and other people from my party as well—was outrageous.

I raised that issue with the PSNI, and a section of the Jewish community contacted local representatives stating that the antisemitic language frightened them. So that is the society we have. When the hon. Gentleman brought forward the debate, he did so for a purpose: to factually and evidentially record the things that are happening. I have recorded those two things because I think it is important from the point of view of how my constituents feel.

To conclude, those are just a few examples of how democratic resilience can be improved—yes, it can be improved—and how we can improve social cohesion to ensure that people feel protected within their communities. I look to the Minister, who is a genuine man and who has the same impression as the rest of us, to try to make people’s lives better and to have a society where we can live together in such a way that we do not have to fight or be antagonised. I look to him for the reassurance that he will do his best, as I know he will, to ensure that all forms of rational and respectable opinion are upheld within society. I look forward to the contributions by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blaydon, who is a dear friend of mine—she knows that—and others to the debate.

2.51 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Mark, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend and city colleague the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on securing this important debate.

The Khan review is welcome, and we can all be grateful to Dame Sara Khan for the considered work she has done. I am grateful to her for taking the time to visit Stoke-on-Trent and speak with community groups

and various organisations in our city. Also, she has spent a considerable amount of time meeting MPs, including myself, for which I am grateful. She has helped shine a light on some of the serious challenges we face around social cohesion and countering extremism. There is much to agree with in her report and much to support in her recommendations, but there are also points that need to be raised and highlighted for the sake of further clarity, and that is what I intend to do in my remarks.

I echo my hon. Friend’s words about the foolhardy cessation of funding for Prevent and its work in our city of Stoke-on-Trent. That followed the previous removal of counter-extremism support. The report makes it clear that:

“Without such support, places like Stoke fall through the gaps despite the permissive extremism environment and harm it is causing to the city.”

It is not nice to have to say that our city still needs the close attention of Prevent. It would be wonderful to say that Prevent’s job was done and dusted, but the reality is that there are those in the city who reject our liberal, western, democratic values. Worst of all, there are those who have been prepared to act on their hatred by engaging in, or attempting to engage in, murderous terror. I am very concerned about the robustness of the decisions taken by the Home Office and how it is prioritising resources across the country.

Sadly, we have seen both Islamic extremism and far-right extremism in Stoke-on-Trent. Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun have been active in some communities in Stoke-on-Trent, radicalising young people and attempting to spread their perverse view of religion. That is why it is welcome to see the Government take action recently to proscribe Hizb ut-Tahrir, and I hope they will continue to closely monitor those who are now seeking to get around the proscription and continuing such activities under another guise.

There is also a history in the city of far-right activism, with the BNP, the English Defence League and a number of other organisations that my hon. Friend mentioned, which has in some cases resulted in the permeation of more serious radicalisation. In 2010, we saw attempts to blow up the City Central Mosque. Fortunately, those attempts were stopped, but that demonstrates an undercurrent of extremism that the far right has propagated.

Concerningly, we have seen attempts from extremist groups to undermine and control our democratic systems. Cases have been reported of Islamic extremists attempting to discourage participation and interfere with elections. With the far right, as my hon. Friend mentioned, we saw the BNP get up to nine councillors in 2008-9. The reason for their electoral success was their exploiting the political vacuum left by a declining Labour party. Many hundreds, indeed thousands, of voters in Stoke-on-Trent felt that voting BNP was the only way to make the main political parties listen to those voters’ mainstream concerns. Of course, the BNP was only too keen to take advantage of that situation. Our city felt forgotten and left behind. People felt that they were being told they were wrong to be proud to be British. They felt that a metropolitan and globalist London elite was sneering at traditional working-class communities. I am glad to say that we have won those voters back to mainstream politics, and we must keep those voters with mainstream concerns within mainstream politics.

[Jack Brereton]

I know that Dame Sara has expressed concern about the mainstreaming of extremism. There are concerns that engaging with extremist groups or individuals gives them legitimacy. She also highlighted a number of serious concerns about freedom-restricting harassment. It is particularly concerning that the report suggests that this problem is getting worse, stating that 60% of people feel that the problem is worse than it was five years ago.

I would like also to see more of a focus on what, for want of a better turn of phrase, I am going to call “extreming of the mainstream”. This is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford, I think, was touching on, where we see the alienation of hard-working, patriotic communities. It is not extreme to want to hear “Rule, Britannia” at the Last Night of the Proms, or to sing it when and wherever you like in the UK. It is not extreme to fly the St George’s cross or to have an England flag tattoo. Rather, it is extreme to want to ban “Rule, Britannia”. It is extreme to want to ban the flag of England. And yet we all know that there are attempts to chip, chip away at our shared icons, heroes and ways of life.

The same can be said for religion. It should not be considered extreme to have strongly held religious beliefs, whether Christian, Muslim or of any other religion. Most faith is about peace, tolerance and respecting others. We have often seen faith communities throughout north Staffordshire come together in the toughest of times, when this cohesion is challenged, resisting fundamentalists and calling out those who attempt to cause and sow division.

I am glad that the Cass report has also brought public debate about life-altering medical interventions for minors back to the mainstream place of sanity and biological objectivity. It was beyond bizarre that it took legal action to determine that Maya Forstater was worthy of respect in a democratic society for her perfectly mainstream recognition of biological reality. That is an area in which I would like further clarity. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has already said that of course “gender-critical” and, indeed, non-voluntary trans activist voices would not be affected by the definition of extremism. However, if a new body is created to report back on extremism annually, and to promote cohesion and so on, what is to stop that body becoming another national institution that is captured by those with extreme views of their own, which it wants to present and push as being mainstream and anti-hate? I hope we can hear how that will be safeguarded against.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said, the UK is one of the most open, multicultural and freedom-loving countries in the world. The rule of law, religious freedom and free speech are some of our core democratic British values. However, we cannot take these values for granted, especially at a time when we see these values under increasing threat around the world. Democracy is fragile. We must redouble our efforts to protect our shared values and democratic rights, and we must see robust action against those who threaten to undermine or suppress our way of life—something I have made very clear to Staffordshire police and others.

In conclusion, I welcome the important review and I look forward to hearing further from the Minister how the next steps will be taken. We must be wary of extremes, particularly those that bring violence with them, and we must also be wary of attempts to paint the mainstream as extreme, because doing so pushes mainstream voters into the arms of extremists.

2.59 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I congratulate the hon. Member on Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing this important debate.

Our democracy faces significant challenges threatening social cohesion and wellbeing, with the rise of extremes on all sides, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) outlined. The rampant spread of dangerous conspiracy theories and disinformation, alongside unregulated technological advances in artificial intelligence, pose a direct threat to our democratic ability and stability. Additionally, as we have seen in more recent times, politics and politicians at large, across the globe, have utilised populism to boost their own political gains at the expense of minority communities and those on the receiving end of their political attacks.

The Khan review uncovers a phenomenon of freedom-restricting harassment, where individuals are coerced into self-censorship through abuse and intimidation. That harassment is reported as suppressing the freedom of expression of individuals. Eighty-five per cent of the public acknowledge its presence in the UK and 60% perceive it to be worsening over the years. The report highlights a link between the erosion of democratic resilience and the absence of a national strategic framework.

The recommendations in the report for protecting victims of harassment and incitement are welcome and to be encouraged, as is the recommendation for a new independent office for social cohesion that genuinely works, in good faith, to balance the rights and freedoms of all with the need for social cohesion across the United Kingdom. In addition, schools should be safe havens for learning, free from intimidation. I therefore also support the review’s proposal for buffer zones around schools, to curb protests and provide support for staff and students. However, while aspects of the report are welcome, it completely ignores the role that the Government are playing in breaking down social cohesion in this country.

The recent statement by the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, on a proposed new definition of extremism is concerning, particularly due to the approach that he presents, which targets Muslim groups. On one hand, the Government acknowledge there is a problem with social cohesion and people policing their ideas and opinions. On the other hand, we have a Secretary of State targeting Muslim organisations and dangerously labelling them as extremists without an evidence-based approach or any right to appeal.

In addition, the Secretary of State fuelled speculation in the media that he would label the Muslim Council of Britain as an extremist organisation. He also took away funding from the Inter Faith Network and its work because a member of its board was linked to the Muslim Council of Britain. The irony is that an interfaith charity that champions the work of social cohesion had

to close down because the Government ended its funding—the same Government who acknowledge we have an issue with social cohesion.

It gets worse. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology used her position to target a professor over her support for Palestine by wrongfully accusing her of extremism. The result was the taxpayer footing a bill for £34,000 to pay for the price of the right hon. Lady's libellous attack. Let us not forget that a former Home Secretary tried to silence hundreds of thousands of genuine people demonstrating for a ceasefire in Palestine by labelling the protests as "hate marches".

Do the Government want to be part of a solution, fixing social cohesion, or part of the problem? The evidence is stacked on the latter. It is difficult to look at top Conservative figures today and not find someone who is actively working to damage social cohesion in this country. Seriously—how can we advocate for social cohesion in the UK with Susan Hall as the Conservative candidate for Mayor of London? The Conservative nominee for Mayor of London embodies a hard-right politics profoundly disconnected from the essence of London, its diversity and its values. She endorses Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Suella Braverman. She perceives London's diversity as a weakness. Susan Hall spouts Islamophobic tropes that have stirred up division and hatred against Muslims. She likes tweets about Enoch Powell, and a tweet by Katie Hopkins describing Sadiq Khan as "the Mayor of Londonistan".

Susan Hall is actively involved in Facebook groups sharing antisemitic, white supremacist content and racially charged threats against Sadiq Khan. That is the Tory mayoral candidate for London. The election is only a few days away, yet the Government want to lecture people on social cohesions and the impact it has on society, and the Tory candidate for London epitomises the very definition of divisiveness.

I am a proud Bradfordian, a proud Muslim, and a proud Member of the British Parliament. When we talk about community cohesion, there are vulnerabilities that Dame Sara Khan references—the issues of job security, and the issues that make communities feel threatened, and people feel otherised. These issues require people to know that they matter, that they belong, and that people care. Instead, what we have is senior people like the former Home Secretary and the former Prime Minister who compared women to letterboxes and other things. As a result of his column, there has been a 335% increase in attacks against Muslims. I associate myself with the comments that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North made about antisemitism, but I add to that the increase in Islamophobia. That is led right from the top.

When we are elected, we as politicians are expected to lead with authenticity, with congruence, with leadership that unites people. The definition of cohesion is sticking together, working together, tackling problems, and mutual support for positive futures. That is the definition of community cohesion, but is that the rhetoric we get from the Tory Benches? No, it is not. The Government need to understand the role they have played to get to the point where this report was even needed. I have been in this House since 2015—I just started my 10th year—and it is a slippery slope every year, pandering to hard-right narratives, with Members of Parliament having to apologise to the Leader of the Opposition because they have retweeted far-right conspiracies.

I get it—I completely get it. I understand why MPs ask whether a career in politics is worth it, because of the abuse we get. People are stepping down in this place, but that did not start on 7 October, and the conversation about the ceasefire—that started when Brexit was happening. That started when people in this place and the media were perpetuating headlines about people being traitors, and there was no response from the Government then. There was no condemnation then, when all those things were happening, yet here we are, with this whole review, and the Minister will stand up and say how committed the Government are, when they cannot tackle the rot from their own Front Benches to temper their language or epitomise leadership, walk the walk and show what it looks like to lead. We certainly have not had that from the Government.

I will simply finish on this. It is not just about the issue of the mayoral election going on in London right now. Social cohesion is imperative for Great Britain, but that means leadership, and calling out people like the former Prime Minister who rubbed shoulders in America with Steve Bannon, who said, "Tommy Robinson is our hero". Tommy Robinson is putting out videos of him fixing his tie in the House of Lords—people like that, entertained in our Palaces! That is why we have to fix social cohesion. The message comes right from the top, from the media, and from social media platforms. I am afraid that this Government certainly do not do that. It is important that the Government learn the lesson, lead by example, and do not preach something that they do not practise themselves.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Thank you. Before I bring in the Front Bench spokespeople, I remind Members that referring to other Members by name is not correct. They should use their title, ministerial positions or whatever role they occupy in the House.

3.9 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark, and I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing this important debate.

Dame Sara Khan's report does not make for easy reading, but it is vital that we tackle extremism and radicalisation head on. I hope the Government will take this opportunity to reflect, and to consider how we can work constructively to build more cohesive, resilient communities. At its heart, this is about how we as a society live well together. It is not only a matter of security, but a matter of public health, and speaks to our fundamental wellbeing.

I thank all those who have contributed to the debate. We heard from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who talked about the importance of the review; from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who looked the experience of his own constituency, and talked about the importance of democratic resilience and social cohesion; and from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who also talked about the Khan report and the situation in his constituency. Finally, we heard a very spirited speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who talked about the importance of language and how people speak about things, as well as the need

[Liz Twist]

for a national strategy. She also discussed Islamophobia, and, in a very passionate speech, said that the Government needed to walk the walk.

To say that this has been a challenging period for our communities would be an understatement. We continue to see the impact of the ongoing conflict in Gaza on community relations. Meanwhile people are finding it tough to make ends meet, and our public services have been struggling. The Khan review's position on this point is clear: these difficulties risk undermining our social contract, fuelling disillusionment with our democratic system, and allowing extremism, disinformation, and conspiracy theories to take root. The House can, and should, work together to tackle these serious issues, and the Minister can be assured that my party is ready and willing to engage in good faith with these discussions. We are here to represent our constituents, and we should come together to reject extremists who seek to undermine these efforts.

That involves recognising the shortcomings in the Government's work on this to date. As the Khan review clearly outlines, those shortcomings have left local authorities to deal with the fallout following the most challenging incidents of community conflict. We must remember that it is councils that are dealing with these issues on the frontline, whether that is fulfilling their statutory duties by organising community safety partnerships and safeguarding boards, or developing more bespoke partnerships in response to local issues. The unprecedented levels of demand that councils currently work with have made it more difficult to carry out the broader upstream work that is desperately needed.

Meanwhile many councillors face appalling levels of abuse and harassment simply for serving their communities. We heard about the impact on Members of Parliament, too, as they go about their work, and how sadly, in two cases, Members have lost their lives. It is imperative that central Government work as a supportive partner with local government on this, providing the space for local authorities and other agencies to come together to share best practice. The reality, as Khan says, is that "there is no strategic approach within Whitehall's machinery to deal with these threats to social cohesion and our country's democratic resilience."

We have had review after review, and still no sense of where tensions are, how to prevent them, or how to rebuild after conflict. The constant political turbulence certainly has not helped matters. The integrated communities action plan has had some success, but of 70 commitments listed in it, just 14 have been delivered. We were told that the cross-ministerial group responsible would meet every six months, but in the end, it met only once. This is part of a wider pattern: we are still waiting for an update on the hate crimes strategy, promised in 2020, and it seems that the anti-Muslim hatred working group and the antisemitism working group are no longer meeting. I hope that Sara Khan's review gives the Government an opportunity to refocus and demonstrate the political will needed to make lasting preventive change. Actions speak louder than words. We need to see that this is made a priority.

The review also invokes the Government's record on housing asylum seekers and the Home Office's failure to communicate effectively with local authorities before placing asylum seekers in their areas. Shockingly, some

local authorities told the reviewer that far-right groups knew about local asylum hotels before they did. We desperately need a new approach, which has to include new strategies on counter-extremism and community cohesion. The Secretary of State has said that the Government will be publishing a more detailed action plan, which will include funding commitments to support organisations on the ground working to build community resilience. I look forward to hearing about the progress made on that, but in the meantime, I want to ask the Minister the following questions.

First, the review is clear that we must take a more proactive approach to community cohesion. That includes learning more about what makes local areas particularly vulnerable or resilient to extremism. Will the Minister say what his Department is doing to address those knowledge gaps? The recruitment of a new Islamophobia adviser continues to be in doubt. Will the Minister shed some light on any progress made on that issue?

Technological innovations have created further challenges in maintaining cohesive communities. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to tackle new forms of radicalisation, including radicalisation that takes place online? The tensions that we are currently seeing are playing out at all levels of our society, including in our classrooms. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Education about providing the support that teachers need to manage difficult conversations? Finally, can he tell us whether the Government have given up on refreshing the hate crime action plan?

Social cohesion is not a "nice to have". If we do not show leadership and support local authorities to address concerns within their communities, extremists will fill the void. We must start thinking about how we approach proper preventive work that engages communities, rather than waiting for flashpoints to occur. I hope we can work together on these most fundamental issues.

3.18 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I begin by thanking all hon. Members. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing the debate, for opening it in such a temperate and balanced fashion, and for asking some immensely reasonable questions relating to his own community and, more broadly, the importance that we all attach to ensuring that social cohesion is strengthened across the country and that we make progress on this hugely important agenda.

The first thing to say is that the battle against extremism and the rise of extremist ideology across our country is something that everyone here cares passionately about, as all hon. Members who have spoken today have articulated. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North powerfully underlined in his opening speech the need to counter the spread of extremist beliefs among young people in our schools, the importance of confronting issues when young people fall victim, the importance of the Prevent programme to ensure that communities are cohesive and strengthened and, more broadly, the importance that, as a Government and a country, we must attach to making progress on these hugely important issues over time.

That is one of the reasons why we commissioned the Khan review, why we gave Dame Sara Khan the space, the time and the support to look at these matters in the round, and why we welcomed the publication of her report a number of weeks ago. She was charged with examining these issues in greater depth, to investigate the scale, the causes and the impact of extremism in local communities, and to provide insights into how we can build resilience to better support those involved, local authorities and civil society.

As a number of Members have said, the report outlined some of the challenges we face, not because of decisions that the Government have made—I will come back to the point that the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) made in a moment—but, if we are going to have a mature debate about this, because of long-term issues that are impacting western democracies across the world and will impact this democracy whoever is in power. As a consequence, the hon. Lady should be careful about some of the statements that she makes. Those who seriously want to make progress will deal with the issues in front of them rather than calling others who are involved in the conversation names.

The report highlighted particular issues around disinformation, harassment and intimidation; the climate of self-censorship that hon. Members have outlined, not just among people in this place or associated with politics, but across all walks of life; a wider disillusionment with democracy that is starting to seep into parts of our civic society; and decreasing trust in politics, particularly among the young. All of that aggregates to create a vacuum that extremism and extremist ideology can fill.

The Government very much welcome Dame Sara Khan's work and we thank her for it. We wholeheartedly agree that democracy is a precious asset. That is a view that all of us in this place—right hon. and hon. Members who have the privilege of representing communities up and down the land in Parliament—would share.

The report shines a light on some fundamental gaps in our system, and it clearly sets out Dame Sara's view of what the Government should do to address those flaws. As has been articulated, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities recently set out measures that will ensure that the Government do not inadvertently provide a platform to those who want to subvert our democracy and deny other people's fundamental rights. That is just the first of a series of steps the Government will take in the coming weeks and months to tackle extremism and protect our democracy, including the publication of a full response to the Khan review before the summer break. While I am not able to go into the details at this stage, we have committed to publishing a response to the review in the weeks ahead.

I want to turn to some of the individual points that hon. Members have made. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North raised a number of hugely important points about the need to ensure cohesion, and drew upon the experience that he and his colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent have over the long term. I wholeheartedly endorse many of those points.

My hon. Friend has a specific concern with regard to Prevent funding. He will be aware that I am unable to speak absolutely about Prevent funding from the perspective of the Department that I represent, but he indicated that he has written to the Home Office, and I will

certainly make sure that, yet again, those points are telegraphed to my equivalents in the Home Office. I recognise that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and those involved in Stoke-on-Trent politics in general, feel very strongly about that.

I understand that part of the restructuring of the Prevent funding was about regionalising some elements of the funding, and there are still elements of the support that are available to all local authorities. I understand—at least from the notes that I have been given, accepting that I am not the lead for Prevent—that Stoke-on-Trent City Council may not have taken advantage of all the support that is available. I know that my hon. Friends will make sure that the council does that if it has not done so already, recognising the very valid points that they made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South outlined in even more detail the very long-term challenges that were created with the rise of some of these extremist ideologies in his home town, the time and effort that it took to try to beat those back, and all the work that was done to do so. He rightly highlighted the importance of giving space to very mainstream views that are shared in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, Bradford, the north-east and definitely in my part of Derbyshire. We must not suggest that it is illegitimate to be proud of this country and to celebrate its history, its culture, its institutions, its norms and representations of it. Those who over the past 20 years have tried to diminish those things, remove them and pretend they did not happen—those who suggest they are old-fashioned and have no place in our society—are absolutely wrong and do nothing for community cohesion. They do nothing to build the strength and tolerance that our country has thrived on for many decades.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South is absolutely right: like many others, I may not choose to go to the Proms or to indulge in “Rule, Britannia”, but it is vital that we have a shared understanding of the norms, culture, history, traditions and identity that we share in this country, which have brought us to the place we are today. We should be immensely proud of that.

My hon. Friend highlighted some of the read-overs to other areas. Fundamentally, there is an ideology—postmodernism—that has seeped out of our universities over the past 50 years, and which seeks to dismantle the nation state as a concept. There is absolutely no underpinning logic to it; it is essentially a play—a game, an attempt to twist things—and it does not actually help us build communities. It does not seek to build things up; it seeks only to tear down institutions that have worked so well for centuries on end, and to eliminate the concept of the nation state.

Too many people in this place and elsewhere do not understand the incredibly nefarious effect that postmodernism will have on our society if we are not clear about it. That ideology seeps out of universities, moves into our institutions and infects parts of our public sector, and then moves out into civil society as a whole. It explicitly encourages people to have no shared understanding of our history—it effectively wishes to abolish history—to have no shared lexicon and to play with words to such an extent that reality is completely subverted because we say something is one thing on one day and then pretend it is something else on another.

[Lee Rowley]

There are entirely arbitrary rules underpinning it, which change based upon the fashion, whoever shouts the loudest, and the time of the day and the day of the week. That is an ideology that will fail, and if we allow it to infect our institutions, our civil society and the work we do in this place and elsewhere, our country will be much weaker, poorer and less able to build the kind of cohesive society that we want.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we have not had a discussion in this place or elsewhere about what we must do. When people play with the building blocks of civic society, words, institutions, basic concepts and shared endeavour, how can we build the kind of cohesive society that we want? Whether it is expressed in a temperate way, like my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for Stoke-on-Trent South did, or in a more emotive way, like the hon. Member for Bradford West did, we have a shared endeavour, but postmodernism absolutely prevents that from happening. We should call it out, stop it and say it has no place in our country and our academic and civil institutions, because it will fail and will lead to a less cohesive society.

Naz Shah: I was just thinking about the Minister's warning that I should be careful. I am just trying to work this out. There is this idea that we should have a shared history, but we are not teaching our history in its entirety to our children. We are not talking about togetherness. The Minister might want to read the lecture by the first Muslim Cabinet member, the former Tory chairwoman, Baroness Warsi, who talked about the idea that Muslims do not matter. Does the Minister agree that, if we want a cohesive society, language is key, and the message has to come right from the top in 10 Downing Street? Muslims must not be otherised. Does he not include Muslims in that conversation, because it certainly feels like that?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, because she articulates yet again the care that is required in language and assertions, which has been sadly absent from her contributions to the debate, both a moment ago and previously. Of course Muslims matter. Of course people of all faiths matter. It is frankly outrageous that there is a suggestion that that is not the case. Of course they matter.

Those of us who are trying to build a cohesive society—an endeavour that I know the hon. Member for Bradford West shares—believe that such statements should not be made. They send a message to people who are listening today that, for some reason, there is some kind of fundamental difference and that those of us who have the privilege to sit in this place do not believe in cohesion and want to separate people out on the basis of the skin or the religion they have, and that is fundamentally untrue.

What I find most offensive, most outrageous and most egregious in this culture of grievance that is perpetuated by comments such as the ones put forward a moment ago is the separation of people within our community into backgrounds or experiences or skin colour.

Naz Shah: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: No, I will not give way.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. The Minister talks about being temperate and using temperate language. Could I please remind him to observe that when he makes his comments?

Lee Rowley: With absolute pleasure, Sir Mark. I absolutely intend to do so. As has been outlined, my concern is that it is important that we are very clear and very careful about the language we use, which I have sought to be, and about suggestions as to the motivations of others, which I have sought to be. Equally, it is important that we are robust about calling out cases where that care is not taken. All of us have a responsibility in this place and elsewhere to utilise the best and most careful language, assertions and arguments. Today has been an indication of where that is not occurring in places, and I will come on to that more in a moment.

Naz Shah: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will make some more progress before doing that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised a number of important points and made some very strong points about social media. We are all dealing with our interaction with social media, its importance now and its pervasiveness in daily life, as well as with the opportunities and challenges it brings as a whole. The reality is that social media is entirely embedded in our daily lives, in the way it was not even a few decades ago when I was growing up. The situation is extremely different, most obviously for children, who are having to learn how to deal with it as they grow up, but also across society as a whole. That is something we will have to grapple with for the rest of our lives, and it will not be immediately clear for many years exactly what that means. We are all going to have to learn, and to take things extremely carefully, as we try to understand how we ensure that social media is embedded in our life in a way that accentuates the positives and minimises the negatives.

The hon. Member for Strangford also talked about the challenges of cynicism about democracy, and I accept that point as well. From my personal perspective, one of the challenges in recent years is that there has been a baselining of issues in our country that we actually need to debate much more often. The rights that people talk about quite freely—often too freely in many instances— which I support, and which I know everybody in this place and beyond supports, do not just appear; they are not guaranteed.

Naz Shah: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I will give way in a moment. Those rights are hard won and hard fought for—people have died for them—and we must continually repeat and confirm that in order to ensure that people recognise that these rights are not automatic. All of us involved in politics and the political process have work to do. The situation we are in, including the relatively benign environment we have grown up in, and our right, when we go home to our respective communities, to have the kind of debates and discussions we want, need to be nurtured. If they are not, they wither on the vine; they ossify, and they do not work. We cannot get away from this principle—this indulgence—that if we do not accept that all of that

is built on the concept of the nation state, the United Kingdom and the values our country has, ultimately it will not work in the long run.

Naz Shah: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He is right, and everybody has that right, including me. I represent the great people of Bradford West, and 60% of my constituency is Muslim, as I myself am. I find it really offensive that the Minister is offended that I am stating facts. I am demonstrating that the Government are not walking the walk when delivering on their so-called cohesion policies or their so-called attempts to deliver equality. In fact, I am even more offended at any suggestion that my interventions are about a grievance narrative, when they are actually all about Muslims just wanting equality. We are not talking about special treatment; nobody in my constituency wants special treatment. What they do want—will the Minister give it and agree?—is equality.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Interventions are meant to be short.

Lee Rowley: I thank the hon. Lady, who makes some of my case for me. However, turning to her comments, I agree with some of what she says. It is important that we build a shared understanding and a shared set of values in this country. I agree that we should be temperate with language. Where she has called out inappropriate behaviour—I do not agree with all her points—I accept that no party is perfect. I accept that some of my colleagues will have made mistakes. I accept that some words have been looser than they should have been.

However, I hope the hon. Lady will accept that that is not limited to my party or to the Government—there have been multiple examples. However, if we just trade off on the basis of who said what where, or make some kind of case that one political party is worse than the other, when we know that they have all had significant issues with community relations over many years—only one party got into the place it did with regard to antisemitism a number of years ago—we will be much poorer in the debate about this issue.

The hon. Member for Bradford West referenced facts, and I am happy to talk about some of the challenges around the facts she provided a moment ago. She knows that the Inter Faith Network's funding was withdrawn because of a decision to appoint somebody who had a background in a particular organisation—that was a choice that the organisation made, and it appointed that person. The policy of non-engagement with the Muslim Council of Britain has been in place since the Labour party was in power. Indeed, it was the former Labour Member for Salford—the Secretary of State in the predecessor to my Department—who started that policy of non-engagement with the Muslim Council of Britain in 2009, which my party continues to this day. It is perfectly logical to extend a policy that was introduced and endorsed by the Labour party, on the basis of logic put forward by the Labour party, because of the challenges that we now have. The hon. Member for Bradford West shakes her head, but those are the facts on the assertion that she made.

Liz Twist: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: I am afraid I will make progress. I have given way a number of times.

The hon. Member for Bradford West made a number of comments about populism and raised a number of concerns about extremism and its definition. When she next speaks in debates like this, she needs to define the specific issues she has with the definition of extremism, because that was not part of her speech when we strip back all the criticisms about individuals. We can always have a robust debate, but if we want to have a mature one, which the hon. Lady claims she does, it would be better to focus on concerns about the specific definitions the Government are trying to bring forward, and what they do and do not achieve, as opposed to spending much more time talking about individuals.

I will probably leave it there. I have many more things I could say about the hon. Lady's speech, but maybe it is better to deal with those in another forum at another time. I will just say that I do not agree with much of her speech, and I hope that, in time, she will reflect on many of the points that were made.

Putting aside some of the challenges mentioned in Members' speeches, and what was contained in at least one of them, I think today has shown that all of us feel extremely passionately about ensuring that we build a society that is cohesive and resilient for the long run, and about seeking to utilise what the Government can do to move forward the things we see in our individual communities, whether that be Stoke-on-Trent, Blaydon, North East Derbyshire, Bradford, Strangford—the hon. Member for Strangford is no longer in his place—or elsewhere. We also want to identify the issues that we need to deal with in the years ahead, which is exactly what the commissioning of the Khan review sought to do.

Despite the robustness of the debate, and despite my fundamental disagreements with some of the points that were made, I think it has been a useful debate and a good debate. Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for giving us the opportunity and space to have the debate, and I am glad that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South have had the opportunity to raise specific they are concerned about within their great city. I hope that such robust debates—next time, the language will hopefully be slightly more cautious and temperate—highlight the interest and need of everybody, wherever we sit on the political spectrum, in terms of getting this matter right and making progress for the long run, which is something we all want to achieve.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I call Jonathan Gullis to wind up the debate.

3.40 pm

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you, Sir Mark. I thank all Members who took part in this important debate, and I thank the Minister for his words and reflections, particularly on the Prevent funding for Stoke-on-Trent, and for saying that he will pass on our comments to the Home Office. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and I will continue to push for that additional uplift, to make sure that we can retain that important service.

I want to reflect on a few of the things that have been said. First, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, should rightly be horrified

[Jonathan Gullis]

to antisemitic tropes, words and images projected on to buildings in Belfast, as we sadly saw happen here on Elizabeth Tower. It is completely abhorrent that that kind of thing is taking place, and the police must crack down on it.

I visited the hon. Gentleman's constituency—in fact, I gave a talk to members of his party, as well as to the wider community—and it was great to be surrounded not only by passionate patriots and Unionists, but by members of the community who have lived side by side. They may have different religious or nationalistic views, but they have ultimately grown up side by side as neighbours, friends and colleagues, and I am immensely proud to see the way that that country has moved forward.

My own stepmother, Janet Harbison, set up the Belfast Harp Orchestra, and a member of her family was once an Irish nationalist Member of this Parliament—as you can imagine, our dinner table can be quite interesting at times. She wanted to take part in the peace process by using culture as a way of bringing the community together, and she faced death threats from the IRA, despite coming from the Republic of Ireland and despite her family's recent history of representing people wanting a united Ireland at that stage. Even she was targeted, with people sending her images of her younger sister, alongside death threats, letting her know that they knew where her family lived. That was truly shocking.

When Janet married my father, who is half-Irish and half-English by birth, they were targeted with abuse and threats; bomb threats were literally made against them, which saddens me to my core to this day. That meant that I was not able to visit my father as much as I wanted to, purely for my own safety. Rightly, my mother and stepfather, and my father and stepmother, wanted to make sure that I was safe.

That shows how far the country has now come, which is why what happened in Belfast is so sad. To see such things being played out again—although in a different guise, using what is happening the middle east as a background—is very sad indeed for a community that has been divided on the basis of birth or religion.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, who is fellow Stokie, although I am obviously an import—my accent gives it away—while he is from there by birth and by breeding. In fact, “Brereton” is all over the bloody roads and in the names of streets, because my hon. Friend's family were responsible for building many of them in the not-too-distant past. It is great to see him standing up again for the community that we serve, and he is right to do so.

I am proud to wear or wave the St George's flag, as I am the Union flag. I am proud to say that I am British and English. I am proud to sing “Three lions on a shirt” as much as I am to sing “Rule, Britannia”, which will not come as a shock to the Minister. I am proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with many fine patriots across our great community of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, 73% of whom voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 Brexit referendum. I appreciate that there were unfair comments, and the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) talked about people being called “traitors” in this place. I was not in this

place at the time, but I of course entirely understand that it would have been completely inappropriate to refer to people in that way.

It is important to understand that there was a groundswell of anger among the public, including people like myself, who voted to leave and who campaigned to leave the European Union. We felt that this place was, sadly, not hearing or representing those views and that others in this place—not the hon. Lady but others, who are no longer here—were pushing the idea that people were somehow thick, uneducated or racist in wanting to see that democratic right delivered. That fed into some of those far-right extremist groups, which were able to proliferate off the back of that.

It has taken a long time to rebuild that trust. These things led to an undermining of our democratic system, which is why 42% of people still chose not to cast a vote in the 2019 general election. That is very sad indeed and was used by groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which actually encouraged people not to take part in the democratic process—sadly, in this case, the Muslim community, in particular.

It is very important that we use the opportunity we have in this place. I taught religious education for eight years in secondary state schools across Birmingham and London, and Islam is a religion of peace. It is stated very clearly that to take one life is effectively to take the lives of all humankind. It is therefore entirely appropriate to make it abundantly clear to extremist groups—those on the far right, but also those in the Islamic community that pursue a twisted perversion of what Islam is actually about—that that is simply wrong and abhorrent. The word “jihad”, which is sadly now used in terrorist atrocities, actually has a very different meaning—that if, God forbid, holy war is required, innocent women and children of all races and faiths are to be left aside, and all religions are to be left in peace. Ultimately, it is only done in the defence of one's faith—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Member wind up his speech, rather than start another debate on a related subject?

Jonathan Gullis: I do apologise, Sir Mark. I appreciate the point. As I say, I wanted to make sure that I use this opportunity, because as Members of this place, our words carry a lot of importance. I represent a large Pakistani and Muslim community, and given the recent tensions around what has unfolded in the middle east, its members may feel that I do not advocate their particular view as much as they would like me to. I want to let them know that I do, and I will always stand up for the positive nature of that community and what it has done. Indeed, for the first time in Tunstall, we have seen the election of a member of the Pakistani-British community, Councillor Tabrase Din, who is doing great work on trying to make our streets safer and tackling the backlash in recent times, particularly around extremism.

The hon. Member for Bradford West made an impassioned speech. I would just remind her that political parties across this House have people in them who have done very silly things, and he who is without sin may cast the first stone. I remind her that it was, sadly, the Labour party that was found to have breached or undermined the human rights of those in the Jewish community, in particular. I saw that with my predecessor,

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent, who suffered tremendous antisemitism at the hands of extremists, who had, sadly, proliferated in her party. I commend the fact that the Leader of the Opposition has done a lot of work to try to drive that out, despite what we saw recently in the Rochdale by-election.

No party can sit here and say that all its members have been perfect, and we have all seen and needed to call out extremism in all its forms. However, I kindly remind the hon. Member for Bradford West that calling people such as Donald Trump or Boris Johnson extremists is completely wrong and drives the feeling that they need to be marginalised even further. They are mainstream, centre-right politicians who have a view and who were democratically elected by overwhelming majorities in both their nations at different times, and they should be respected, even though we may have political differences about what they did.

It is important that we continue to have this informed debate and that we make sure that all sides of the argument are heard. Most importantly, however, we must allow mainstream views to continue to be held by mainstream parties in a good-quality, good old-fashioned democratic debate, rather than allowing the wider public to feel marginalised, so that they look to the extremist elements of society, thinking that their views will be heard or supported there. It is for us in this place to make sure that people feel that they can be heard and that their views are supported, and we will continue to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Khan Review on threats to social cohesion and democratic resilience.

3.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

Life Sentences: Public Understanding

5.10 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I call Dr Kieran Mullan to move the motion and will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the member in charge to wind up.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public understanding of life sentences.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I welcome this opportunity to discuss crime and justice, one of the topics that motivated me to enter politics and that I have focused on in my time as an MP. As the son of a policeman, and having spent time volunteering as a special constable, I am acutely aware of the way that crime can destroy families and upend the lives of decent, law-abiding people. Wanting the victims of crime and their families to benefit from a more just justice system is something that I feel passionately about. I always aim to contribute to the debate and to edge the system in a direction that I think better delivers the justice that it should be set up to deliver. I have spoken before in this place about my concern that all too often the victims of the most serious crimes and their families do not see justice done.

Before I speak about the use of the term “life sentences” specifically, I will set out the background. My time campaigning in this area has taught me that there is what I have described previously as “intellectual snobbery” about people who think that our justice system is at times insufficiently punitive. There are well-meaning and in many respects important groups that lobby hard to make the system less punitive, and nothing that I believe invalidates their arguments or counteracts efforts to deliver reform and rehabilitation of offenders. If such efforts work and overall there are fewer victims of crime, that will be a good thing, but as a Conservative, I believe that we should keep one eye on reality as well as one eye on the ideal future. Criminal behaviour is not going anywhere any time soon, and even the best rehabilitative systems see recalcitrant and very serious offenders.

Also, we have to recognise that, in and of itself, punishing offenders is a public good; in fact, it is recognised in the law as one of the purposes of sentencing. Whether we like to admit it or not, it helps victims and their family and friends to feel that justice has been done, and in the aftermath of a serious crime, whatever comfort we can bring to victims’ families is incredibly important. I would argue that punishment is fundamental to our system. It tells victims and their families that they should not take matters into their own hands, because the justice system will deal with things fairly.

Of course, there are no black-and-white answers stating what that will mean in every case, but almost nobody who argues for less punitive measures would suggest, for example, that a murderer—even one who we could guarantee would not offend again—should spend just four weeks in prison. Nearly everyone accepts that punishment is necessary, and it is easy to suggest outcomes that 99% of people would agree instinctively are too lenient.

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

In the most serious cases, there is in my view a huge—indeed yawning—gap between what most fair-minded people would think constitutes justice and what actually happens.

I am also concerned that the Department itself—the Ministry of Justice—does not sufficiently engage with this issue. That engagement is sometimes missing from impact assessments and policy changes, and perhaps even more worrying is its absence from the MOJ's own annual report. The focus is on victims' experiences of the processes of the justice system, which is of course important and to be welcomed, but I think that what most victims and their families want most of all is for justice to be done, and the MOJ has little to say on whether or not the justice system as it stands is actually delivering that. I have suggested before that we could start by at least asking people what they think about this issue, but there has been little appetite for that.

I will never forget what the father of Sarah Everard said when the murderer of his child was sentenced to a whole-life order—a very rare thing in our justice system. He said that it was the only thing that brought him any comfort. I do not think that he would have felt any different if the perpetrator had not been a policeman, even though it was only because the perpetrator was a policeman that a whole-life order was given. I believe that the view that father expressed is common among the families of murder victims.

Because this is a subjective issue, I think that the views of victims' families and the public at large should act as a powerful and important standard against which we hold ourselves, albeit it should not be the only consideration. I remember discussing this question with Elsie Urry, a lady whose three children were brutally murdered in 1973 by a man who she thought was then sent to prison for the rest of his life, only for him to be released in 2019 when he was considered to be no longer a danger to others.

That brings me on to the use of the term “life sentence”. The first thing we need is transparency about what our justice system is actually delivering. Without it, the public do not necessarily know what is happening, and if they do not know what is happening, politicians will not be held to account properly, which is very unfortunate in a democracy. The focus of my debate is to highlight the fact that, in the current system, what is happening is frequently misreported and misunderstood, giving the impression that our justice system is more punitive than it is, particularly when it comes to the most serious offences.

What is called a life sentence is in fact, in sentencing practice—a sentence of a minimum term of imprisonment, after which there is an opportunity for release with the remainder of the offender's life spent on licence. But what is actually reported? What do the public get told? I was pleased to be able to explore this issue in more depth in the Justice Committee's report, “Public opinion and understanding of sentencing”, which states:

“The use by major news outlets of the phrase “jailed for life” when they are not referring to a whole life order is an example of how media coverage risks perpetuating misunderstandings of the law on life sentences among the public. Reporting of sentencing that potentially inflates expectations of how long a person will serve in prison risks damaging public confidence.”

A whole-life order is a term of lifelong imprisonment; it is different from a life sentence.

Since late last year, my office has regularly monitored this issue, and I am afraid that it is not just the media that spreads this misunderstanding. Even more concerning is the fact that police forces and, on one occasion, the Crown Prosecution Service have incorrectly used the phrase “jailed for life” to describe a life sentence. Just today, Nottinghamshire police force released a statement with a headline saying that two murderers had been “jailed for life”. That is simply not true. The two individuals had received life sentences with minimum terms of 16 and 19 years. That is very different from being jailed for life, as we can reasonably expect both of them to be released.

Since October 2023, we have had to contact eight police forces for using the phrase “jailed for life” in their headlines about 13 cases. On six occasions, the police forces in their opening paragraphs failed even to explain the minimum tariff set by the courts, and once a police force failed entirely to mention that there was a minimum tariff. I am pleased to say that three police forces admitted their mistake and subsequently changed their statements after we contacted them, but the majority have not. That matters. People do not always read all the details of a news article, let alone of an official press release from a police force. Every time “jailed for life” is used of someone subject to a life sentence, people get a false impression of what is happening.

I do not want to diminish the many positive things that this Government have done to introduce what I think are fairer punitive elements into the system, not least the big step change away from Labour's halfway early release to a two-thirds release for the worst offenders, and the introduction of a whole-life order for premeditated child murder. I welcome the planned introduction of whole-life orders when there is a single victim whose murder involved sexual or sadistic conduct, instead of the existing requirement for two victims.

There is much for me to welcome, but I am clear that we must go further on child murder. I think the requirement for significant premeditation is too high a burden, as it excludes, for example, a parent battering their own child to death in a rage. In addition, where multiple offences are involved, our system is too quick to have sentences served concurrently. We have seen this in cases of historical child sex abuse, where there are sometimes dozens of victims and hundreds of offences. Measures need to be in place to impose whole-life orders in some cases of that type.

Such changes are difficult to make. They are expensive changes for the Government, and there is always pressure on prison places. We can hope for success only if people understand how rarely whole-life orders are used, and that life sentences are not in any way comparable, especially given the usual minimum terms. If most people serving a life sentence did in fact spend most or all of the rest of their life in prison, this would be less pressing, but they do not. On average, they serve 20 years.

Some people will argue that the term “life sentence” is accurate because it describes the rest of an offender's life being served on licence. When we make that argument, however, we risk offending the victims and their families. Families of victims of murder are really serving a life sentence of grief, trauma, and terrible memories of what happened to their loved one. Someone serving their sentence on licence out in the community is basically just being asked to do what all of us are asked to do,

which is to not offend. That is a burden that we all face, and I do not see it as in any way equivalent to spending time in prison. None of this is an issue for those familiar with legal jargon, but when a member of the public who is less well informed of what the terminology means reads “jailed for life”, they are being misled.

I am aware of an almost diametrically opposed view of the public understanding of sentencing, though. A commonly made argument is that, broadly, away from the issue of what a life sentence means, the public underestimate sentencing lengths and think we are less punitive than we are. That is undoubtedly driven by media reporting, where journalists, who have a good innate sense of what the public will think is reasonable, are quick to report cases where they sense that that has not happened. Often, however, an unjustified logical step is made by advocates of less punitive approaches: that because of that, we do not need to make the system more punitive. That approach forgets that two things can be true at the same time: people can think our system is less punitive than it is, but they can also think, even when presented with the reality, that it is not punitive enough.

There is another argument based on research in which the public are asked to go through more detailed theoretical cases and sentencing exercises. Studies suggest that people agree with the sentences normally given when they have the full picture. However, almost universally, these exercises look at less serious offending and cases that are full of mitigating circumstances. My focus has always been on the worst and most serious offending. I do not think I have ever seen one of these exercises take someone through the case, for example, of a serial rapist in and out of prison who refuses to engage in behavioural change programs, or of a parent who batters, tortures, neglects and then murders their own child. That leaves me still firmly of the view that, in the most serious cases, the problem of misreporting remains important.

There are things we can do about this. First, as part of the Justice Committee’s inquiry into the public understanding of sentencing, the Committee travelled to Finland and the Netherlands to speak to officials and stakeholders about how they approached reporting sentencing to the public, including the role of media or press judges engaging with the media on reports. The press judges undertake their media duties in addition to their role as a judge, so that when a sentence is handed down, communication with the media is managed by a press judge rather than the sentencing judge. I was not able to be there, but I know the Committee heard that press judges actively engage with the media on public interest cases in particular, even participating in interviews. Committee members also visited the Helsinki District Court, where judges were encouraged to write their own press notices following the passing of a sentence, in order to take the news into their own hands. As a result, early reports on a sentence were often based upon the judge’s press notice, ensuring greater accuracy in initial media accounts of the sentencing decision. That is something we could consider.

Ultimately, we have to accept that the term “life sentence” is at the root of the problem. It is too easily misunderstood and therefore too easily misreported. If terminology is causing a problem, we should change it. We just do not need the term. The judiciary can describe and report what they are doing: passing a minimum

term with an opportunity for future release, followed by continuous monitoring on licence. I do not expect extinguishing the term to cause an overnight change. The media and public bodies are used to using it and “jailed for life” is a catchy headline, but over time we could see a change and have a more honest understanding of our judicial system.

It may be that I and those who share my views have no more success in making the case for changes on the matter of substance—the sentences actually being served—but at least we will be making that case in a more honest environment. I am arguing for transparency in sentencing, because I know that that is important to victims of crime and their families, and to the public. I hope the Minister sees the value in that, and will reflect on what I have said and try to find a positive way forward.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I start by thanking and congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) on securing a debate on this important subject. I commend him on his excellent work supporting victims, bringing these important issues to the attention of parliamentarians, and campaigning for sentencing changes. I completely agree that sentencing fitting the crime and improving public understanding is vital to public confidence in the justice system. As he mentioned, he is an active and engaged member of the Justice Committee, whose vital report, “Public opinion and understanding of sentencing”, I will refer to later in my speech.

A life sentence is the most severe punishment that our courts can impose. It is vital that the public have confidence in sentencing, and are able to understand the circumstances in which sentences are given and how they operate in practice. Our efforts to ensure that the justice system is open and transparent are embedded in the working cultures, procedures and practices of our courts and tribunals; consequently, such considerations will always form part of the ambitions for reforming the justice system.

The availability of judgments and the accessibility of sentencing remarks, including those given in life sentence cases, are key components of the principle of open justice, helping to build understanding and confidence in sentencing. The Sentencing Act 2020 puts a duty on the courts to explain how they have determined the sentence and what the sentence means for the offender.

My hon. Friend has extensive knowledge of the sentencing framework, but it may be helpful if I set out some information on life sentences. Life sentences, which apply to a range of offences, usually have a minimum term, which is set by the court, as my hon. Friend said. This period must be served in prison in full before the offender can be considered for release, at the discretion of the Parole Board. The minimum term is for the purposes of punishment and deterrence. It is essential that sentences for the gravest offence—murder—and other offences sufficiently serious to attract a life sentence have a minimum term that punishes the convicted offender and acts as a deterrent to others.

[Gareth Bacon]

Mandatory life sentences must be imposed on anyone convicted of murder. Schedule 21 to the sentencing code contains the statutory framework for setting the minimum term. The schedule includes starting points depending on the circumstances surrounding the murder and non-exhaustive lists of aggravating and mitigating circumstances. For adult offenders, those range from 15 years right the way through to a whole-life order, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich said. Many offenders on life sentences remain in prison beyond their minimum term, and some may never be released. If they are released, they will, as my hon. Friend said, remain on licence for the rest of their life and will be subject to recall to prison at any time if they breach any of the conditions of their licence.

We have delivered and continue to deliver several initiatives aimed at strengthening public understanding of sentences, some of which we set out in January in response to the insightful report produced by the Justice Committee, of which my hon. Friend is a member. Our response described a wide range of actions that we have taken. I want to focus on a few specific issues that my hon. Friend has raised today, especially the terminology in sentencing and the points he raised about the murder of a child.

Sentencing terminology is at the heart of today's debate. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that this terminology should always be accessible and comprehensible to the public. On terminology used for life sentences in particular, the Government recognise the concerns raised by my hon. Friend around understanding how life sentences work and the phrase "jailed for life". We acknowledge his concern around the lack of understanding that the minimum tariff set by the judge represents the punishment part of the sentence, and the decision from the Parole Board concerns only the public protection element after the minimum tariff is served. It is not an avenue for early release, as some consider it to be; however, I accept that it can be misunderstood by the general public.

We have also noted that the Justice Committee's report highlights the Sentencing Academy's work to review the terminology of sentencing, which is an important piece of work that could contribute to broader initiatives or proposals in this domain. The Government, like the Justice Committee, await its findings, and will review them with great care.

Most important, as I am sure my hon. Friend would agree, given his speech, is the question of how we can support victims in understanding this terminology. Under the victims code, victims, including bereaved families, are entitled to be told the sentence the offender received, including a short explanation of the meaning and effect of the sentence by the witness care unit, which is a police-led function. If they have any questions about the sentence that the witness care unit is unable to answer, the victim will be referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, which will answer their questions for them.

To ensure that agencies know what is expected of them, the Victims and Prisoners Bill places a statutory duty on the relevant agencies to provide services in accordance with the victims code, unless there is good reason not to. It introduces a compliance framework by placing a new duty on criminal justice bodies to collect

and share code compliance information with police and crime commissioners. We will hold a full public consultation on the code once the Bill receives Royal Assent, which I hope shows how seriously we treat today's topic.

It is important that we turn for a few moments to the role of the Parole Board, which determines whether to release offenders eligible for automatic release by deciding whether it is necessary for the prisoner to remain confined. The Victims and Prisoners Bill, which is currently before Parliament, introduces a range of reforms to the parole process that are designed to help to protect the public and to bolster public confidence in the system. Through the Bill, we will codify the release test, making clear that minimising risk and protecting the public are the sole considerations for release.

The Bill introduces a new power to allow Ministers to direct a second check by independent courts in cases where the board has directed the release of one of the most serious offenders, which would, of course, include those convicted of murder. We hope that this measure will reassure the public that the process is as rigorous as possible, and that there is an extra safeguard in the release process for the most serious offenders.

In recent years, the Government have introduced several policies to improve the openness, transparency and public understanding of the parole process. In 2018, we introduced decision summaries, which enable the Parole Board to provide victims and others with an explanation of the reasons for its decisions. In 2019, we introduced the reconsideration mechanism, which provided a way to challenge a parole decision if it appears legally or procedurally flawed. Finally, in 2022 we amended the Parole Board rules to enable parole hearings to be heard in public, if it is in the interests of justice to do so. There have been four such hearings to date.

I now move on to my hon. Friend's points about child murder. I want to acknowledge that all murders are terrible acts, but those where the victim is a child are particularly so. The murder of those most vulnerable in our society causes extreme grief and devastation for the loved ones left behind. I understand entirely why society feels it necessary to ensure that those responsible for these terrible crimes are properly punished.

As my hon. Friend set out, under section 21 of the Sentencing Act 2020 the starting point for the murder of a child involving sexual or sadistic motivation, or their abduction, is normally a whole-life order. There may then be aggravating factors that could result in an increase to the minimum term due to the victim being a child. I understand my hon. Friend's concern that a requirement for premeditation is too high a threshold for imposing a whole-life order, but I contend that it is right that we set a high threshold in legislation for the imposition of such an order, which is the most severe punishment that our courts can impose.

In this way, the requirement for premeditation is on a par with the other circumstances that govern when the murder of a child would normally attract a whole-life-order starting point—namely, the murder of a child if the abduction of the child is involved, or sexual or sadistic motivation. All cases of child murder are rightly punished severely by the courts, and all those who are convicted and given minimum custodial terms face long prison sentences, possibly with no prospect of Parole Board release.

Dr Mullan: I recognise what the Minister says, but if he cannot express an opinion from the Government on whether the situation should change, that does leave a yawning gap. The cases that most upset the public can be when a parent kills their own child, and the circumstances are very often without premeditation. When the public have heard us wanting to deliver a promise on child murder and see these cases reported without the whole-life order being applied, does he think that will lead to further frustration, even if he thinks it is justified frustration?

Gareth Bacon: I am a father, and I read some of the cases of child murder with the same level of horror that my hon. Friend does. I have to say that if my child had been brutally murdered in that way, I would expect and hope for a whole-life order.

However, the point that has to land in the Chamber today is that judgments are made, particularly in the press and in the general public, that are not based on full knowledge of the facts presented to the court. That is why we are trying to educate the public on how and why sentences are being given in the way they are. It is not possible to do that in every case, but it must be done based on the facts presented to the court for the jury to find the defendant guilty.

The Government have also increased the powers available to the courts by raising the maximum penalties for acts of cruelty. As I mentioned earlier, I just want to reiterate that there is no early release for those who commit child murder and are given a life sentence. The minimum term must be served in prison in full before the offender can be considered for release at the discretion of the Parole Board.

In the time that I have remaining, I want to touch quickly on my hon. Friend's point about concurrent sentences. Judges will generally impose concurrent sentences where there are multiple offences arising from the same incident, or where there is a series of offences committed of the same or similar kind, especially against the same

person. Consecutive sentences are generally imposed where the offences arise out of unrelated-factor incidents, even if they are part of a wider pattern of behaviour.

As I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate, however, sentencing is a matter for our independent courts. Parliament has provided them with a broad range of sentencing powers to deal effectively and appropriately with offenders. Courts also have a statutory duty to follow sentencing guidelines developed by the independent Sentencing Council for England and Wales.

Although sentencing is a matter for independent judges, the Government have committed to locking up the most dangerous criminals away for longer—to protect the public and deliver the justice the public expects. Since 2010, average sentence lengths have increased by 49% to the year ending June 2023. We have introduced tougher punishments for the worst offenders, including extending whole-life orders to premeditated child murders and ending the automatic halfway release for serious crimes, which my hon. Friend acknowledged in his speech.

We are going further still, and the Sentencing Bill will ensure that rapists and serious sexual offenders serve their full custodial term in prison. As acknowledged by my hon. Friend, in the Sentencing Bill we are also adding murder with sexual or sadistic conduct to the list of those offences that will become the subject of a new duty to impose a whole-life order, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate, to my hon. Friend for securing it and to others for attending—although I think they may be here for the next debate. I found the debate very valuable in my consideration of the issues at hand, and I hope I have reassured my hon. Friend and those in attendance, at least to an extent, that I and the Government continue to take these issues into account as we strive to improve the criminal justice system.

Question put and agreed to.

Preventable Sight Loss

5.35 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered preventable sight loss.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. I would like to begin this debate by asking Members who have good eye health to consider these questions. How would you feel if you lost your sight? How would it affect your life and your ability to connect with family and friends or earn a living, travel independently, enjoy the place you live in, the hobbies you have or visit new places? If you were to lose your sight, how would it make you feel to subsequently find out that it actually could have been saved?

Sadly, hundreds of our constituents are going through this very experience. In England, over 600,000 patients are currently on NHS waiting lists to begin treatment for ophthalmology—the branch of medicine concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the eye. A survey by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists from this year shows that only 25% of NHS ophthalmology departments feel able to meet patient need, and 70% of departments are more concerned about out-patient backlogs compared with 12 months ago. These are incredibly alarming statistics. Alarming, too, is the fact that it was reported last year that, in 551 confirmed instances, patients had lost their sight as a result of delayed appointments since 2019.

Alongside the problems with ophthalmology in the NHS, we have seen the growth of the independent or private sector. I ask Members to consider the impact that the increased use of private sector provision is having on eye care. Independent sector providers now deliver almost 60% of NHS-funded cataract procedures. That has more than doubled from around 25% before the coronavirus pandemic. Although it has helped to bring down cataract waiting lists, the Royal College of Ophthalmology has found that 67% of NHS ophthalmology departments reported that the impact of independent sector providers on patient care in their area is negative. Let us reflect on that: over two thirds of ophthalmology departments in the NHS believe that the impact of independent sector providers on patient care is negative. It is important that we understand why.

The three aspects those departments have said they are most worried about are training opportunities for junior doctors, funding for the NHS ophthalmology department in which they work, and the available workforce. They believe that these will hamper the long-term ability of their departments to deliver sight-saving care for patients. Every Member of this House should be concerned about that.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People has said that the role of the independent sector has been associated with significant challenges that pose an increasing risk to the sustainability of comprehensive eye care services in the NHS. I believe that the impact on many of our constituents could be, and is likely to be, devastating.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the use of the independent sector creates a postcode lottery as well? More affluent areas get to the front of the queue more quickly, and we

see regional variations where the independent sector is stronger. That is a real concern for people waiting to have this treatment.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I will touch on regional variations later.

A paper published last month by the Centre for Health and the Public Interest reported that in the period 2018-19 to 2022-23, the NHS paid the private sector around £700 million for cataract treatments. While cataract operations are very important and can transform people's lives, it is crucial that those responsible for health policy consider whether the increase in the number of them being delivered comes at the expense of other sight-saving treatments.

We must ensure that the NHS is comprehensive in the range of treatments that it provides. The Centre for Health and the Public Interest warns that the increase in the percentage of the NHS budget being spent on cataract operations is likely to mean that there are fewer resources available to treat other eye care conditions, such as glaucoma and macular degeneration, which are generally considered more serious and lead to irreversible sight loss. Ophthalmologists have also told me that it is impacting capacity for the treatment of conditions such as cancer care, urgent treatment and the treatment of newborn babies.

Data received by the charity from 13 NHS trusts has shown that waiting times for some irreversible conditions have increased between 2017-18 and 2022-23, including for glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Waiting times have also increased for cataract operations. The charity also reports that the rise in expenditure on cataract services has been accompanied by an increase in the number of private, for-profit clinics, which have been established to deliver NHS cataract services. Its paper states that 78 new private, for-profit clinics have opened over the past five years.

It is not surprising that some senior ophthalmologists have raised concerns that the increased expenditure on NHS cataract provision, carried out predominantly by the independent sector, is being driven not by patient need but by the commercial interests of the companies delivering it. Last December, Professor Ben Burton, president of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, warned that the entire commissioning process needed looking at, with local integrated care systems unable to effectively control their use of resources, resulting in some patients with

“very mild cataracts getting surgery at the expense of other patients going blind”.

He added that the approach of unplanned commissioning means that

“the NHS is losing consultants, money and trainees to the private sector”

and that the profit margin is “too high”, meaning that “companies can pay three times the NHS overtime rate...So, unsurprisingly, people are dropping sessions in the NHS and doing cataract surgery at private companies.”

Professor Burton further warned that:

“We are trying to train the next generation of cataract surgeons, but they're not getting any straightforward cases to train them on, because the NHS is being left with the more complex cases, with the less complex ones being outsourced.”

That very much chimes with the arguments raised by the Centre for Health and the Public Interest. In other words, the independent sector is cherry-picking the less complex work.

When he responds on behalf of the Government, will the Minister set out what discussions they have had with NHS England about sorting out the perverse outcomes caused by the unplanned commissioning that Professor Burton has highlighted? Unless we see a change of course by policymakers as a matter of urgency, there are real concerns that we will see the breadth of eye care provided within the NHS diminished to the point where some complex sight-saving treatments are no longer available on the NHS. They might be things such as the treatment people need when they are in urgent care after a road traffic accident, the treatment needed for newborn babies or treatment for cancer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. First, this is a terrific subject. She will know that this morning I had a debate on optometry care, which is a similar topic, and the issue is clear. In that debate, I said that 22 people weekly lose their sight to preventable loss. The hon. Lady knows that. Does she agree that the annual eye test should be pushed as forcibly as a dental check-up, and that the message should start in schools and resound right through the community? I think she will agree that optometrists and opticians want to be part of that move forward. If that is the case, we need the Minister and his Department to work alongside them to push for appointments from an early age.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; it was characteristically appropriate. I particularly welcome his call for the message to start when children are in school because it is massively important.

In the not too distant future, we may face eye care deserts in some parts of the country, in much the same way as has happened with dentistry, with some people missing out on crucial treatment. That is exactly what Professor Burton has warned could happen. He said:

“There is a risk that the NHS loses ophthalmology completely, like it has dentistry, in terms of it being a service which is available free at the point of delivery.”

It is not difficult to see how such a conclusion has been arrived at. The great tragedy we face if that happens is that some people will lose their sight from treatable conditions.

The use of the independent sector for ophthalmology has tended to be more prevalent in some parts of the country than in others, so Members representing constituencies in those areas may be particularly concerned. A regional analysis of trends published by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists in 2022 found that in 2021 the north-west of England had the highest proportion of NHS-funded cataract procedures delivered by independent sector providers, at 61%. The midlands, the north-east, Yorkshire and the south-west of England also had figures over 50%. Those figures have increased greatly since 2016. Although there is regional variation, we should be concerned about that right across the United Kingdom.

NHS staffing levels for ophthalmology are also a matter of extreme concern. As I said earlier, NHS ophthalmology departments are worried about training

opportunities for junior doctors and the available workforce. In response to a recent written parliamentary question, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), failed to provide clear information about the Government’s plans for specialty training places for ophthalmology. She said:

“A decision regarding which specialties these places will be allocated to will be made nearer the time that the places are required for the expanded workforce. NHS England will work with stakeholders to ensure this growth is sustainable and focused in the service areas where need is greatest.”

Will the Minister clarify that? When Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spoke of stakeholders in that context, was she talking about the independent sector as well as the NHS? If so, will the Minister ask NHS England what progress it is making towards meeting its commitment, set out in the 2023 elective recovery taskforce implementation plan, to

“track, monitor and evaluate independent sector’s impact on the long-term NHS capacity landscape”?

That is an incredibly important matter, and if the Minister is not able to reply today, I would welcome it if he can write to me on that point.

How confident is the Minister that the full breadth of ophthalmology expertise will be there in the NHS for any one of us in five or 10 years? Data from the most recent workforce census from the Royal College of Ophthalmologists shows that there is real cause for concern, given that 76% of NHS ophthalmology departments report not having enough consultants to meet patient need. In reality, NHS ophthalmology departments are increasingly relying on costly locums to cover workforce gaps, and nearly two thirds—65%—use locums to fill consultant vacancies.

Typically, UK-trained ophthalmologists will have undertaken the vast majority of their training in the NHS, including those now working for independent sector providers. There are concerns that the increase in NHS staff working in the independent sector on cataract provision is reducing the availability of training opportunities that enable NHS staff to train in more complex areas. That is potentially a time bomb for the future, and could mean that we will not have anywhere near enough staff trained to carry out work on treatment for conditions such as glaucoma and wet macular degeneration.

It is clear that we are facing a sight loss health emergency, and there is an urgent need for a national eye health strategy. The RNIB has suggested that the goal of such a strategy should be to establish eye health as a public health priority, and it should aim to prevent irreversible sight loss.

As the Royal College of Ophthalmologists pointed out, it is imperative that NHS ophthalmology departments across the UK are supported to deliver high-quality and timely care for all patients, regardless of their condition and where they live. Among other things, it is calling on policymakers to support the development of a multi-disciplinary eye care workforce fit for the future. That should include delivering an additional 285 ophthalmology training places in England by 2031 and boosting investment in the ophthalmic practitioner training programme so that more eye care professionals can work to the top of their licence.

[Margaret Greenwood]

The royal college is also calling for better integrated eye care through investment in digital solutions such as interoperable electronic patient records between optometry and ophthalmology, and a further development of integrated pathways for optometry so that patients receive the most appropriate and accessible care and are prioritised based on clinical need. It is calling for the reform of commissioning, tariff and data reporting systems, which it believes will ultimately help the NHS ophthalmology services. All those things should be part of a national eye health strategy.

The strategy must be inclusive and must address the needs of everybody. The charity SeeAbility has pointed out that people with learning difficulties are 10 times more likely to have a serious sight problem than other people, but are far less likely to have a sight test. What is happening to ophthalmology services in the NHS is clearly a matter of extreme concern and is one example of just how damaging the privatisation of NHS services is to the delivery of a universal and comprehensive national health service.

The increasing use of the independent sector to treat NHS patients leaves us vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. Under this Government, the use of private-sector companies in health has increased. Indeed, the *Health Service Journal* reported last December that the amount spent by NHS trusts on outsourcing activities to other providers has almost doubled from £2.4 billion in 2019-20 to £4.7 billion in 2022-23. The *HSJ* stated that independent providers are

“likely to make up the bulk of the spend”.

The Minister will say that the Government are not privatising the NHS, but that is smoke and mirrors. The World Health Organisation defines privatisation as

“a process in which non-government actors become increasingly involved in the financing and/or provision of health care services”.

We have seen that in ophthalmology, with the commercial interests of private companies driving the increased expenditure on NHS cataract provision. That is the view of ophthalmologists. No doubt the Minister will say that the Government are providing the national health service with record levels of funding—again, smoke and mirrors. The fact is that, as pointed out in the 2023 report “The Rational Policy-Maker’s Guide to the NHS”, NHS spending has not been enough to keep pace with need when we factor in and combine the effects of inflation, population growth, population ageing and increased morbidity.

I ask Members to think about the questions I raised at the beginning of the debate. How would you feel if you lost your sight, how would it impact your life, and how would you feel if you then found out that the loss of your eyesight could have been prevented? How would you feel if you found that you could not get the treatment you need because less serious conditions were being treated as a priority in the independent sector by specialists who were lured there, away from the NHS, due to how commissioning works and because the market is increasingly influencing what is and is not treated?

RNIB figures show that every day, 250 people in the UK start to lose their sight. We need the national eye health strategy, the goal of which should be to preserve vision and prevent irreversible sight loss. I call on the

Government to address those issues as a matter of urgency. The Government must invest in the national health service and strengthen it as a public service to ensure that it is universal and comprehensive. For that, they must build the capacity of expertise within the NHS so that we can be confident that the service is there to treat all eye conditions. In the words of Professor Ben Burton, the chief executive of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists,

“the key to ensuring long term capacity to deliver patient care is to invest in comprehensive NHS services, workforce and infrastructure.”

5.52 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this debate. That was a comprehensive and detailed, but succinct, assessment of where we are at. Sometimes, the role of Members of Parliament is to identify an issue before it comes into crisis so that we can advise Government on the action that is needed, and that is exactly what my hon. Friend has done.

When some of my constituents identified this topic as the subject of an Adjournment debate, they approached me to raise an issue I have been dealing with for the last 20 years: people whose eyesight has been damaged as a result of refractive eye surgery, or laser treatment, as some know it. The refractive eye surgery sector is now a huge profit-making industry. Many gain through the use of refractive eye surgery, and their eyesight is benefited, but there are many others—in fact, thousands every year now—whose vision is damaged as a result of the surgery.

Many years ago, a campaign called My Beautiful Eyes was launched by a woman called Sasha Rodoy. Some people will know of her if they have dealt with these laser treatment issues in any way. She is a heroine. Each year, we organise a lobby of Parliament called Bad Eye Day. We bring together individuals whose eyesight has been damaged by refractive eye surgery and their families. When I say “damaged”, for many of them, it is to the point where their eyesight is nearly lost. Many others have heartbreaking stories of losing their employment or being severely disabled.

In 2004, Frank Cook, who was then a Labour MP, introduced a private Member’s Bill to address the issues confronting people whose eyesight had been damaged by refractive eye surgery. I co-sponsored the Bill, which basically called for regulation of the sector. In 2013, I produced a ten-minute rule Bill that reflected many of the proposals that Frank had put forward. We have had debates, meetings with the royal colleges and ministerial meetings. All we have been asking for over the past 20 years is greater regulation—effective regulation—but progress has been limited. Even in the Government’s own inquiry into cosmetic surgery, Sir Bruce Keogh identified laser surgery as something that should be subject to further regulation. To be frank, nothing has followed from all those ministerial meetings and debates, from all the legislation we put forward or from the Government’s own inquiry.

We need effective regulation that runs through every aspect of the process. The first aspect is the marketing and advertising of these treatments. As Sasha Rodoy says, the industry is notorious for making outlandish

claims about the effectiveness of surgery. On a few occasions, we have taken companies to the Advertising Standards Authority and they have been found guilty of exaggerating their claims about the treatment.

Secondly, we want regulation of the advice provided to people who commission the surgery. It is about getting appropriate advice, and about whether the individual's eye is appropriate for the type of surgery. At one stage, we found that advice was being provided by members of staff who were not qualified and were simply selling the product. We want the provision of advice to be regulated, supervised and monitored.

We also want surgical practices and professional standards to be supervised and monitored. I have dealt with several cases in which professional standards have fallen below what we would expect and people have been harmed as a result. When things go wrong, the company will often fail to put things right adequately. It will delay its response and will often try to get beyond the limit when legal action can be taken. Those individuals then have to fall back on the NHS.

Time and again, the NHS has to address complex injuries as a result of laser treatment, yet the financial burden falls not on the companies but on the NHS itself. We have argued that the performance records of those private companies and, if necessary, of the surgeons involved should be published to identify where harm has been caused as a result of action taken. Where NHS involvement is needed to correct or address the concerns that people have been left with, maybe there should be a levy on those private companies so that the cost burden does not fall on the NHS.

We are now 20 years on from that first piece of legislation, which Frank Cook brought forward because—if I recall rightly—he had gone through that experience and was interviewed by the media about it. All of a sudden, he received a flood of correspondence from people saying, “The same thing's happened to me: I've had the same sort of injuries.” When I raised the issue in 2013, I had literally hundreds of emails coming in. We have a national lobby each time, and some of the stories are absolutely heartbreaking.

I know that there are demands on the Minister's time, but it would be really useful if, like some of his predecessors, he met victims of refractive eye surgery who have become campaigners and the professionals they work with, so that we can address the current situation, get an objective overview of where we are and then agree a programme for reform. All that people are asking for is adequate regulation based on monitoring of professional practices, so that they feel protected. At the moment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West said, there is a real risk of eyesight loss. It is one of the worst things that can happen to people, because they become completely isolated from the world. It is incredibly distressing.

That request fits with the demand for a national eyesight strategy, which is desperately needed. What my hon. Friend described is happening across the country. There is a fear that if we do not address it now, we could quickly get into a crisis as a result of the loss of professional staff to the NHS in particular. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) also mentioned the postcode lottery of access to those services. I hope that the Minister will agree to meet

campaigners on this issue, which is worth addressing, so that at least they can have their say and he can take advice on the programme of reform that we need.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): We now move to the Front-Bench contributions.

6.1 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing the debate, Sir Mark. If my voice goes during my speech, I will just sit down, and hon. Members can assume that the rest of it would have been fabulous.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing this important debate. As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, it is important to highlight these issues before we get to the point of total crisis. I will talk about what has been happening in Scotland on preventable sight loss.

I thank and commend everybody who works in eye care, whether they work as optometrists or in ophthalmology in hospitals, and everybody who provides those incredibly important services to people. We recognise the hard work and dedication that they put in to ensure that as many people as possible continue to have the best possible eyesight.

As the hon. Member for Wirral West said, whether someone can see properly has a significant impact on their life. When I was eight years old, I lost my eyesight completely over a week. I had optic neuritis, which is incredibly unusual for an eight-year-old. For a short period, I genuinely could not see almost anything. Thankfully, I was treated well and helpfully by the team at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and got my sight back entirely, which does not always happen with optic neuritis. Although I did not have to deal with that situation in the long term, I am aware of how terrifying it is. It has a major impact on people's lives.

With our public platform, we should do everything we can to encourage people to get their eyes tested regularly and have regular eye examinations. Eyesight is important, but most people probably take it for granted most of the time. Regular checks can ensure that optometrists and community optometrists discover any possible future eye conditions and that people are given treatment as early as possible. Eye checks can also highlight more serious conditions such as cardiovascular issues, high blood pressure or diabetes. In Scotland, we have free universal NHS eye checks in community optometrists. Those check-ups are available for everybody—UK residents, refugees, asylum seekers and some eligible overseas visitors—and people do not have to pay. I encourage people to get their eyes checked regularly: it is important to go along.

I will talk about our strategies and workstreams for ophthalmology. In Scotland we have what is called the national ophthalmology workstream, which has brought together the views of a huge number of people working in ophthalmology, particularly around hospital care, to ensure that the best possible service is provided to everyone. There are workstreams on things like cataract surgery, which the hon. Member for Wirral West has mentioned, to ensure that people are given the best cataract surgery as early as possible. Successful surgery in the first instance also reduces the need for follow-up appointments.

[Kirsty Blackman]

The strategy tries to ensure that, even with Scotland's fairly unique geography, as many conditions as possible can be treated close to people's homes and in their communities. If hospital appointments are needed, they should be there, but if the need for hospital appointments can be reduced by providing the same or a similar service closer to home, that is encouraged.

We recently had a pilot of the NHS glaucoma service in communities, which started in Glasgow and has been rolled out across Scotland. It aims specifically to ensure that the number of hospital appointments is reduced. Going to hospital when you do not necessarily need to can be stressful. If someone can be treated in a primary care setting that they are used to, it is easier and better for everybody. It takes some of the stress off NHS services, ensuring that the necessary services are delivered and that capacity matches demand where possible. As I say, it is about providing the best possible services that suit people, as close to home as possible. We cannot get away from the fact that there is a capacity and workforce issue, not just in England but across these islands, but we have been doing what we can to recognise that. The strategy has been in place since 2017 and is leading to real differences and real improvements for people.

We have a couple of other things in place in Scotland. The See Hear strategy is specifically about ensuring that services are improved for sensory-impaired people. Under the See4School system, every pre-school child has their eyesight tested to ensure that they are as ready as possible to learn when they go to primary school and that those conditions can be picked up as early as possible.

Lastly, I encourage everybody to please get their eyes tested. For anyone who has not been for some time, I thoroughly recommend going. It is not just about being able to see incredibly well with 20/20 vision; it is about ensuring that conditions are picked up. I ask everybody to encourage their constituents to go.

6.8 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) on securing the debate. She is a fierce campaigner on bringing down NHS waiting lists, and for an NHS that remains true to the principle on which it was founded: to be a service that is there for everyone when they need it and that is free at the point of use. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who made a powerful speech about how eye care is often a neglected topic.

The RNIB estimates that more than 2 million people in the United Kingdom live with sight loss. Shockingly, at least half of that sight loss might be avoidable. A recent Royal College of Ophthalmologists workforce census found that 63% of eye units estimate that it will take at least a year to clear their backlogs; a quarter of them estimate that it will take more than three years. Across our country, the demand for ophthalmology services has risen rapidly and is set to increase by 40% over the next 20 years. The economic cost of sight loss is estimated to be £25.2 billion a year. Surely that is too big a price not to act.

The current Government have treated eye care as an afterthought. Today in England, 619,000 people are on a waiting list for a hospital eye appointment, and 250 people start to lose their sight every day. Yet this Government have no strategy for eye health in England, unlike every other UK nation.

The next Labour Government will take eye health seriously. We will crack down on the tax dodgers and use the money to bring down waiting lists. We will train a new generation of doctors, nurses and midwives to treat patients on time. We will double medical school places to ensure that we have the workforce we need, including across ophthalmology. We will reform the system, too, so that everyone can access the right care when and where they need it.

Moving more care to the community will help to support those who are suffering sight loss, as will focusing on the provision of non-clinical community support to complement the work of community optometrists, ophthalmologists in hospitals and rehabilitation officers. That is why the next Labour Government will seek to negotiate a deal with high street opticians to deliver NHS out-patient appointments for eye conditions such as glaucoma. There are currently 6,000 high street opticians in England, equipped with specialist staff and kit that can get patients seen faster. We will put them to work to beat the backlog and free up hospital specialists to treat the patients in serious need. That will all mean greater convenience for patients. As these are routine appointments, it will be less expensive to the taxpayer to deliver them on the high street than in hospital.

We know that delivering eye care in the community works. A 2014 study considered the impact of the introduction of minor eye care services in Lewisham and Lambeth on ophthalmology hospital departments. GP referrals to hospital ophthalmology decreased by 75% in Lewisham and by 30% in Lambeth. Costs in areas that did not have a minor eye care service increased, but costs in Lewisham and Lambeth decreased by 14%. A separate dataset from Hereford in 2022 showed that 92% of referrals to eye casualty by GPs could have been seen by an optometrist via the minor eye care services, and 83% of self-referrals could have been seen by MECS.

Perhaps the Minister can say today whether he backs Labour's plan to try to strike a deal for high street opticians to deliver additional clinical services. Has he made an estimate of how many people now on hospital waiting lists are waiting to be seen for issues that could easily have been seen in community optometric services? According to a report published last year, more than 550 patients have suffered sight loss since 2019 because of NHS delays. That is absolutely tragic.

It is not just patients who stand to benefit from Labour's plans. GPs stand to benefit from the removal of low-value, time-consuming paperwork that could be dealt with in opticians' shops by optometrists themselves. Patients can already go directly to sexual health clinics, as well as to physiotherapists in some parts of the country, without seeing a GP; in Greater Manchester, where lung cancer is the biggest killer of people under the age of 75, patients with risk factors can now get walk-in chest X-rays. Opticians who spot a problem should not have to send patients to their GP for referral to an eye specialist instead of referring them directly. Why is direct referral not the case everywhere? Labour's plans will see best practice adopted everywhere to allow

opticians themselves to refer patients to eye specialists, meaning that patients can be seen faster and GPs can get on with more important and meaningful work.

We know how important eye care services are to our communities. Vision loss in older people has been proven to affect their physical and mental health and to increase the speed of cognitive decline. We know that sight loss can be a symptom of serious disease. The Government must set out a plan for these services, with a mix of strengthened community-based care and prevention policies. It is right that we address the gaps in care co-ordination that disproportionately affect those with the greatest need, to give everyone the best opportunities to access education and employment and to live well in older age. Let us give everyone a right to sight.

6.13 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): It is always a pleasure to see a fellow Lancastrian in the Chair, Sir Mark. I thank the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for bringing forward the debate. This is the second debate today on eye health to which I am responding on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), who has been busy in the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee. I also thank those who contributed to the debate—the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill)—for their thoughtful contributions.

Preventing sight loss remains one of my right hon. Friend's top priorities, and it is right that we should dedicate parliamentary time to this important issue. Losing one's eyesight can be devastating, and I want to pay tribute to some of the charities that I did not have time to mention in this morning's debate—Fight for Sight, the Vision Foundation and Sightsavers, to name just a few more.

About 2 million people live with sight loss in our country. That number is projected to double by 2050, mainly because of our ageing population. We are doing a huge amount to reduce the number, through preventive measures and early detection. One of the best ways to protect eyesight is through regular sight tests. That point was made eloquently by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, and I am pleased to confirm to her that I am having my next eye test tomorrow morning.

This debate is why the NHS invests more than £500 million every year on free eye tests for people on benefits, people over 60, and people at risk of serious conditions. That investment delivered more than 12 million NHS sight tests to those groups between 2022 and 2023, and extensive discounts on glasses and contact lenses for children and people on income-related benefits, through NHS optical vouchers.

We have also taken great strides in preventing some of the causes of sight loss, including smoking and obesity. As I mentioned at the start, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire is taking our landmark Tobacco and Vapes Bill through the House, and we are backing quit-smoking campaigns with unprecedented funding and support.

On obesity, we have taken a raft of measures on sugar reduction and healthy eating. We have made strong progress in reducing the average sugar content in soft drinks through the soft drinks levy, and almost halved their sugar content between 2015 and 2019. For two years, we have also been restricting the placement of less-healthy products in shops and online, thereby helping consumers to make healthier choices.

Our wider prevention work goes hand in hand with our efforts to catch eye problems early. Glaucoma—which was covered in the debate this morning—and diabetic retinopathy are two of the main causes of preventable sight losses, and both can cause blindness if left untreated. That is why we are offering screening tests to nearly 4 million patients with diabetes at least once every two years. Since 2010, the number of adults between 16 and 64 who became visually impaired from diabetic retinopathy fell by almost a fifth. Our approach has been commended by the World Health Organisation, and we will build on that progress. In October, we begin phasing in optical coherence tomography scans as part of the screening programme, to reduce unnecessary referrals to hospital eye services and improve the quality of the service overall.

It is vital for patients who need to be in secondary care to have access to timely diagnosis and treatment. That is why we have set ambitious targets to recover services that suffered over the pandemic, through our elective recovery plan, which is backed by more than £8 billion of funding, and why we have expanded surgical hubs and harnessed capacity in the independent sector so that more patients can be seen more quickly. Our plan is working and it is delivering results. Waiting times are falling. The number of patients waiting 78 weeks or longer for ophthalmology treatment has reduced by 96% since its peak. But we know we have much further to go.

While we work to recover from the pandemic, we are reforming eye care services to be fit for the future. NHS England's transformation programme is currently funding seven projects across each ICS area, testing how improved IT links between primary and secondary care could allow patients to be assessed and triaged virtually. Where appropriate, that would keep patients out of hospital, freeing up hospital eye-service capacity for those who need specialist care the most.

The initiatives have shown promising results. For example, the project in North Central London ICS has improved the flow of information from community optometry to Moorfields Eye Hospital, reducing the triage time from 11 days down to one. The appropriate use of clinics has doubled to more than 70% and reduced the waiting time for first appointments by up to 35 days. NHS England is now using the data from the projects to build the case for a wider roll-out.

Kirsty Blackman: I appreciate what the Minister is doing in this policy area. Some of the initiatives he just mentioned, such as electronic assessments and triaging electronically, were put in place in Scotland seven years ago. We decided that they were working and that we would roll them out. Has he spoken to Scottish colleagues and looked at the work done in Scotland in order to ensure that the Government do not have to replicate the same pilots that we have proven do work, so that people can get treatment and things can be put in place more quickly?

Andrew Stephenson: As a proud Unionist, I am always happy to learn from different parts of the United Kingdom. After I was appointed to my role, one of the first things I did was to go to Edinburgh and visit various universities and companies across Scotland, and I saw some of the great work going on in Scotland. I also met the then Health Secretary, Michael Matheson, to talk about areas where we can work together, particularly on things such as research. However, we can also trial different things in different parts of the country. Many people in this House talk about regional variations, which can be a concern. Nevertheless, one of the benefits of being able to trial different things in different regions is that we can learn the lessons, learn what works and then build on that best practice.

As well as helping our primary and secondary care sectors to reach their full potential, we have a long-term plan in place to support our workforce and put it on a sustainable footing, which is the first ever long-term workforce plan for the NHS. We have again increased training places for ophthalmologists in 2024 and improved training for existing staff, helping them to deliver for patients while reaching their full potential.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington raised what sounded like a very important and serious issue. He will forgive me for saying that this area is not my specialist subject, but I am happy to raise his concerns with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire. However, I will say now, in response to his comments on laser eye surgery, that refractive laser eye surgery is not generally available on the NHS. Doctors who perform such surgery must be registered with the General Medical Council and the Care Quality Commission. All locations where refractive eye surgery is carried out should be monitored and are required to report any adverse events. As I say, I will be happy to relay his concerns to my right hon. Friend.

John McDonnell: I appreciate the Minister's response; that is really helpful. It would also be useful if a Minister met some of the families who have experienced issues in this area, because over the last 20 years we have had the same ministerial response with regard to regulation, and there have just been too many examples where that regulation and monitoring have not worked and therefore people have been endangered. That is why in the Government's own report Professor Sir Bruce Keogh recommended further regulation; I think we need to revisit that.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making those points. I am not instinctively anti-regulation; indeed, just a few weeks ago I put through this place the statutory instrument on the regulation of physician associates and anaesthetist associates. There are certain parts of the healthcare sector where regulation is very much needed and I would very much advocate for it. As I have said, I will defer to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire. This is her ministerial responsibility, and I am sure she will read the right hon. Gentleman's comments with interest and may want to take the discussions further.

Finally, on research, the Government are backing scientists and researchers to take strides in understanding sight loss and in making new treatments available. Two years ago, we awarded £20 million to Moorfields Biomedical

Research Centre to undertake another five years of vision research, and almost £6.5 million to Moorfields Clinical Research Facility to support cutting-edge treatments for all eye conditions.

Eye care services face challenges and we are taking decisive action to address them, both now and in the long term. The hon. Member for Wirral West and I will never agree on the use of the independent sector. I strongly believe, and think the Labour Front Bench team strongly agrees, that using the independent sector enables us to fully realise our healthcare system's capacity and to reduce the time that patients spend on waiting lists. I would argue that that does not represent any move to privatise our NHS. As I have said on the record before, the overall proportion of NHS England's spend on independent sector providers has not increased significantly in recent years. In 2013-14, 6.1% of total health spending was spent on the purchase of healthcare from independent sector providers; in 2022-23, the proportion was 6.5%.

This morning, the shadow Minister in the first Westminster Hall debate, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), talked about making better use of the independent sector to help to ensure that we deliver the best outcomes for patients, and the shadow Minister in this debate, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston, reiterated that point. On the use of the independent sector, then, I gently say that it is something on which there is broad cross-party support. While recognising that there are always challenges with the use of the independent sector, it is not in any way a privatisation of the NHS.

I firmly believe that through prevention, innovation and investment in our workforce, we will deliver for all our people across the United Kingdom access to the important healthcare services, including ophthalmology services, that they deserve.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): I call Margaret Greenwood to wind up the debate.

6.24 pm

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister said that he is never going to agree with me on the use of the independent sector. Will he look back over this debate and consider the points I have made—and not just my views but those of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists and the RNIB—and the outcomes that are arising as a result of the increased use of the independent sector? He takes an ideological position, but what I am asking him to do is look at the practical outcomes of what is going on.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for his work on behalf of those who have had their eyesight damaged through laser surgery. I hope the Minister will pick up on his call for further regulation and for a meeting with the victims of that treatment. I also thank the many organisations that contacted me in advance of the debate with their thoughts and briefings. It is vital that we do all we can to ensure the provision of comprehensive and universal eye care in the national health service.

The growth of the independent sector in delivering almost 60% of NHS-funded cataract procedures is having a negative impact on patient care, as more than two thirds of NHS ophthalmology departments have said. As a result, treatment for other eye care conditions in the NHS—such as glaucoma and macular degeneration, which are generally considered to be more serious and which lead to irreversible sight loss—are being adversely impacted. We must also consider the potential impact of the availability of treatment for people in urgent care after, for example, a road traffic accident; the treatment needed for newborn babies; and the treatment of cancer both now and importantly for future generations.

Currently, the market is influencing what is and is not treated, and private companies are cherry-picking the treatment that they want to deliver. This is no way to

protect and strengthen the national health service. We need a national eye health strategy to preserve vision and prevent sight loss as a matter of urgency. We need a comprehensive and universal national health service that is there for us all when we need it for eye care and all other areas of health. I thank everybody who contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered preventable sight loss.

6.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 30 April 2024

TREASURY

Notification of Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): The independent Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stocks of UK Government bonds and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the Asset Purchase Facility by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities. The Bank ceased reinvestment of assets in this portfolio in February 2022 and commenced sales of corporate bonds on 28 September 2022, and sales of gilts acquired for monetary policy purposes on 1 November 2022. The sales of corporate bonds ceased on 6 June 2023, with the majority of the portfolio sold. A small number of remaining short maturity corporate bonds were held through to maturity and these have since all fully matured on 5 April 2024. Therefore, the APF is now comprised solely of gilts.

The Chancellor at the time agreed a joint approach with the Governor of the Bank of England in an exchange of letters on 3 February 2022 to reduce the maximum authorised size of the APF for asset purchases every six months, as the size of APF holdings reduces.

Since 3 November 2023 when I last reduced the maximum authorised size of the APF, the total stock of assets held by the APF for monetary policy purposes has fallen further from £750.9 billion to £704.2 billion. In line with the approach agreed with the Governor, the authorised maximum total size of the APF has therefore been reduced to £704.2 billion, which is now comprised entirely of gilts.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and HM Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, the APF and its directors from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. Provision for any payment due under the liability will continue to be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in Parliament providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS435]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Stop and Search and Detention and Questioning

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The Government are today launching a statutory consultation on revisions to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 Codes of Practice A and C. Strip search involving the exposure of intimate parts is one of

the most intrusive powers available to the police. The Government recognise that these powers are needed in order for the police to prevent harm and effectively investigate crime. However, it is vital that these powers are only used where necessary and proportionate, and that any such search is conducted in a fair and respectful manner, without unlawful discrimination, and with full regard for the welfare and dignity of the individual being searched.

These considerations are particularly important where the individual being searched is a child or vulnerable person. Findings by the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the Children's Commissioner for England, and the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children's Partnership show that too often when strip searches involving the exposure of intimate parts are conducted, safeguarding and child protection have not been sufficiently prioritised.

The revisions proposed in this consultation are intended to strengthen the safeguards for children and vulnerable persons who are subject to searches involving the exposure of intimate parts, and emphasise the importance of safeguarding, without hindering the police's ability to keep the public safe.

Code A concerns the exercise by police officers of statutory powers to search a person or a vehicle without first making an arrest. Code C concerns the detention, questioning and treatment of persons by police officers.

The proposed changes under consultation include the following:

A new requirement that any search of a child or vulnerable person involving the exposure of intimate parts conducted under stop and search power must be authorised by an officer of at least the rank of inspector.

A new requirement for police custody officers to consult an officer of at least the rank of inspector prior to conducting an EIP search of a child or vulnerable person in custody.

A requirement that if at any time an officer has reason to suspect that a person may be under 18, in the absence of clear evidence to dispel that suspicion, they shall be treated as a child for the purpose of the code and any other code.

A new requirement that police must, where practicable, notify a parent or guardian regarding an EIP search of a child, unless to do so would put the child at risk of harm.

An explicit reference to the safeguarding needs of any child who may be subject to an EIP search, and to the potentially traumatic impact that the search may have.

A new requirement to notify an officer of the rank of at least superintendent following any EIP of a child or vulnerable adult where, because of urgency, an appropriate adult was not present.

A new requirement that a safeguarding referral must be made whenever an EIP search of a child takes place.

A clarification that appropriate adults of the opposite sex can only be present during strip search if known to the detainee.

Replicating as far as is relevant in Code A the Code C provisions on the conduct of a strip search, to ensure that provisions on EIP searches in Code A are self-contained.

Requiring that where more than outer clothing is removed from a detainee in custody due to concerns for the detainee's welfare, to preserve evidence, or any other reason set out in Code C paragraph 4.2, the appropriate provisions in Annex A shall apply.

The consultation will run for six weeks, and the Government will publish their response later this year. The consultation and Codes A and C are being published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS433]

National Crime Agency: Dealing with Corruption

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): The National Crime Agency is the national lead agency for tackling serious and organised crime, tasked with reducing the impact it has on the UK, and thereby protecting the public from the highest-harm criminals we face. To achieve that, it manages intelligence and information that requires the highest levels of security, and provides sensitive intelligence and covert tactics to law enforcement from across the whole of the UK.

His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services has finalised its 12th inspection of the NCA. It assessed how effectively the NCA is at dealing with corruption, and specifically the NCA's effectiveness and efficiency in helping and working with police forces and other law enforcement agencies to identify and tackle corruption involving police officers and staff.

I have asked HMICFRS to publish the report. It will be published today and will be available online at <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/national-crime-agency-vetting-and-anti-corruption-part-2>

I will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The inspection found the agency works well with partners to identify and tackle corrupt police officers and staff, that the agency understands the threat posed by corruption to law enforcement, and that its anti-corruption unit employs effective policies and approaches to tackle corruption. However, it found that the intelligence the agency receives could be improved, and its ACU could strengthen its approach to identifying and prioritising investigations. I expect the agency to ensure that it has dedicated sufficient resources to meet future demand, and has the procedures in place to support law enforcement on the most appropriate and serious cases.

The inspectorate also found that a new nationally co-ordinated approach to collating and assessing intelligence relating to corruption in police forces and other law enforcement agencies may strengthen our understanding of this issue and our collective ability to address it. My officials are considering the feasibility of this suggestion with the NCA and relevant partners.

Overall, the inspectorate has made five separate recommendations. These are designed to better enable the NCA to effectively support law enforcement in addressing corrupt police officers and staff, an issue that poses a significant threat to fair and effective policing, and ultimately public safety. These changes will enable the NCA to have the intelligence, resources and approaches it requires to robustly address with partners this threat to police forces and wider law enforcement.

[HCWS434]

Petitions

Tuesday 30 April 2024

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Road safety at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares deep concern regarding the ongoing hazards at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605, which has seen a distressing history of road traffic accidents and fatalities; further that the lack of safety measures, such as a roundabout, speed restrictions, or traffic lights, raises significant alarm; notes that despite existing cameras monitoring an average speed of 60MPH, accidents persist, highlighting the inadequacy of current measures; further that urgent reconsideration of installing traffic lights and speed restrictions is imperative, not only for local residents' safety but also for commuters on the A605; further notes that given the success of traffic lights at the Barnwell A605 junction and their cost-effectiveness, their implementation should be swiftly considered; further declares that the financial and emotional toll of accidents, spanning back to the bypass construction in 1990, underscores the urgency for action; further notes that over the past two decades, our community has endured tragic losses from road accidents, with the first recorded in 2000, and the resulting injuries, fatalities, property damages, and strain on law enforcement and medical resources have been extensive, estimated to cost hundreds of thousands of pounds; further declares that immediate improvements are overdue, and we implore the authorities to prioritise the necessary measures to safeguard our roads and communities; and further that the introduction of the Elton bypass neglected pedestrian safety entirely, evidenced by the hazardous crossing conditions at the public footpaths.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to put pressure on the county council responsible and ask that this matter be addressed promptly, and consider appropriate measures to ensure the safety of local residents and commuters at the junction of B671 from Elton village onto the A605.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 13P.]

[P002958]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman):

I was sorry to hear of the residents' concern about ongoing hazards at the junction of the B671 from Elton village on to the A605.

Local authorities have a duty under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to exercise their functions under the Act so as to secure the expeditious, convenient and safe movement of vehicular and other traffic (including pedestrians), so far as practicable having regard to various matters including the amenity of the area through which the road runs.

Local authorities are free to make their own decisions about the roads under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. It would be inappropriate for the Government to seek to intervene in the process of local democratic accountability.

The Department issues guidance to local traffic authorities designed to make sure that speed limits are appropriately and consistently set while allowing for flexibility to deal with local circumstances. The guidance can be found online at www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-local-speed-limits

This guidance is not mandatory and the final decision is for the authority, working with the police who would carry out any enforcement.

Traffic lights may be installed if a junction has a poor safety record, and traffic authorities should develop policies and criteria to enable them to objectively assess the need for traffic signals at sites, taking into account any local relevant factors. Whether traffic lights should be used is entirely a matter for each traffic authority to consider. The Department has published guidance to assist them in chapter 6 of the "Traffic Signs Manual", available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/traffic-signs-manual

TREASURY

Barclays Bank closure in Suffolk

The petition of residents of Suffolk Coastal and the wider Suffolk area,

Declares that Barclays Bank has stated it will close its Leiston branch; further that this means Barclays will have closed all of its branches in Suffolk Coastal including Aldeburgh, Felixstowe, Halesworth, Martlesham Heath, Saxmundham, Southwold and Woodbridge; further that the petitioners believe that rural areas like Suffolk are more likely to be at risk of bank closures; further recognises the powers of the Financial Conduct Authority given under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 regarding access to cash and bank closures; and further that it is concerned at the validity of the assessment of the justification of closure by Barclays.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Barclays to keep open their last remaining branch in Leiston is Suffolk Coastal; and to require the Financial Conduct Authority to publish its assessment of the justification given by Barclays for closure of its Leiston Branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Dr Thérèse Coffey, Official Report*, 20 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 1013.]

[P002936]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami):

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding the closure of the Leiston branch of Barclays. I am sorry to hear of her constituents' disappointment at the planned closure of the branch. The Government believe that all customers, wherever they live, should have appropriate access to banking and cash services, and I would like to assure her that I am monitoring this issue closely. Banks and

building societies occupy a privileged position in society and are essential to enabling people to manage their money on a day-to-day basis.

The Government legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to introduce a new legislative framework to protect access to cash for individuals and businesses. This establishes the Financial Conduct Authority as the lead regulator for access to cash and provides it with responsibility and powers to seek to ensure reasonable provision of cash withdrawal and deposit facilities. As part of this responsibility, the FCA must seek to ensure that there is reasonable provision of free withdrawal and deposit facilities in relation to personal current accounts. The FCA recently consulted on its proposed regulatory regime: FCA consultation on access to cash. <https://www.fca.org.uk/publications/consultation-papers/cp23-29-access-cash>

For access to banking services more broadly, while the Government acknowledge that decisions to open or close a branch are commercial decisions for banks, it is imperative that banks and building societies recognise the needs of all their customers, including those who need to use in-person services. The impact of branch closures must be mitigated where possible so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have appropriate access to banking services.

Guidance from the FCA sets out its expectation of firms when they are deciding to reduce the number of their physical branches or free-to-use ATMs. Under this guidance, firms are expected to communicate their decision to close a branch clearly to their customers and other relevant stakeholders at least 12 weeks before the proposed closure. Before this, firms are expected to conduct analysis of the needs of customers using the site, the impact of a planned closure and alternatives that are or could reasonably be put in place to continue to meet those customers' needs. The FCA expects this analysis to include usage

trends, overall transaction volumes across a representative time period, and details of any commercial evaluation the firm has completed. Firms are expected to publish a high-level summary of this analysis, though the FCA does not expect firms to publish information that is confidential.

Alternative options to access everyday banking services can be via telephone banking, through digital means such as mobile or online banking, and via the Post Office or banking hubs. The Post Office allows personal and business customers to carry out everyday banking services at 11,500 post office branches across the UK, and banking hubs are a shared initiative which enable customers of participating banks to access cash and banking services in shared facilities. Over 100 banking hubs have been announced so far and UK Finance recently confirmed that it estimates that a total of 225 banking hub locations will be announced by the end of 2024. Over 40 hubs have already opened, and the Government hope to see the other hubs open as soon as possible. In an Adjournment debate on 24 April 2024, I stated that I would like the criteria to be adjusted to better take the needs of rural areas into account.

Following my recent discussions with the banking sector, I welcome the participating high street banks' voluntary commitments to a range of improvements to the banking services provided in hubs. This includes all firms agreeing to provide a consistent range of banking services in hubs, and that customers will not need to bring their own smart device to carry out a service. Firms will trial customer liaison services and Saturday openings, and have also committed to keep services in banking hubs under review, ensuring hubs continue to be fit for purpose for all customers.

I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting the concerns of her constituents in this area.

Written Correction

Tuesday 30 April 2024

Ministerial Correction

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

The following extract is from Second Reading of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill on 16 April 2024.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: There is also a strong economic case for the Bill. Every year, smoking costs our country at least £17 billion, far more than the £10 billion of tax

revenue that it draws in. It costs our NHS and social care system £3 billion every year, with someone admitted to hospital with a smoking-related illness almost every minute of every day, and 75,000 GP appointments every week for smoking-related problems.

[*Official Report*, 16 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 265.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom):

Dame Andrea Leadsom: There is also a strong economic case for the Bill. Every year, smoking costs our country at least £17 billion, far more than the £10 billion of tax revenue that it draws in. It costs our NHS and social care system £3 billion every year, with someone admitted to hospital with a smoking-related illness almost every minute of every day, and 75,000 GP appointments every **month** for smoking-related problems.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 30 April 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	129	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—continued	
Blue Belt Programme.....	129	Middle East: UN Security Council.....	129
British Embassy: Port-au-Prince.....	137	Nicaragua: Freedom of Religion or Belief.....	144
Conflict in Gaza: Iran.....	140	Persecution of Christians.....	132
Gaza: Humanitarian Situation.....	135	Rafah: Military Offensive.....	139
Illegal Migration: International Co-operation.....	134	Strategic Export Licences: Israel.....	137
International Parental Child Abduction.....	142	Sudan: Humanitarian Situation.....	141
Jimmy Lai.....	143	Topical Questions.....	143

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 30 April 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	5WS	TREASURY	5WS
National Crime Agency: Dealing with Corruption.....	7WS	Notification of Contingent Liability.....	5WS
Stop and Search and Detention and Questioning.....	5WS		

PETITIONS

Tuesday 30 April 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	3P	TREASURY	4P
Road safety at the junction of B671 from Eltonvillage onto the A605.....	3P	Barclays Bank closure in Suffolk.....	4P

WRITTEN CORRECTION

Tuesday 30 April 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	3WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued	
Health and Social Care.....	3WC	Tobacco and Vapes Bill.....	3WC

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**not later than
Tuesday 7 May 2024**

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 30 April 2024

- Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 129] [see index inside back page]**
Deputy Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
- Port Talbot Steelworks [Col. 151]**
Answer to urgent question—(David T. C. Davies)
- Telegraph Media Group Ltd: Acquisition [Col. 162]**
Statement—(Lucy Frazer)
- Tenant Farming Commissioner [Col. 170]**
Bill presented, and read the First time
- Public Amenities (Adoption by Local Authorities) [Col. 171]**
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Gareth Thomas)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*
- Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill [Col. 175]**
Lords amendments considered
- Petitions [Col. 229]**
- Heathrow Airport: Western Rail Link [Col. 233]**
Debate on motion for Adjournment
- Westminster Hall**
Glaucoma and Community Optometry [Col. 45WH]
Sport Horse Industry: Import and Export Controls [Col. 58WH]
Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience: Khan Review [Col. 64WH]
Life Sentences: Public Understanding [Col. 86WH]
Preventable Sight Loss [Col. 95WH]
General Debates
- Written Statements [Col. 5WS]**
- Petitions [Col. 3P]**
Observations
- Written Correction [Col. 3WC]**
Ministerial correction
-