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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 13 May 2024

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SECOND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 750

ELEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2023-2024

House of Commons

Monday 13 May 2024

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Personal Independence Payment

1. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the average time taken to decide the outcome of personal independence payment applications. [902750]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The time taken to process a new PIP claim fell from 26 weeks in August 2021 to 15 weeks at the end of January this year.

Helen Morgan: I have recently helped a constituent who waited four months for an appeal against an initial PIP decision. The paperwork for that decision was incorrect—it referred to another person; we do not know who that person was—and it took another four months to correct that, and another month to pay her. The process could best be described as a shambles. Another constituent has described it as a “highly stressful, bureaucratic nightmare”. Will the Secretary of State give us some reassurance that his Department is working to speed up the process and make it more dignified for those people applying for help?

Mel Stride: I set out the improvement in the processing times that people have been experiencing. In fact, we are now at 15 weeks—that was the figure at the end of January—which is quicker than was the case during the pandemic. I cannot comment on the individual circumstances that the hon. Lady has identified, but I will of course be happy to look at the matter that she has raised.

Job Vacancies: St Austell and Newquay

2. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps he is taking to help fill job vacancies in St Austell and Newquay constituency. [902751]

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): I know that my hon. Friend knows what a fantastic job his jobcentres do. This month, St Austell is running a sector-based placement with Crown Rail, offering guaranteed interviews to those who complete the training. Newquay jobcentre has worked brilliantly to bring in 20 new employers, who are using the jobcentre regularly to help fill their vacancies.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer and join her in thanking the excellent Department for Work and Pensions staff at both Newquay and St Austell jobcentres. Through their hard work and under the leadership and policies of the Government, we have achieved an 80.2% employment rate locally, which is well above the national average. We also have some great opportunities for the jobs of the future coming through in renewable energy, lithium extraction and the space sector. What more are the Government doing to ensure that local people in Cornwall can grasp those opportunities?

Jo Churchill: My hon. Friend is a formidable champion for his area. As we speak, our partnership team is working with local employers such as Naked Solar to design sector-based work programmes and fill potential vacancies. I am keen to work with him and his neighbours, because the areas that he named are all good for the high-wage jobs that his constituents deserve.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): One helpful change would be to extend access to employment support to economically inactive people in St Austell and Newquay who are not claiming benefits and do not have access to that support. Will the Minister consider that as a step towards increasing the prospects of filling the current job vacancies?

Jo Churchill: We have extended the restart scheme for another couple of years, making sure that everybody who walks through the doors of our jobcentres is met by a work coach. What we need to do is ensure that they have the time to look at that bespoke support.

Child Maintenance Service

3. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Child Maintenance Service in securing funds from paying parents. [902752]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): The Government are committed to ensuring that separated parents support their children, taking robust enforcement action against those who do not do so. Since December 2022, there has been an increase from 65% to 68% in those paying something towards maintenance through collect and pay.

Sarah Green: Last year, I wrote to the Department about a loophole that allows paying parents who earn non-taxable income overseas to avoid making child maintenance payments. For one of my constituents, that loophole has allowed their ex-partner not to pay any maintenance and effectively engage in financial abuse towards them. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that loophole, to ensure that paying parents are fulfilling their financial obligations to their children?

Paul Maynard: I am obviously concerned to hear that case. We have just had a consultation on the possibility of moving from collect and pay to direct pay for all claimants, which would certainly help to put a greater focus on compliance.¹ Although I am more than happy to arrange a meeting, I am not sure that one with me would be much help, because I am not in charge of child maintenance. I will ask the relevant Minister in the Lords to have a meeting with the hon. Member.

Jobcentres: South East Cornwall

4. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the support available in jobcentres in South East Cornwall constituency. [902753]

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): My hon. Friend will know that her local jobcentres are doing a good job of helping people find and progress in work in her area, driving the recruitment of seasonal workers and creating exciting partnerships with employers such as Morrisons.

Mrs Murray: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to put on record my condolences to the family and many friends of my immediate predecessor Colin Breed, who sadly passed away last Thursday.

Under the Conservatives, we have near record levels of payrolled employment and I regularly hear from employers that they cannot get the staff needed. Last month's House of Commons Library paper on people claiming unemployment benefits stated that 1,405 people were doing so in my constituency. What more can the Department do to make sure that the unemployed are ready to fit into vacancies as they arise by looking at what local businesses need?

Jo Churchill: I am sure I speak for the whole House when I join my hon. Friend in sending our condolences to the family and friends of her predecessor.

Our employment relation teams are working hard with local employers to match customers to the vacancies in my hon. Friend's businesses. We are building skills, working with sector-based work academy programmes and boot camps, supporting people with a generous increased childcare offer of up to £1,000 for one child and £1,700 for two, and helping people with access to travel. For those on the health journey, later this year we will roll out our WorkWell programme across England, including in areas in the south-west.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): On specific days, jobcentres have been closed due to ongoing industrial action. Can the Minister assure me that anybody who misses an appointment due to that action will not be sanctioned?

Jo Churchill: We will always take a reasonable view and make sure that unavoidable circumstances such as those the hon. Gentleman speaks of will be taken into account when talking to customers.

Employment Levels

5. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What plans he has to increase levels of employment. [902754]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): We have a near record level of employment and very low levels of unemployment, but we are not stopping there. The Chancellor announced our back to work plan in the previous statement.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The latest Office for National Statistics figures show that the number of claimants in my constituency fell over the past year. That is good news, but more needs to be done. Does the Secretary of State agree that we always need to make work pay, that we need to create incentives for people to get back into work and that local action such as my annual jobs fair, which I held recently in partnership with the DWP, Halesowen College and the Halesowen business improvement district, can make a practical difference on the ground by getting opportunities to people?

Mel Stride: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the reduction in the number of claimants in his constituency, which I know is at least in part due to the excellent jobs

1.[Official Report, 22 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 12WC.](Correction)

fairs he assists in organising. He is right that work should pay; that is why I am very proud that mine is the party that brought in universal credit, making sure that that is exactly the case.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I add to the tribute paid by the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) to my friend Colin Breed, who served South East Cornwall with great dignity before her? I thank her for paying tribute to Colin and offering condolences to his friends and family.

In our part of the world, the issue is less unemployment and more the lack of a workforce. The Lake district has 20 million visitors every year and a relatively small working-age population, 80% of whom are already employed in hospitality and tourism. Can the Secretary of State help us out by saying yes at least to discussions with the European Commission, which has offered a youth mobility visa programme between the UK and Europe? Only one youth mobility visa scheme exists with Europe already, and it is with Andorra, which is quite small.

Mel Stride: I think the Government have already said they are not minded to pursue the scheme to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but that is not the same thing as saying that we do not take the issue extremely seriously. That is why we have extensive training provision such as SWAPs—the sector-based work academy programmes—and the WorkWell provision that we are rolling out, to which my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment has just referred.

State Pension Age Changes: Compensation

6. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of providing compensation to women born in the 1950s affected by changes to the state pension age. [902755]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The ombudsman's report has been laid before Parliament and it is under active and considerable consideration at the present time.

Neale Hanvey: A report in today's *Scottish Daily Express* notes that seven in 10 members of the public support financial compensation for women born in the 1950s. If the Government will not act on the final report of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which recommended compensation, will they now listen to the voice of the people and provide the proper financial redress that the Women Against State Pension Inequality absolutely deserve and are entitled to?

Mel Stride: There are a variety of opinions as to what the outcome of the ombudsman's report should be. There are the ombudsman's recommendations themselves, to which some people take a counter-view while others believe that there should be more by way of payments. We are potentially looking at very large sums indeed. It is important, therefore, and only fair to those on all sides of the argument, that we take an appropriate amount of time to consider the report thoroughly, which the ombudsman has also invited Parliament to consider.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for reminding himself and us that the ombudsman has, unusually, suggested that Parliament should get involved. Some were asking for £10,000 compensation per person. The ombudsman has recommended between £1,000 and just under £3,000. Could the Secretary of State indicate whether he will make a decision, and, if so, when and how much?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend the Father of the House for his question. I cannot prejudge the outcome of the very detailed set of considerations. He makes reference to the amounts involved, which are considerable. As I have said, it is absolutely right that we look very carefully at the conclusions of that report and listen to what Parliament has to say in that respect.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Roslyn Gilmore is one of several thousand WASPI women in my constituency. It has now been six weeks since we had the statement to the House, so I repeat the call again: when can we expect the response to the ombudsman's report?

Mel Stride: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I have just given to the Father of the House. It has to be stressed, quite rightly, that the report was five years in the making, and that was—in part at least—due to the complexities of the matters under consideration. We are looking at those matters extremely carefully.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Two things cannot be disputed. The first is that some women came to harm because of what happened. The second is that the report, and the assessments that came to pass prior to it, were a long time in the making. I encourage the Secretary of State to look into this matter not just carefully, as he says and I know he will, but at great pace.

Mel Stride: I have made it clear from the Dispatch Box that there will be no undue delay in coming to conclusions on this matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee on Tuesday, the ombudsman essentially said that the reason it decided to lay the report before Parliament was that it could not trust the Government to deal with it. I ask the Secretary of State a simple question: does he have confidence in the ombudsman, and does he accept its report?

Mel Stride: I have made our position extremely clear: we are considering the report and it will come back to the House in due course and without undue delay. The ombudsman has, as the hon. Gentleman indicated, invited the House to express its opinion as well. That is something that we will consider alongside the matters raised in the report.

David Linden: The Secretary of State is right to say that “in due course” is on people's lips, because the reality is that 270,000 WASPI women have now died, as they do with every passing day. Indeed, nine WASPI

women would have died in the time our Select Committee hearing took on Tuesday. Is not the issue here that the Government hope that this issue will be lost during the course of an election campaign, and that the two big parties can concoct a situation in which we ignore the matter, more women will die, and more 1950s women will be denied the justice that they deserve?

Mel Stride: I simply do not accept that that is a fair assessment of the very considerable time and effort that we are putting into taking this matter extremely seriously.

Universal Credit

7. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): If he will make an estimate of the number of in-work universal credit claimants that have had payments stopped due to errors made by his Department in the last 12 months. [902757]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): No estimate has been made, but customers can request a mandatory reconsideration if they do not agree with a decision to stop their universal credit.

Paula Barker: My constituent Georgina Mitchell is a single mum to three children, two of whom have additional needs. She works as a nurse and is in receipt of universal credit. The Minister says that work pays, but since October, Georgina has had her benefits stopped intermittently because the DWP has falsely recorded her earnings as £19,000 one month, £12,000 the next, and so on and so forth. She cannot pay her social landlord, and her ability to pay for childcare is severely impacted. I have raised the matter with local officials, but despite assurances, it keeps happening. She cannot sort this, and despite my interventions, I cannot seem to sort it. Will the Secretary of State or the Minister investigate the matter urgently, and advise me on why these mistakes keep happening and on what will be done to ensure that they do not happen again?

Paul Maynard: I am very concerned to hear about the case that the hon. Lady has raised. I am more than happy to look into it if she contacts me further, and I recognise the urgency with which we would need to do that.

Pensioner Poverty

8. **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in poverty. [902758]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): Poverty among pensioners has remained stable, with no statistically significant changes since 2022-23. The number of pensioners with relative low income decreased by 1% in 2023 to 16%, and since 2010, over 200,000 pensioners have been lifted out of poverty.

Christian Wakeford: My inbox is full of constituents who are sick of the economic chaos inflicted by this Government and by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). Can the Minister explain why the number of elderly

individuals resorting to food banks has doubled in the past year to nearly 100,000? Are the people of Bury South wrong, and if they are, what is the reason why so many elderly residents cannot afford to eat in this country?

Paul Maynard: In 2023, 1% of low-income pensioners lived in a household that had accessed a food bank within 12 months. That percentage is unchanged from the previous year's figures. I recognise the effort that people put into supplying their Front Benchers and Back Benchers with zinger points to make, but when I was in that role 25 years ago, I learned to make sure I had worked out what the Government's answer might actually be.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the temporary shadow Minister. I wish the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), a speedy recovery, and look forward to seeing her in the House. Angela Eagle, welcome back.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the shadow Secretary of State is making a good recovery—she is probably watching us even now, in between her physiotherapy.

Is it not the case that on this Government's watch, food bank usage has doubled for pensioners, and over 2 million pensioners—nearly one in five—are now living in poverty? That figure is not stable; it is rising, so what is the Minister going to do about it?

Paul Maynard: Of course, I also pass on my good wishes to the shadow Secretary of State, who I hope is recovering well.

Just as I gave the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) some advice, I can now give some advice to Labour Front Benchers: always listen to the answer the Minister has just given. I will repeat it: in 2023, 1% of low-income pensioners lived in a household that had accessed a food bank within 12 months. That percentage is unchanged from last year's figures.

Dame Angela Eagle: But 2 million pensioners are in poverty. Labour got far more pensioners out of poverty than the Minister's Government have, and the number of pensioners in poverty is now rising: it was 1.6 million when the Conservatives came into office, and it is now 2.1 million, so there are more pensioners in poverty. Despite the Minister's bluster, the Government's own statistics show that well over a third of pensioners entitled to pension credit are not receiving it, which saves his Department almost £3 billion a year. Even when pensioners do apply, the Minister's Department is missing its own 10-week service standard for processing new claims in nearly a quarter of all cases. Why is his Department so reluctant to ensure that pensioners are receiving the benefits they are entitled to?

Paul Maynard: The Government are putting an enormous amount of effort into improving the uptake of pension credit. The number of claims received in financial year 2022-23 was more than 80% higher than in the same period the year before, and the recent case load is going up for the first time in over a decade. We have given cost of living payments to pensioners on pension credit—we have given pensioners extra money

on top of their winter fuel allowance and cold weather payments. The reality is that no Government have supported the pensioner population more than this Government have. As we all know, Labour is the party of 75p pension increases; no pensioner will ever forget that.

Access to Work Assessments

9. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce waiting times for Access to Work assessments. [902760]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): Access to Work remains in high demand. We have increased the number of staff processing Access to Work claims, and are prioritising both renewal applications and applications from customers about to start a job. We are also improving the service through increased digitalisation to reduce the time from application to decision.

Neil Coyle: On this, there is a litany of broken promises to disabled people. Ministers have failed to tackle the backlog, failed to open the scheme to more employers, failed to extend the scheme to apprenticeships and failed to passport packages of support. So why have Ministers now decided to hit disabled people with more brutal cuts to PIP, when they have not supported disabled people into work through Access to Work?

Mims Davies: The average timescale for an Access to Work application decision in April 2024 was 43.9 days. We have increased the staff on applications, redeploying 95 staff from wider DWP work. Despite the hon. Gentleman's points, claims for reimbursement are in a good position within a 10-day ambition to pay. It reflects the ambition that employers have and their mindset change to be more open-minded with their recruitment, and I am delighted about that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Let's get some facts. On 1 January 2024, there were 24,874 people awaiting an Access to Work decision, on 1 February, 26,924, on 1 March, 29,871 and on 1 April, 32,445. Every month, the figure keeps increasing, so since the beginning of 2024 the Access to Work backlog has risen by more than 7,500. Does the Minister really think this is supporting more disabled people back into work?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her points. If we are trading figures, at the close of business on 7 May 2024, there were 36,721 applications awaiting decision. I remind those people listening why this matters. This is very significant support—demand-led support—for people who are getting opportunities to work or taking on new roles. This grant can provide up to £66,000-worth of flexible personalised support per person per year. It is absolutely right that we get the right information from the individual and take time to approve a significant application such as this.

Vicky Foxcroft: I am absolutely shocked that the Minister brags about the Access to Work backlog increasing to 36,721.

Last month, the UN published its latest review of how the UK has implemented its convention on the rights of disabled persons, the first since 2017. The Access to Work backlog was just one of the many reasons cited as evidence that the Government are still failing to take all appropriate measures to address grave and systemic violations of disabled people's rights. Does the Minister have any plans to put this right by finally implementing the UN's recommendations, or is she going to ignore them, as successive Tory Governments have consistently ignored disabled people?

Mims Davies: I am disappointed not to be enough of a bragger in this House, but I am very pleased that we are taking time to make sure that the tailored support is correct. We are working around fit notes and occupational health. We are also listening to those who are deaf and hard of hearing, who make up 36% of the total Access to Work expenditure, and I will be bringing more to the House on that matter. We are absolutely focused on improving this, with online 24/7 applications for Access to Work. On the other points the hon. Lady makes, if she listens to the BBC "Access All" podcast, she will hear me say that we are very disappointed about that report. We continue to work very hard for disabled people and we will be doing all we can to make sure they are listened to—unlike her not listening to a word I said just now.

Job Vacancies: Sittingbourne and Sheppey

10. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to help fill job vacancies in Sittingbourne and Sheppey constituency. [902761]

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Fantastically, as the timing would have it, the team in his constituency are today holding a jobs fair at Swale leisure centre, with the support of 48 local employers. The local radio station is broadcasting live from the event to promote opportunities, and the DWP is working hard day in, day out to get people into work.

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, but does she agree that it is also important to ensure that people who are unemployed have the education and skills training needed to take the jobs on offer? Much of the unemployment in my constituency is on the Isle of Sheppey. With that in mind, will she join me in welcoming the radical shake-up of secondary education now taking place on the island, and in addition the extension of Sheppey College to provide additional post-16 skill training courses, which is being part-funded by the Government's levelling-up fund?

Jo Churchill: I join my hon. Friend in that, because any way we can help lift skills across the piece, such as through boot camps and workplace academy programmes, to help people into high-skill, well-paid jobs, particularly in areas where perhaps that has not been the norm, is to be welcomed and congratulated.

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

Mr Speaker: Is it really linked? I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: May I first thank the Minister for what she is going to do for the Sittingbourne and Sheppey constituency as that is absolutely brilliant? However, I would love to see the same thing happening across all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and in particular in Strangford. Could the Minister work with the local colleges, which can provide opportunity and skills? It is better—

Mr Speaker: Order. I can save the Minister replying. The question is only about filling job vacancies in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, not the rest of the world. Let us move on. That was a good effort but, out of 10, I would give it one.

Welfare Reform

12. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps he is taking to reform the welfare system. [902763]

18. **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reform the welfare system. [902769]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): On reforming welfare, we are increasing the incentives to work and increasing the disincentives not to work or to engage with the system, and we are looking to better target help for those who need it most.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I recently discussed the consultation on changes to the personal independence payment with Waveney SHIMS—Suffolk Help in Multiple Sclerosis—our local MS support group. It highlighted the need for a more targeted and fair approach for those with fluctuating conditions, which should include the scrapping of the 20 metre and the 50% rules, and the need for assessments to be carried out by those qualified and with a full understanding of neurological conditions. Could he confirm that the review will take these matters into consideration?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and considerable interest and knowledge in this area, and for the discussions he has held with me on these matters. As he will know, we are currently going through a 12-week consultation on how PIP can be reformed. I certainly subscribe to the view that we want to examine the issue of one size fits all and whether there are better ways of looking after people.

Graham Stuart: I welcome the Government's welfare reforms and celebrate the millions of additional people now in work thanks to this Conservative Government. I note that every Labour Government there has ever been has left more people unemployed and on the dole queue at the end than at the beginning—theirs is a truly disgraceful record. However, can my right hon. Friend assure my constituents who may be chronically ill or vulnerable that, although there will be support in place, they will not be forced back into work if that is not appropriate?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Work is essential and is at the heart of the reforms we are bringing through. Indeed the Office for Budget

Responsibility has assessed the impact of our measures with the work capability assessment reforms, for example, as leading to over 400,000 fewer people on those benefits by the end of the forecast period. I am very proud of that achievement because, as he highlights, that will mean more people have work and the benefits of it.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Secretary of State claims that his work capability assessment reforms are to encourage more people to get into work, yet the independent Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that just 3% of the 424,000 people who would be denied financial support would actually move into work in the next four years. So the evidence is clear that these reforms are codes for cuts. Will the Secretary of State finally come clean and admit that welfare reforms are about denying vital protections and support for people with serious mental and physical health conditions?

Mel Stride: The reforms we are bringing in are not a code for cuts; they are a clear, well thought through set of reforms for putting work right at the centre of people's existence. The hon. Lady quotes the Office for Budget Responsibility. She will be aware that it believes that the measures that the Chancellor has brought in over the past three fiscal events will overall mean 300,000 more people in the labour market.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): When the Secretary of State is considering welfare reforms, will he please look at the shambles in the Child Maintenance Service? Over the past year, the number of complaints to my constituency office has skyrocketed. Chief among those is that constituents cannot get responses. When they do, those responses differ between different members of staff and often are in conflict with each other. What will he do to address the extraordinary waiting times and other communication issues within the Child Maintenance Service?

Mel Stride: We are looking at modernising how the Child Maintenance Agency operates, as the hon. Lady will know. If she has specific examples of constituents who have had undue waiting times, I will be interested in putting her in touch with the relevant Minister—he serves in the other place, as the House will know—for him to consider them.

People with Autism: Employment

13. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people with autism into employment. [902764]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): We are continuing to run programmes to support autistic people into employment, including local supported employment, Disability Confident and Access to Work. The Department for Work and Pensions will also be working with stakeholders to support the independent task group carrying forward the recommendations following the Buckland review of autism employment.

Peter Gibson: May I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the efforts by Darlington building society, along with other companies in the region, supporting the North

East Autism Society to help create 1,000 jobs for people with autism? Can my hon. Friend highlight the work being done by the fantastic team at Darlington jobcentre, with their health and welfare roadshow this Wednesday to help people get back into work?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the attention of the House the important initiatives going on in his patch in Darlington. Such local programmes have a huge impact in helping autistic people into work and tackling stigma. Once established, I am sure that the Buckland review task group will be interested to hear direct details of the work being done in his area.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is right that the Buckland inquiry and report are a breath of fresh air. I contributed to that inquiry as chair of the Westminster Commission on Autism. However, is it not a fact that too often people on the autism spectrum—or any spectrum—are undervalued in terms of their huge potential to do great things in our economy in many jobs? Will she look at early diagnosis, which is so important?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman and the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), are linking together on this. We have specialist SWAPs for people on the autism spectrum so that we can see that talent and ability. Autistica estimates that one in 70 people are autistic—that is around 1 million across the UK—but sadly just three in 10 of working-age autistic disabled people are in employment, and the Government are determined to tackle that with the review.

Unemployment Levels

14. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce unemployment. [902765]

19. **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce unemployment. [902770]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): We are bearing down on unemployment, not least through the sterling work of our JCP work coaches, as well as through the back to work plan that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor recently announced.

Craig Tracey: This Friday, I will be hosting my next jobs fair in Atherstone, along with the local DWP. While these events have been successful, with more than 30 businesses typically on hand with live jobs on offer, one of the regular bits of feedback I get is that access to transport is often a barrier to people taking up jobs, particularly where those jobs might be out of the town centre or in industrial parks, and particularly before that first pay packet comes in. Will the Secretary of State set out what if any support is available to help as many people get into some of the fantastic opportunities we have in North Warwickshire and Bedworth?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for the extraordinary work that he does locally to support people into work. He asks what support there is for those with travel challenges.

The flexible support fund is there for a variety of different uses, but one is to help with exactly the issue he raises for the first three months of employment.

Dr Wallis: We have successfully halved inflation, but we must get people back into work. In Bridgend, we have lost the Ford factory and Biomet. It is about local jobs. I have always said that maintaining close contact with local employers and working with businesses on the ground is the way to do it. Could the Secretary of State tell the House what his Department is doing to work with employers to get people back to work?

Mel Stride: We do a huge amount with employers both at national level and at local jobcentres. If my hon. Friend has not already engaged with his local jobcentre staff, I strongly recommend that he does so. The results speak for themselves. Unemployment is around half the level in 2010 under the last Labour Government. We have near record levels of employment. Youth unemployment under this Government has fallen more than 40%; under Labour, it went up by almost 45%.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): More than 39,000 south-west companies are classed as being in significant economic distress, according to Begbies Traynor's "Red Flag Alert" report. The loss of those businesses would deepen regional economic inequality and increase regional unemployment. What steps is the Minister taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that those businesses, which provide vital jobs, find a way out of significant economic distress?

Mel Stride: As we have set out, there is a clear and detailed back to work plan, which is working for the reasons that I have given. If the hon. Lady has examples of specific employers under the distress that she outlined, the Minister for Employment will be happy to look at what we may be able to do as a Department in her constituency.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Prime Minister said this morning, and the Secretary of State just repeated it, that the Government introduced universal credit to help people into work. That is not a real account of the situation. The truth is that not only do we have record sickness-related inactivity, but young people are faring the worst. I know what Ministers will say—the questionable allegation that Labour Governments leave office with unemployment higher has already been trotted out. Actually, Full Fact found that that is particularly true of post-war Conservative Governments. So will the Minister acknowledge what is going on today: for the first time ever, we have 3 million inactive 16 to 24-year-olds? That's true, isn't it?

Mel Stride: I have already set out that we have universal credit, as the hon. Lady identified, as well as WorkWell and universal support to address exactly the individuals to whom she referred. On the general point, it should be pointed out that economic inactivity is below the OECD, G7 and European Union average, and lower than in France, Italy and the United States and in every year under the last Labour Government.

Alison McGovern: I said they would and I hear what the Secretary of State said about scheme after scheme and initiative after initiative, but what have the results been? If the Tory plan was working, the OBR would have forecast an increasing employment rate, wouldn't it? But what is the truth? Not only is employment forecast to go down, but the forecast was downgraded in response to the Government's policies. That's the truth, isn't it?

Mel Stride: Our record speaks for itself: 4 million more people in work since 2010. Unemployment has halved since the last Labour Government, on the hon. Lady's watch. Youth unemployment has fallen by more than 40%; under her watch it rose by more than 40%. As I have stated, the last Labour Government's record on economic inactivity is that it was higher than today every single year.

Support for Pensioners

15. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support pensioners. [902766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): The state pension provides the foundation of support for older people. In the next year, we will fund more than £167 billion of benefits for pensioners—some 6% of GDP.

Alexander Stafford: Older people should be able to retire in comfort and dignity, which is why this Government created the triple lock and increased the state pension by 8.5% this year and 10.1% last year. However, many of my constituents are concerned about being taxed on those pensions, as the personal allowance has, in effect, been frozen for nearly five years. Will the Minister encourage the Chancellor to look again at the personal allowance and allow more pensioners to keep more of their well-deserved money?

Paul Maynard: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, it is this Government who have doubled the personal allowance since 2010. It is absolutely clear that those who rely solely on the state pension are not liable for income tax.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): We must all be aware of a growing number of pensioners who are struggling with rent, council tax and other cost of living increases. Given that state of affairs, does the Minister think there may be an argument that the threshold to access pension credit is too high and that if he were to lower it just a little, he would help a great many more people who are obviously struggling?

Paul Maynard: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the state pension has gone up by 8.5% this year, after an increase of 10.1% last year. On top of that, for those in receipt of pension credit we have added £900 in cost of living payments, and 8.9 million have received a £300 top-up to their winter fuel payment. We have spent billions on supporting pensioners through the cost of living crisis. As we established in the exchanges earlier, pensioner poverty remains stable.

Pensioners: Cost of Living

16. **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support pensioners with increases in the cost of living. [902767]

17. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support for pensioners with increases in the cost of living. [902768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): The Government have provided total support of over £108 billion to help households and individuals with higher bills. As I just said, in addition, the basic state pension has gone up by 8.5% this year.

Richard Burgon: But a new poll today shows that two thirds of people think the Government should urgently pay fair compensation to all WASPI women, including many in east Leeds, who were hit by the change to the state pension age. It has been over six weeks since the Secretary of State got the parliamentary ombudsman's final report, but nearly three years since the ombudsman said that the Department for Work and Pensions had committed maladministration through its failure to properly inform affected women of the state pension age changes. With a WASPI woman dying every 13 minutes, time is not on their side. When will the Government stop dragging their feet? To help ensure justice, will the Government allow MPs to vote on a compensation package before the summer?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman has heard the Secretary of State reply at great length to a number of questions on that subject today. As he said, we are looking carefully at the report and considering what is a very complex set of recommendations and proposals to make sure that we do the right thing.

Deidre Brock: Ministers certainly seem to prefer the comfort of their own massaged figures to facts. The Trussell Trust, however, says it has seen a 36% rise in pensioners turning to food banks in the past six months, and that is likely to increase. The hard fact is that the UK devotes a smaller percentage of GDP to state pensions and pensioner benefits than most other advanced economies. When will they take pensioner poverty seriously and fix this scandal?

Paul Maynard: The households below average income statistics, which are cleared by the Office for National Statistics, show that 1% of low-income pensioners live in a household that has accessed a food bank within 12 months. Given all the effort we are putting into the ongoing campaign to increase access to pension credit and the success that campaign is having, I am very confident that we will make continued progress in reducing pensioner poverty.

Topical Questions

T1. [902775] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): May I first extend my best wishes to my opposite number the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), and wish her a speedy recovery? Since my last appearance at the Dispatch Box, we have announced the areas for the WorkWell pilot, which will cover about a third of England. I am extremely pleased that we have also gone out for consultation and a call for evidence on fit note reform. That will feature within it the 15 pilots I have just referred to. On 8 May, we announced that Access to Work has gone digital. Finally, I congratulate the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) on her elevation to Minister of State, which reflects both the seriousness with which we take her portfolio and, of course, her undoubted abilities and contribution to my Department.

Chris Clarkson: I join the Secretary of State in congratulating the Minister on her elevation—it is not before time.

This Conservative Government have an enviable record when it comes to employment, with 4 million more people in work since 2010. I was pleased to hear that one of the integrated care boards involved in the WorkWell scheme, which my right hon. Friend has just mentioned, will be Greater Manchester ICB, which means that my constituents will have access to integrated health and employment support from October. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) is heckling from a sedentary position; the only job that she has created recently has been one for a couple of clowns. *[Interruption.]* To be fair, that is topical, Mr Speaker.

Will my right hon. Friend explain how the WorkWell scheme will benefit people in my constituency and throughout Greater Manchester by ensuring that they can access work?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right. The scheme is being rolled out in Greater Manchester, in parts of London, in Cambridgeshire and all the way to the Isles of Scilly and parts of Cornwall. It brings together healthcare support and work coach support to ensure that we do everything we can to help into work those who face barriers to work.

T3. [902777] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): It is an unavoidable fact that the United Kingdom has one of the lowest pensions in the developed world, and pensioner poverty is a very real issue. I meet constituents who are pensioners reasonably frequently, and all the increases that the Government have provided for them have been lost through taxation. For example, Peter's private pension will be cut by £681 a year, while Mr and Mrs Clark's modest private pension has been slashed by nearly 50%. They did the right thing and put away a little extra for their retirement; will the Government now do the right thing and correct the position so that they can enjoy it?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to everyone that I have a lot of Members to get in on topical questions, and they are meant to be short and punchy? I really do need to get other Members in.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Paul Maynard): Let me simply point to what the Resolution Foundation had to say in its Living Standards Outlook: pensioner poverty is forecast to fall.

T2. [902776] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Given that it would not survive under Labour, just how vital is the work plan?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is entirely right to raise that point: in the absence of this Government, the work plan will be no more. The problem is that we do not know exactly what will replace it, because there is no plan from the party opposite—no plan on work capability assessments, no plan on personal independence payments, no plan on fit notes. We do not know what Labour stands for, so let us stick with the plan, and let us elect a Conservative Government at the next election.

T4. [902778] **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): A recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation revealed, shockingly, that 1 million children experienced destitution in the UK last year. Is it not the case that the Government have completely failed the most vulnerable children in our society?

The Minister for Employment (Jo Churchill): No, not at all. We are providing significant support through the welfare system and expect to spend about £306 billion in the current financial year, including £138 billion on children and those of working age. We are focused on targeting cost of living support to the most vulnerable families. The local housing allowance, for instance, helped 1.6 million families in that bracket.

T6. [902781] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Let me begin by praising my local jobcentre in Bexleyheath for the tremendous work it is doing to get people into employment. I visited it on Friday and was very impressed. Our welfare system should always be there to protect the most vulnerable in our society, but new challenges are threatening its sustainability and preventing it from working as intended. I therefore welcome my right hon. Friend's plans to target the system better towards those who need it most, by controlling spiralling costs and ensuring that it is fair to the taxpayer.

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is, as always, absolutely right. We must have a system that targets the most vulnerable in society, and it must also be fair to the taxpayer, because that is part of what underpins the confidence that the public have in our welfare state—and that is worth preserving.

T5. [902779] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): During the time for which the ombudsman's report has been ongoing, 270,000 WASPI women have already passed away. How many more 1950s-born women in Lancashire will die before the Government finally act on the report's recommendations?

Mel Stride: I have already replied to questions on that matter in this session. To reiterate, we are looking extremely carefully at what is a very complex report. It took the ombudsman five years or thereabouts to compile, and there will be no undue delay in our responding to it.

T7. [902782] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his efforts to make work pay, but for many of those in work, a lot of the excellent support available in jobcentres is currently voluntary. Will my right hon. Friend look at what more he can do to encourage people in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire to upskill in order to take on more well-paid work, and to reduce dependency on benefits?

Mr Speaker: And it is his birthday as well.

Jo Churchill: Happy birthday! I am sure my hon. Friend's family and small children will be wishing him well from Stoke.

As has been outlined, there is great work going on. I met the Skills Minister only last week to discuss the better join-up that is happening, and we are really focused on allowing people to progress in work. Allowing them to move up and move on, and to stay and succeed in work, is just as important as getting that first job.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On 14 September 2023, I led a Backbench Business debate in this House, supported by the hon. Members for Moray (Douglas Ross) and for Easington (Grahame Morris). We asked the Government to take action on footballers with brain-related injuries. The Minister who responded spoke warmly, and the then Minister at DWP, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), indicated that there would be a meeting for the three of us, on a cross-party basis, with the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. I wrote to the Minister on 18 January and 13 March, and there was a Westminster Hall debate on 24 April, but nothing has yet happened. Can we get that meeting with the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to make sure that we get footballers with brain injuries the support they need?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Mims Davies): I have already met the chair of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council in my role as the Minister for Disabled People, and I will continue to engage on whatever is required. To be clear, the council is considering any connection between neurodegenerative diseases and professional sportspeople, and will publish its findings once the investigation is complete. I have also met the Sports Minister and will be keen to share this issue with colleagues. I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman.

T9. [902784] **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): This Conservative Government's next generation of welfare reforms are to be warmly welcomed. The NHS North West London ICB, which covers Uxbridge and South Ruislip, has been selected as a lead partner for one of the new WorkWell pilot areas. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can maximise the programme's effectiveness in integrating health advice for my constituents?

Mims Davies: I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in WorkWell, which is a significant intervention. I am not sure about the Secretary of State's diary or mine, but we are keen to meet and to highlight the work of the NHS North West London ICB. It is one of 15 partnerships, which are backed by £64 million-worth of investment. It will design integrated WorkWell services and deliver them to around 59,000 disabled people so that they can start, stay and succeed in work.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): New statistics show that there are 4.3 million children living in relative poverty in the UK, with, as we have heard, 1 million children experiencing destitution, including in Manchester, which has the second highest levels of destitution in the country. What impact does the Minister think the Government crashing the economy and unleashing a cost of living crisis has had on those figures?

Jo Churchill: I laid that out in replying to a previous question. Our economy is going gangbusters, and inflation is down to 3.2%. I gently point the hon. Gentleman to the additional support delivered through the household support fund, which we have extended for another six months. I might gently ask him to press the Mayor of Greater Manchester on where the £32.3 million for his area has gone.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government's reforms to welfare and put on record my thanks to the great team at the Fareham jobcentre, with whom I have worked to organise jobs, apprenticeships and skills fairs. A child growing up in poverty is more likely to have worse literacy, numeracy, health and job outcomes, and a shorter life expectancy than the national average. Is it not right that the single biggest and most effective thing the Government could do now would be to scrap the two-child benefit cap?

Jo Churchill: I gently say to my right hon. and learned Friend that I am sure she would agree that any system has to be balanced and fair for the taxpayer, but also for those who need it most. Many working families do not see their incomes rise when they have to make choices, and we have to make the system fair. I would be more than happy to sit down with her and explain how we do that.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Maternity allowance, contribution-based jobseeker's allowance, contribution-based employment and support allowance, bereavement benefits, basic state pension and the new state pension: these are all calculated using our contributions to national insurance. Given the Chancellor's announcement of his desire to abolish national insurance, costing £46 billion, what discussions has the Secretary of State's Department had with the Treasury about how he is going to fund it?

Mel Stride: This scaremongering about the state pension and the £46 billion on the back of what is an aspiration through time—maybe more than one Parliament—to abolish national insurance is frankly disgraceful, particularly from a party that gave us the 75p increase in 1999 and, on its watch, saw us have the fourth highest rate of pensioner poverty in Europe.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Thanks to scientific research, there is an emerging picture of the biological causes of common mental health conditions. Given the Secretary of State's extremely welcome WorkWell announcement, questions have been raised about how the individuals implementing it can not only understand the diagnostic pathways that they will need to go through, but improve the evidence base for treatment, specifically with solid science to support this Government policy delivery. Will he work with his colleagues in the Department

of Health and Social Care and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to help academic research to provide the evidence that we need to deliver positive outcomes for people with mental health conditions?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for her pertinent question. That is exactly why we are piloting these measures, and we want to make sure that we get it right. I am interested in her suggestions, and I would be happy to consider them in greater detail.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Government have been talking a lot about sick note culture. As this is Mental Health Awareness Week, does the Minister agree the record long waits that many people face in getting adequate mental healthcare is delaying their return to work and keeping them on benefits longer?

Mel Stride: The approach we are taking with our call for evidence is to try to find a system in which the fit note approach is improved, and part of that must mean getting treatment to people earlier rather than later. That is exactly why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor came forward with 400,000 additional talking therapies within the NHS for exactly that purpose.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to Barrow jobcentre and to the central DWP team for the work they have been doing to support the community through the Team Barrow project? I was also delighted to find out that we are going to be a WorkWell pilot area in south Cumbria. Could my right hon. Friend outline the difference that will make to local small and medium-sized enterprises and to people looking to get into the jobs market?

Mel Stride: It will intervene at a very early stage of the health journey for those falling out of work and going into long-term sickness and disability benefits. We want to stop that journey by helping people and, through WorkWell, bringing together healthcare assistants and work coach assistants to make sure that we retain people in work or, if they are not far from the labour market, bring them into employment.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Since we began this question session a little over an hour ago, four WASPI women have died while we debate the challenges of

their pensions. The Secretary of State talks about the great sums involved, but can I remind him that those sums belong to the women affected? This Government showed no lack of haste in penalising those women. Will they show the same eagerness to compensate them?

Mel Stride: It is important that all Government policies are properly costed and that their cost to the taxpayer and the economy are taken into account. I have given the House an assurance that we are looking in great detail at the report. There will be no undue delay, and we will come to our conclusions at the earliest possible moment.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I have visited the old Rehai building in Amlwch, which is being repurposed with business units and a new jobcentre for the north of the island. Will the Minister visit Amlwch, meet some of my constituents and personally thank the team who have worked so hard to find a suitable building?

Mims Davies: Diolch yn fawr to the team in Ynys Môn! We have been searching for a building for a number of years to go to the added youth offer, and I would be delighted to join my hon. Friend in Ynys Môn and to thank the team.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will get it right this time, Mr Speaker.

What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Communities, back home in the Northern Ireland Executive, in relation to the extreme poverty surges witnessed in the winters of 2022 and 2023?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Northern Ireland Executive are at liberty to make their own arrangements on most of the benefits for which the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible. However, they generally choose to go with our decisions. I assure him that officials work very closely with their counterparts in Northern Ireland to make sure that we take the needs of the Northern Irish people into account when we take those decisions.

Parc Prison

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the urgent question, I will make a short announcement about the House's sub judice resolution.

A coroner's inquest has been opened into some of the deaths of men at HMP Parc, and those proceedings are now sub judice. However, given the significant public interest in addressing this matter, I have decided to grant a waiver in respect of the inquests under the House's resolution relating to the matter of sub judice. While hon. Members may refer to those deaths, I would urge the House to bear in mind the possibility that criminal or civil proceedings might be brought in future, and hon. Members should exercise caution in their remarks.

3.36 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will provide an update on the situation in Parc prison.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): Ensuring that our prisons are safe and secure for both prisoners and staff remains our priority. I extend my sincere condolences to the families and friends who have lost a loved one, and my gratitude to the staff at HMP and YOI Parc.

There have been nine adult deaths at HMP Parc since March 2024. It is important to note that these deaths are not all drug-related, However, four have so far been linked to substance misuse, with another potentially so. Any death in prison is thoroughly investigated by the prisons and probation ombudsman and is subject to a coroner's inquest. Until the results of these investigations are available, I must be a little careful not to pre-empt the detail of their findings or to comment on individual, identifiable cases, so there is a limit to what I can say with certainty.

I am able to say that we believe that the two deaths this month have not currently been linked to substance misuse. The deaths at HMP and YOI Parc should be considered in the wider context of the threat that synthetic opioids pose to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, to those in our custody and, indeed, to the country more widely, recognising the broader societal issue.

Our work at the prison can provide vital learning as we respond to this challenge, both in custody and in the community, where I understand this challenge has also occurred. HMPPS and G4S, the prison operator, are working closely together, using the latest technologies to gather intelligence on drug entry points and movements within the prison. There have been extensive searches of prisoners and staff, and any suspicious substances are tested on site with Rapiscan. Drug amnesties have been run to improve safety, and X-ray scanners are being used on entry to prison.

We have also expanded the use of naloxone at the prison, focusing on duty managers and night staff. In total, around 400 members of staff at HMP and YOI Parc are now trained to carry the drug during working hours. We also have specialist teams in HMPPS, including the substance misuse group and intelligence, supporting staff in the prison.

Chris Elmore: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I am one of the local Members covering the prison site, so I also thank the Minister for the genuinely constructive and extremely open way in which he has engaged with me.

I also thank Heather Whitehead, the governor of Parc, for engaging with me over recent months as the deaths have sadly increased. My thoughts are, of course, with the inmates who are no longer with us, and with their families. Obviously, every death is a tragedy, regardless of the circumstances.

The Minister made reference to issues around Spice in the prison. There is an assumption, mainly based on social media, that it is like the wild west inside the prison. He touched briefly on the concerns of the Bridgend community that the prison is a catalyst for Spice, because it is being transferred in and out of the prison. Will the Minister expand on what work can be done with the MOJ, Public Health Wales officials and Bridgend County Borough Council intervention teams to try to bring some sort of control to the drug abuse taking place inside and outside the prison?

I pay tribute to the prison staff. They are working in what appear to be extremely difficult circumstances. Issues around staff to prisoner ratios have still not been dealt with. We must ensure the prison officers who have had to deal with the deaths over the past nine to 10 weeks are receiving the mental health support they need, so they are able to continue to work in what are some of the most difficult circumstances, in one of the largest prisons in Wales. It is a category B prison and some of the inmates housed there pose significant challenges.

Finally, will the Minister expand on the work with the health board? I have had some constructive meetings with health providers over recent weeks, but there appears to be a disconnect between the reality on the ground in the prison and what the Ministry of Justice seems to be saying. I would be grateful for any update he can provide to try to bring some calm, not just to the prison estate but to the wider Bridgend community.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the typically measured tone he has adopted on what is a very sensitive subject, which he and I have spoken about previously. I join him in thanking staff. I visited HMP Parc last month and met some of the staff for myself. It is also right to thank the broader system, if I can put it that way, including the health board and South Wales police. I put on record my gratitude to Lesley Griffiths for her engagement on this issue in the Welsh Government. We look to work with all those partners to tackle this problem, because it is a shared societal challenge not just in the prison but in the community.

The prison has put in place a strategy to tackle drugs by restricting supply, promoting recovery and seeking to reduce demand, and by ensuring there is co-ordination between G4S, HMPPS, Public Health Wales and the local health board. We are seeking to bring into that the local police and the local authority, so there is shared ownership of tackling the issue.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight mental health support for staff. When a death occurs in custody, the impact on staff, just as on other prisoners, is significant. When there are a number of deaths in custody, that is amplified. Therefore, we are putting in place support to

ensure staff feel and are supported. The hon. Gentleman highlighted staffing; I believe there are currently around a dozen vacancies. We have significantly increased the number of staff, but I recognise a number of staff are new in post. They need to be supported by experienced officers to enable them to perform to the best of their ability.

Spice is a very strong drug; I believe the hon. Member for Ogmores has been briefed that we are looking carefully at nitazenes, which are a variation of Spice. I commit to continuing to keep the hon. Gentleman engaged and informed, as a local Member of Parliament, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis).

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

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): We should be clear that the number of fatalities we have seen at HMP Parc this year is by no means normal. It is an extraordinary situation, so I am grateful you granted an urgent question today, Mr Speaker, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) for requesting it. The Minister knows there have been multiple allegations of staff bringing illegal substances into the prison. A current prisoner at Parc recently wrote to the Welsh Affairs Committee:

“Drugs are everywhere in prison, from cannabis to heroin and the so called spice. Drips and drabs may enter through visits and come by way of drone, but let us not confuse the issue, far more comes in by people employed in prisons.”

Given the written answer that the Minister gave me last week, in which he said that currently no prison staff are searched using X-ray body scanners, can he say why not, and, in the absence of such measures, what action he is taking to ensure that all the staff who work in these difficult prisons share in the safety culture and are not part of the problem?

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend raises an extremely important matter. The reality, as he will know, is that the overwhelming majority of staff who work in HMPPS do so honestly and with good intent, and it is right that we continue to root out those who do not. In that context, we continue to work with police forces where prisons are located across the country, and where there is evidence, including in this case, in order to take action against not just prison officers, but any staff.

More broadly, we have body scanners in operation at this prison for visitors and others. Alongside the Rapiscan system that can test substances, we have also rolled out handheld detectors that can be used in cells to locate drugs in a much more effective manner. Considerable progress has been made, but we are clear that we need to continue making that progress not just in HMP and YOI Parc, but across the estate.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) for submitting this urgent question, and the Minister for the constructive way in which he has replied. This is the second time in a week that Ministers have had to come to this Chamber because of the crisis in one or more of our prisons.

I wish to start by saying that we are all thinking of those who have died at HMP Parc, their family and friends, and the governor and her staff. I appreciate that, as this matter is currently under investigation, we are limited in what we can say today, but it is important none the less that we give voice to this crisis.

It was shocking that the prisons ombudsman had to warn prisoners at HMP Parc to throw away drugs immediately due to the severe risk that those particular ones posed to public health. I hope that the Minister can outline what specific steps are being taken—in fact he has already done so—to remove drugs and ensure that we do not have further unnecessary and tragic deaths. He has promised action, but we do not want this to be yet another bout of activity that happens after the fact and does not last.

Drugs featured in the decision by the chief inspector of prisons to issue an urgent notification concerning Wandsworth prison last week. He went on to address the chronic lack of national leadership—from the HMPPS to the Ministry of Justice. We are looking at a national failure of leadership across our prison estate. Drugs are fuelling the violence that we see in our prisons. We are witnessing a crisis across the prison estate—a crisis of 14 years of Conservative rule.

In the spirit of today’s question, I thank the Minister for his commitment, but ask him whether the action plan that he has just outlined will continue once HMP Parc sinks from the headlines.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her question. If it is helpful, I will write to her in the same terms that I have written to the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore), to give some more information that I may not be able to say fully at the Dispatch Box. As she kindly acknowledged, I have set out the steps that are currently being taken to restrict supply, and to tackle at source those scanners and measures at the gate. As I understand it, there is a bid for enhanced gate security, which is currently being looked at and taken forward by HMPPS. At the appropriate time, I am happy to update her in the usual way.

On promoting recovery, training has been undertaken by around 400 staff in the use of naloxone, which, when administered, can swiftly counteract the effect of, for example, nitazenes. That is an important step forward. In terms of reducing demand, we are working at the prison with the alcohol and drug treatment centre Dyfo—this is where Welsh colleagues will correct my pronunciation—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Dyfodol.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister. We are engaging with Dyfodol, and indeed the health board. We are also supporting the Welsh emerging drugs and identification of novel substances project through prison radio and literature, to seek to be integrated and joined up in tackling what is, as I say, a challenge for both the prison and the community.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): I reiterate the comments made by the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) on the way the Minister has engaged. In Gwent, this is more than just a few headlines. This is not the first time that the area has had to endure a spate of deaths like this—in a very different setting, but still a

[Dr Jamie Wallis]

worrying one. The hon. Member for Ogmored touched on the social media speculation. It is not just a case of some irresponsible people; there is genuine worry about what this means for communities and for the town. Where does the buck stop? Where does the accountability line take us? Is it to G4S or to the Ministry of Justice? Who does it reach at the top?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He alluded to a point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), that I failed to answer. I reassure her and him that the focus on this matter will be sustained even when it is not necessarily on the front page of newspapers, because we recognise that the necessary work cannot be done overnight; it will take sustained focus and sustained work from the team there.

My hon. Friend rightly alluded to the challenges that social media can pose, in an already sensitive situation, by exacerbating community concerns. I hope that some of what I have said, going as far as I could, will help to reassure him on some of the issues. On his final point, as I said to the hon. Member for Ogmored (Chris Elmore), this is essentially a shared responsibility between G4S, HMPPS, the council, the health board, the police and others, because this is a challenge for both the community and the prison, and it will be best tackled and resolved by working together in that spirit of co-operation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The nine deaths at HMP Parc in less than three months highlight how prisoner welfare in Wales is fragmented, with responsibilities split between the Welsh Government and the MOJ. Ultimately, of course, devolution of justice will streamline responsibility, but given that health is devolved, does the Minister agree that deaths in prisons in Wales should be subject to scrutiny both here and at the Senedd's Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee?

Edward Argar: With the caveat that we do not have the final reports from the coroner or final findings from the PPO, we have to remember that the deaths appear to have a range of causes, so we need to be a little cautious in respect of the conclusions we draw at this point. On the right hon. Lady's underlying point, she is right about the devolution of health. That is why working with the local health board is extremely important, but I consider that the current arrangements on justice, and on the scrutiny of matters relating to justice and prisons, are adequate.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): A constituent of mine who is detained in the prison says that he feels unsafe in Parc. He describes prisoners walking around with shanks just to feel safe. The prison has said that safety is a priority, but my constituent's parents feel that their son is in danger. Staff will also be very concerned. It cannot be right that knives are easily carried. How many knives have been taken off prisoners in the last six months in Parc prison?

Edward Argar: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the exact answer he wants now, but I am very happy to write to him with that information. On his broader point about safety and assaults on staff or on prisoners,

while assaults on staff by prisoners remain too high, they are significantly down from where they were in 2016-17—although, as far as I am concerned, any assault on a member of staff is one assault too many. Similarly, the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults in custody at Parc has come down significantly from where it was in 2015, 2016 and 2017, but it still remains too high. There is more to do, but if I am able to extract the information he seeks, I will happily write to him.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We know that roughly two thirds of prisoners arriving on the secure estate have suffered a brain injury before they arrive in prison. That can lead to poor executive functioning, anxiety and depression—all problems that can be massively exacerbated by being in prison. I understand that the MOJ wants all prisoners to be screened for brain injury when they arrive in prison. Is that happening at Parc, and are those people then getting the support they need to be able to function as best as possible given those circumstances in prison?

Edward Argar: Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work campaigning on this issue, on which I have interacted with him previously as a Health Minister. On his specific question, it is important to remember, in the context of this very challenging issue, that Parc is generally a well-run prison. One thing that stands out there, which I saw when I visited, is the specialist neurodivergence wing and the work being done there with specialist trained officers and staff to understand the specific needs of those individuals. If he was ever at a loose end and able to visit—with the permission of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis) and the hon. Member for Ogmored (Chris Elmore)—I think that he would find the work being done there encouraging and fascinating. I encourage him to go.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmored (Chris Elmore) has said today. Many constituents have been in touch with our office in recent weeks, and one mother this morning said, "Every day I expect a phone call fearing the worst. Is my son going to be another statistic?" Some parents, including that constituent, have raised concerns over a long period about drugs. Does the Minister understand that actions so far have done little to reassure those with loved ones in prison and that they need to know that the Government are acting urgently?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for articulating the understandable concerns of parents, family and others in a typically sensitive and measured way. It is right that those voices are heard in this Chamber. I hope that some of what I have said today will provide a little more clarity and reassurance, but the other reassurance I can offer is that I will continue to take a close, direct and personal interest in the ongoing work to resolve issues that may remain in Parc.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We have all been saddened by events at Parc. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on the mental health of prisoners, both in Parc and elsewhere, of staffing shortages that force prisoners to spend 23 hours each day in their cells and leave them without access to appropriate rehabilitation courses? What steps will he take to remedy the situation?

Edward Argar: I can offer the hon. Lady reassurance that the regime for time out of cell at Parc is one of the most effective in the prison system, with extensive periods out of cell being facilitated. She quite rightly talks about mental health; it is important in this context to remember, as she does, the mental health not only of those prisoners, but of the prison staff and prison officers who are impacted by a death in custody. We are working closely with the prison, and the prison is working closely with the health board, to ensure that that, among other things, is addressed.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): One inmate at HMP Parc is reported to have been moved there from HMP Exeter. Devon Live reported on a dangerous inmate who was moved to Parc after he threw boiling water in the face of an officer and attacked another prisoner with a tin opener without any warning or provocation. Does the Minister feel satisfied that officers and inmates will be safe from prisoners at HMP Parc?

Edward Argar: As I set out earlier, although I consider assault rates still to be too high, they are lower than they were in 2015-16 and similar years. It is clear that any assault on a member of staff is one too many. Sadly, assaults occur across the estate, and that is why we are backing our staff with body-worn cameras, and why they have PAVA, for example, which they can deploy when they are at imminent risk.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and helpful suggestions to other Members. What steps can be taken to restore confidence in the safeguarding and access to appropriate medical care for those who are imprisoned in facilities throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? An investigation may well conclude that there was no fault, but this matter has certainly raised questions regarding levels of care and access to medical care and facilities.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his important question. I have set out the steps that we are taking in Parc to train staff to use naloxone in order to buy precious time to enable professional medical services to arrive. Across England and Wales, prisons come under my jurisdiction as Prisons Minister. In Wales, healthcare is devolved; in England, healthcare in prisons is the responsibility of and provided by the NHS. We seek to ensure that prisons have effective and close working relationships, at a macro and operational level, with their local health board or local NHS.

Public Procurement

4.1 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): I beg to move,

That the draft Procurement Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 25 March, be approved.

This statutory instrument represents a significant legislative step in implementing the Procurement Act 2023, which seizes the opportunity, following Brexit, to develop and implement a new public procurement regime for over £300 billion-worth of public contracts. The new regime helps to deliver the Prime Minister's promise to grow the economy by creating a simpler and more transparent system that will deliver better value for money, reducing costs for businesses and the public sector.

The regulations bring to life and set out the practical detail necessary for the functioning of many of the Act's provisions. They address many of the points of practical detail that are more appropriately set out in regulations given their detailed nature and propensity to change and need updating from time to time. Many of the measures set out the detail required to be provided in notices required by the Act, which allow contracting authorities to conduct their public procurement in an open, transparent and informative manner. They include the particular contents of various notices that will be used to communicate opportunities and details about forthcoming, in-train and completed procurements.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister think the regulations are duly simplified so that it is feasible for the self-employed and very small businesses to have access to contracts? Is there any provision for breaking down contract sizes so that the self-employed and small businesses have more opportunity?

Alex Burghart: My right hon. Friend asks a pertinent question—one that was at the forefront of Ministers' minds when the legislation was drafted and as it made its way through both Houses. A number of provisions in primary legislation are there specifically to increase the chances that small and medium-sized enterprises, which are more likely to be British, get a bigger share of the £300 billion-worth of public procurement. Those provisions include everything from the online procurement system that we are building—which will increase transparency and allow greater notification of pipelines, helping small and medium-sized enterprises to prepare for those procurements—to reduced red tape, which will take the burden off those SMEs and reduce their barriers to entry. We are hopeful that a lot of local businesses in his constituency and in mine will benefit from this landmark piece of post-Brexit legislation.

The contents I was describing would typically include the contact details for the contracting authority, the contract's subject matter, key timings for the procurement process, and various other basic information about a particular procurement that interested suppliers would need to know. The provisions also cover the practical measures that authorities must follow when publishing those notices, such as publishing on a central digital platform and handling situations in the event that the platform is unavailable.

[Alex Burghart]

Beyond transparency, the instrument includes various other necessary provisions to supplement the Act that will be relevant in certain situations. We provide various lists in the schedules so that procurers are able to identify whether certain obligations apply in a particular case, including a list of light-touch services that qualify for simplified rules, and a list of central Government authorities and works that are subject to different thresholds. The regulations disapply the Procurement Act in relation to healthcare services procurements within the scope of the NHS provider selection regime, which has set out the regulatory framework for healthcare services procurement since its introduction in January this year.

The regulations also set out how devolved Scottish contracting authorities are to be regulated by the Act if they choose to use a commercial tool established under the Act or procure jointly with a buyer regulated by the Act. The provisions of the regulations apply to reserved procurement in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and to transferred procurement in Northern Ireland. The Welsh Government have laid similar secondary legislation that will apply in respect of devolved procurement in Wales, and if the devolved body carrying out that procurement mainly operates in Wales, elsewhere.

The Government have consulted carefully with stakeholders throughout all stages of the reform process, and we published our response to the formal public consultation on these regulations on 22 March. That consultation was a great success, evoking a good response from the various representative sectors, and confirmed that the proposed regulations generally worked as intended. Many stakeholders urged that certain matters be clarified and explained in guidance and training, which is a key part of our implementation programme that is being rolled out across the UK. The Government response demonstrates that we have listened to feedback, and confirms a number of areas in which the consultation led to technical and drafting improvements.

Once the instrument has been made, contracting authorities and suppliers will need time in order to fully adapt their systems and processes before go-live. As such, the Government have provided six months' advance notice of go-live of the new regime before these regulations come into force, which will happen on 28 October this year.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Alex Burghart: I would be delighted to give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

John Spellar: I thank the Minister for giving way—at least it will enable him to draw breath—but could I ask a straightforward question? To what extent is this instrument going to enable British industry and British services to compete on a level playing field, in which we prioritise our domestic producers like every other country in the world does?

Alex Burghart: The right hon. Gentleman knows what is coming, because he asked me this question a number of times during the passage of the Act. We are doing two main things: the first is that we are greatly simplifying our procurement processes, which—as he heard me say

a moment ago to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Sir John Redwood)—will particularly work to the advantage of small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the right hon. Gentleman must be cognisant of the fact that we have a number of international trade agreements with countries all over the world, in which we have agreed to compete with them on a level playing field. The only way in which we could deliberately give advantageous opportunities to British companies vis-à-vis those arrangements would be to break those trade deals. I am sure that is not what the right hon. Gentleman is proposing.

John Spellar *rose*—

Alex Burghart: I will give the right hon. Gentleman one more go.

John Spellar: We have a lot of time and a thin House. I presume that the United States is also a signatory to the same trade treaties, yet it has the “buy American” legislation, which is very strong and very effectively enforced. In the area of shipping, for example, it also has the Jones Act, which says that anything being shipped between ports in the United States has to be carried by American vessels. The United States is working under the same treaty, so why is it able to do that, while we, for some reason—perhaps deep Treasury dogma, or long-standing civil service prejudice against industry—cannot?

Alex Burghart: If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the details of the trade deals that we have with other countries, he will see that by and large, those trade deals have been created in order to further commerce and trade between two countries, and agree that there will be areas in which there will be a level playing field between our country and that other country—that is often the basis of a trade deal. The United States is the world's leading economy and has been for over a century, and can sometimes strike deals or come to arrangements that other countries that are not the world's largest economy cannot. I am afraid he will have to go and do his own research on American trade deals, but I can explain to him why we have the procurement system we do and why, because of the steps we have taken in this legislation, we will be creating additional opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises in his constituency as well as in mine. That is much for the better, and it is a much better situation than we found ourselves in while we were still in the EU, with a very cumbersome, slow-moving and long-unreformed system of procurement to which we had been shackled for about 40 years.

For the avoidance of doubt, Members will want to be aware that this statutory instrument has been corrected to remove drafting references and a couple of typographical errors that were mistakenly added during the publishing process. I hope that colleagues will join me in supporting these regulations and will approve this SI today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.10 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Labour Members will not be opposing the regulations, which provide the detail needed for the Procurement Act to come into effect later this year. As Members across the House will recall, there was a need for a new procurement Act to reform the EU law-based procurement regime following

the UK's exit from the EU and to consolidate various procurement regulations into one place. For those reasons, we did not oppose the Procurement Bill on Second or Third Reading.

The purpose of the Procurement Act was to create a simpler, more flexible commercial system that better meets our country's needs after having left the EU, while remaining compliant with our international obligations. However, as we have made clear in this House before, we are concerned that the Procurement Act was a wasted opportunity to reform procurement. In spite of our attempts to strengthen and improve the Bill with our amendments, the Procurement Act, when it comes into force in October, will unfortunately allow the same wasteful approach to emergency contracting rules that we saw during the pandemic, when friends of and donors to the Conservative party were given the first bite of the cherry while decent, skilled local businesses were denied the same opportunity. Billions of pounds of public money was wasted while excellent small and medium-sized businesses were overlooked. Nothing in the draft regulations will address that concern.

We also made it clear that we were very disappointed that the Act failed to mandate social value to secure investment in good British businesses, and I have to say that I was disappointed by the answer the Minister just gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar). The procurement policy of a Labour Government would be rooted in getting value for money for every pound spent. Our national procurement plan would reward businesses that create jobs and pay their taxes, slash red tape for disadvantaged SMEs and claw back money from contractors that fail to deliver.

The statutory instrument is required to implement the new public procurement regime established by the Procurement Act 2023. It specifies what information should be included in the notices that contracting authorities must publish as per the requirements of the Procurement Act, and where and how these should be published. Other regulations in the statutory instrument impose requirements as to how contracting authorities should obtain specified information from suppliers, and provide further detail about how certain organisations and contracts are to be regulated. It gives details about how the Act covers Welsh and Scottish procurement in relation to reserved matters, and clarifies the disapplication of the Act in relation to regulated healthcare procurement.

Turning to the specific measures in the regulations, there is clarification about the various notices that will be published on the central digital platform. The platform was set up by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and I hope it is progressing well. Notices that must be published there include planned procurement notices, tender notices, dynamic market notices and transparency notices. There is further specification of the information that should be included in the notices, with the purpose being to increase transparency and make the procurement regime more accessible to smaller businesses.

Measures that improve transparency and increase access to procurement opportunities, particularly to small and medium-sized businesses, are very much to be welcomed. The challenge will be in how to make these notices and the digital platform as user-friendly as possible, with all the relevant information easily accessible and searchable. As we move forward, it would be helpful if the Minister updated the House on progress in meeting the requirements

of the regulations and on what impact they have on the number of small and medium-sized enterprises that bid for contracts. Goods purchased from small and medium-sized enterprises often mean providing local jobs, and local jobs mean that people can stay in their home towns and not have to move away for work, and importantly that they will spend their money in their local areas thus boosting the local economy.

The regulations also set out the details for supplier information requirements that will enable the creation of a supplier information system, the purpose of which will be to hold commonly used supplier information and allow it to be shared with contracting authorities, with the laudable aim of reducing the burden for suppliers, who have to provide the same information in relation to every procurement. Anyone who talks to businesses will say just how frustrating it is to have to supply the same information time and again. That is a particular burden for small and medium-sized businesses which simply do not have the capacity to deal with endless red tape. Measures that help to reduce that burden are very much to be welcomed, but again the challenge will be in the design and operation of the system. It should become a useful tool that saves repetition, rather than becoming a burden in itself, with businesses struggling to upload the necessary information.

The regulations also specify a list of services that may form the subject matter of what are called light-touch contracts, which would enjoy a less onerous regulatory regime, with the aim of encouraging organisations such as social enterprises and mutuals to bid for contracts for certain social, health and other person-orientated services. The key issues will be to maximise transparency and to ensure sufficient regulation to protect and get value for money for the public purse while at the same time encouraging a wider range of organisations to bid for contracts. The regulations specify that the Act does not apply to what is termed "regulated health procurement", which is governed by other legislation.

The UK's commitments under the World Trade Organisation agreement on Government procurement require us to have one financial threshold that applies to central Government authorities and another for the procurement of goods and services by local government and wider public sector bodies, as well as a specific threshold that applies to procurement for what are termed "works"—construction procurement that reflects the typically higher monetary values involved in procuring construction. The regulations therefore set out lists of which bodies are defined as central Government authorities and construction-related services that constitute "works". These regulations set out further requirements in respect of what happens at the awarding of contracts and thereafter, with regulation 31 setting out what the assessment summary should contain, including an explanation as to why the particular scores were given against each criterion.

There are some innovative measures, and we welcome those that help to make the whole process more transparent. Regulation 37 sets out the information required in a procurement termination notice that is published when a contracting authority decides not to award a contract, and regulation 40 sets out the details to be included in a contract change notice, including the grounds on which modification will be made.

[*Dame Nia Griffith*]

The regulations also change the frequency of reporting on the prompt payment of invoices by Government bodies from one year to six months and spell out requirements in respect of the contract performance notice, including the details required when used to report poor performance or a breach of contract. The explanatory notes clarify that these regulations do not include a statutory review clause, as they do not regulate an activity carried out by a business for the purposes of the business, but rather that they place obligations on the public sector. However, feedback and monitoring are crucial to ensuring both that we are getting value for the public purse and that the regulations are working effectively for business, including reducing the burdens on business and encouraging a wider range of businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to bid for contracts.

I note that the approach to monitoring this legislation will be through feedback from contracting authorities, suppliers, industry representatives and professionals. As I noted earlier in my remarks, what is important is not just the content of the regulations but the way in which the requirements are implemented. The smooth operation of the supplier information system and the ease of access to the digital platform where the notices of procurement opportunities will be posted are crucial. I note that the Government have given the required six months' notice of the coming into force of the Procurement Act on 28 October, when public bodies and businesses will be required to follow these regulations. It would be useful if the Minister kept the House updated about the implementation of the Act, and going forward, its impact, including, importantly, the impact on the uptake of procurement opportunities by small and medium-sized businesses.

4.19 pm

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): It is difficult to come up with a good system that has the right balance, because the taxpayer's interest is very much in favour of economies of scale and availability, while the small business struggles to meet the possible volumes of a successful bid for a contract and to satisfy all the criteria that the large company finds easy to manage. I am grateful for the fact that the Minister and the Government generally have been thinking rather more about how small business and the self-employed can make a bigger contribution and how contracts can be broken down into more manageable sizes, both in primary legislation and now in the detail.

John Spellar: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that, but very often the primes get the contract and subcontract to the SMEs and put on a huge on-cost and profit margin. Those SMEs are therefore never able to grow properly, and they are stifled, because Whitehall prefers to deal with very large conglomerates.

Sir John Redwood: There will be that bias. Sometimes it is right, and it is always understandable, but Ministers and, above all, the senior officials implementing this new policy will have to bear that in mind. They will have to try to correct for the ease of going for a large company solution, where all the boxes will be filled impeccably and all the right things will be ticked, although that can lead to a contract disaster, because

getting the electronic responses right is not the same as delivering the right good at the right price in all the right ways.

I have another worry. We are in an era of exciting and rapid change. Technology is changing even more quickly than over much of our lifetimes so far, as the Prime Minister was mentioning in his remarks this morning. None of us can be sure what opportunities artificial intelligence will produce in wider digitalisation, but we know that digitalisation will make an increasing contribution to, and have an impact on, service provision. So much of government is about the provision of personal services and administrative services, and so much of that can benefit from the intelligent application of these exciting new technologies, but they need careful handling.

The big problem in public procurement is when the innovators are moving so quickly that the invitation to bid is about things that are out of date; they are what the system has been used to handling and the state feels comfortable with. The state can define the old products and old services perfectly well, because it has experience of them, whereas maybe what is needed in certain cases is the innovative product or service. I remember innovating in industry in the past. Often, we had to be willing to license a competitor of our own breakthrough, to give people comfort that there would be some competitive check on costs and availability. Such things are complicated to model and to build in to big procurement systems, such as the state. It means that the state tends to lag and the private sector makes much more rapid advances, because people take more risk and are prepared to change what they wish to procure when they see something better. In the case of the state things have to go through many committees and many memos, and it is probably easier not to bother or to wait a few years until something has happened.

I do not have any easy answers. I understand that the Government and the Minister have the best of intentions, and they have come up with rules that they think are more flexible, but the proof of this pudding will be in the eating. I just emphasise that we need a system that is flexible enough to understand that sometimes it does not know what it wants, or does not know what is available, or that something that is available might be better than the thing people thought they wanted.

My final observation is that we have lost a lot of the self-employed in recent years for one reason or another, but the issues over tax status are part of the problem, with the toughening of the rules over IR35. I worry that a lot of self-employed people will struggle to get any work from the Government, because it is much easier for those procuring just to say, "It's too much hassle; we would be to blame if this person were taking liberties with the tax system, and although they say they are compliant and self-employed, we aren't so sure." Of course, someone can become genuinely self-employed only if they win enough independent contracts. If a big part of procurement is not allowing them to win state contracts, it is much more difficult for them to become genuinely self-employed.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The right hon. Member makes a very good point. The self-employed have been telling me about the amount of administration they have to do even to be in the running. Also, they do not tend to find out about contracts. I hope that the

regulations will extend their promotion and the length of time, and that the Government try to break down those contracts into smaller chunks, so that small British businesses can genuinely be in with a chance.

Sir John Redwood: I entirely agree. That is where the more transparent and simpler system will be very good, and we should give that a good trial. I am concerned about someone who is genuinely self-employed struggling to prove that they are sufficiently self-employed, and whether the state would want to take less risk on that. Again, I would like the Minister to put a stronger case to the Treasury that, perhaps, to have more successful self-employed people working for the state under contract, we need to review how we enforce and police their tax status.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

4.26 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The SNP does not oppose the draft Procurement Regulations 2024. Their context is a deeply unwelcome Brexit reality from Scotland's point of view, but they are largely uncontentious and little more than one would expect under the framework established by the Procurement Act 2023. However, that framework is unsatisfactory to some extent, not for what it gives effect to but for what it does not safeguard against. The Act fails to mandate sufficient tax transparency for large multinationals bidding for public contracts—a profoundly basic requirement for those seeking to profit from public expenditure to be transparent about their own tax position and, therefore, it is a significant failure in the framework. The Act also fails to appropriately protect workers' rights—never more important for workers in the UK, who face a growing threat to their employment rights, having been stripped of EU protections. It does not properly uphold the priority of social benefit from such contract awards.

Vitaly, the Act fails to close the loopholes that allowed for the appalling Tory VIP lane for the procurement of personal protective equipment during the pandemic. If there is no institutional learning from that glaring and seismic misappropriation of public funds, it prompts the question of whether the omission is by dint of incompetence or by design, given the repeated denials of this Tory Government with respect to that particular crisis.

John Spellar: Some underlying reasons for the PPE failures were the lack of industrial capacity, the complete inability to communicate with industrial capacity, and the endless reliance on middle men who rushed off to China. Firms in this country could have done the job but had no way of getting access, as back-door routes were used, which dominated a lot of the newspapers.

Dave Doogan: The right hon. Member made a number of important points, not least that we allow the atrophy of our industrial base at our peril, particularly in times of crisis. It unduly compliments the Government to suggest that there was only an inability to communicate with ordinary firms in the United Kingdom—I am afraid that the circumstances around the Tory VIP lane were far more sinister than that. With that, I will make some progress.

A third of public expenditure—some £300 billion annually—is spent on public procurement, so it is essential that its regulation is not simply minimalist administrative housekeeping, but an ambitious plan to improve public procurement continuously. In the absence of any such ambition in these regulations, we can clearly see the sloping shoulders of a dying Administration content to pass on their responsibility for forging a public procurement system that benefits taxpayers, local suppliers, industry and service users alike to the next UK Government—God help us.

The SNP and Scotland more generally must, under the current constitutional settlement, concede to be bound by the regulations, for the time being at least. In so doing, however, we note that the Tory Government promised in 2019 to get Brexit done, yet they are still fumbling around with fundamental and basic legislation five years later, trying to implement what was their pipe dream, but is a bona fide nightmare for ordinary people across these islands. Still further regulation will be required to give full effect to the Procurement Act 2023, but it seems unlikely that it will be the same Government standing there to advance it.

4.30 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I would like to make a couple of observations before I get on to the main thrust of my argument.

First, I regard the regulations as a great missed opportunity. It is not that the actual regulations themselves are not acceptable—they are probably an improvement—but they do not deal with a whole number of core failures in public procurement in this country. We have just discussed the covid era. I had a firm in my constituency that produced safety apparel for the catering industry. It knew exactly how to produce gowns; it had skilled cutters and machinery. There was no way of getting through the bureaucracy, which of course had been subcontracted to Deloitte, which also got a massive cut out of it. There was a real failure to engage with industry and, as the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) pointed out, a failure to maintain the industrial base—although I would gently point out to my friend that procurement from the Scottish Administration has not always distinguished itself over recent years either.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Sir John Redwood) rightly pointed out that very often Government procurement policy deliberately moves against SMEs because it aggregates contracts, for example, for repairs and maintenance in defence. Instead of being done by local firms, they are aggregated into one large contract, which only the big national facilities companies are able to do. Of course, they subcontract out the work and we know—we have just had a considerable number of reports about defence accommodation—how woeful their record is on delivery. That is a further problem that, I regret, is not addressed in the document, or in the Minister's rapidly delivered speech.

That is the point: there are no penalties for failure. Recently, the Defence Committee received a letter from the Defence Secretary saying he cannot, under Government procurement rules, take into account past performance in assessing a contract. Mr Deputy Speaker, if you give work to a builder, he bodes the job, he comes back and tenders with the lowest price and you are governed by Government procurement, you have to take that, even

[John Spellar]

though you know the history is that he cannot do the job. We see that very much in IT contracts, where firms fail time and time and time again. It is a shame that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is not present because I am sure he could talk at length about a company that is, rightly, his *bête noire* in that regard.

There is a fundamental failure of philosophy at the heart of Government and the regulations do not address it. That is also why I think this is a missed opportunity. They are based on a philosophy and theory that do not relate to the real world. I intervened on the Minister to talk about trade deals and he went on about the United States being able to strike particular deals. The core of international trading relations—and a lot of it that deals with public procurement is mentioned in the document—is World Trade Organisation agreements. I accept that there has been a deep fundamental failing within the WTO, which was to admit China to the organisation and then not to insist that it followed its rules, until basically it became too big to fail and too big to take on. I accept that there was that failure. But every other major industrial country looks after its own, often very effectively.

We heard all this during the debates about the European Union. I used to have to say, both to Eurosceptics and to Euro-enthusiasts who were ascribing either our problems or our salvation to Brussels, that the problems were not fundamentally in Brussels—they were in Whitehall. I remember once saying to a senior civil servant—a good one, by the way—during an argument about an issue related to this that, if the British civil service had fought the corner of Britain as hard as its French, German, Italian and other counterparts fought theirs, the British public would have been much more content with the EU. The British undermined it because they would not be good Europeans: they would not behave like the rest of Europe.

Let us consider the issue of police vehicles, which I raise regularly in the House. If we go to Berlin, Paris or Rome, we see that all their police vehicles—apart from the Carabinieri Land Rovers—are made in their own countries. If there is free competition and a superior product is available at a better price, surely one country should dominate? Not a bit of it.

Another argument that we have regularly concerns the fleet solid support ships. The Government insist on putting the contract out to international competition, and the bulk of the ships will be built in northern Spain. When France and Italy decided to procure similar vessels, it was made very clear that they had better be built in yards in France and Italy.

Sarah Champion: My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech and I fully agree with what he is saying. One of the ways in which Europe manages to support its own industry is by applying weighting to social value, ascribing the highest value to the very act of providing jobs for local people. That is something that we could be doing.

John Spellar: It is true that the social weighting applied here is insufficient, but European countries also send a clear subliminal message to competitors, putting up, as it were, a sign saying “Just don’t bother.”

When Germany did procure a design for naval vessels from Holland, the prerequisite was that they had to be built in German yards.

Sir John Redwood: Is there not also a strong national security argument for procuring all defence items in Britain and creating a more competitive market at home to have honesty on prices?

John Spellar: That is exactly right. One of the arguments for buying steel from, mainly, Sweden—and possibly from France—was “We do not produce steel of that quality here”, but if we do not provide the orders for that quality of steel, our plants will gradually stop producing it, and we will also lose the skills. That has been a constant row. The same has applied to trains. When I was a Transport Minister, Alstom came along, having taken over the Washwood Heath factory, and said, “Our problem is that when we go to corporate headquarters, we will be told that if we want to sell trains in France we must produce them in France, and if we want to sell trains in Germany we must produce them in Germany. Britain will buy from anyone; where do you think the investment goes?” That has been a regular theme.

During the period of Labour government—and I fear that it is probably still the same with this Government—we heard Ministers say, “We have to abide by these rules because otherwise we cannot expect other people to do so.” I say, “Join the real world, the world in which people do fight their corner, the world where people battle for their corner!” The real, deep irony is that the failure to protect our industry is also a failure to protect our industrial communities, and to protect not just the livelihoods but the life of those communities. We talk about left-behind towns, which are very much at the heart of this issue, but it has also happened to quite an extent in America. It drives a populist feeling that people decry, but which they have been instrumental in bringing about.

If the argument that we have to follow some theoretical rules, rather than be part of the practical world, was wrong previously, which it certainly was, it is even less sustainable now. What the Ukraine conflict has shown is the need for industrial capacity. When I say “industrial capacity”, I do not just mean a plant; I also mean trained personnel. I do not just mean scientists, high technicians and skilled trades—semi-skilled production workers with the ability to make the machines work and to turn materiel out are also a core part of this.

We have seen that drain and drift away, so when we are faced with an existential crisis and Ukraine is on the frontline for freedom against an aggressive and assertive Russia, it becomes incredibly difficult—regardless of whether we will the money out of the Treasury, which I accept is important—to get production ramped up because of the lack of skills throughout the economy. I accept that some of the equipment in the second world war was less technically advanced, but the allies were quickly able—America was astonishingly quick—to move civil capacity into war production. Although we often focus on the “whizz bang” stuff—the hi-tech stuff—a lot of it is about good machining, which requires those abilities and that capacity.

When I argue for maintaining capacity in the UK, it does not mean that we should not co-operate with other countries, but we should do so on the basis of ensuring

that our interests get dealt with as well, which will be mutually beneficial in the long run. If we are able to play our part, we will have that greater industrial capacity, but we cannot be the universal donor. We also have to have a degree of reciprocation and investment coming into the UK.

As I said, I accept that the changes introduced by the regulations are an improvement, but they have still not broken the psychological grip inside the civil service, which is not interested in industry and does not rate it, even in the face of the Ukraine crisis and the world dividing up into trade blocs. I am asking not for Britain to be an outlier, but for Britain to become part of the international community, behave like a normal country and have prosperity spread out much more across the country. I think it is called levelling up—we even have a Department that is supposed to be dealing with that.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who has been a doughty campaigner on this issue in all the time I have been in Parliament. I agree that we are not looking for British exceptionalism; we are looking for Britain to catch up with the kinds of practices that we know are commonplace in many other countries that are part of the European Union. We need to make sure that supporting UK manufacturing is part of the policy aims of our procurement strategy.

John Spellar: I absolutely agree. Hopefully then, we will achieve what Mr Churchill argued for in the early part of the last century. When he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he wanted to see industry more content and capital less proud. By “industry”, he meant both firms and the workforce. We would have much more content and stability in this country if the Government were prepared to use the enormous power that they have. We often talk about the Government as a legislator and an administrator, but the Government as customer is enormously important. That can drive progress and change, but it can also drive equity. I ask the Minister to reflect on that and, in the short time left for this Administration, to start a change of thinking in Whitehall to make it easier for us to play a proactive role rather than a merely reactive one. The prize is enormous, both for our prosperity and for our content.

4.44 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for bringing forward the regulations. I know that he is passionate about this area and really wants to do the best for British businesses, so I hope he takes my comments as helpful, rather than as a challenge—or perhaps as a positive challenge.

Every year, the Government spend over £300 billion on public procurement. A significant proportion of that goes to multinational corporations, and in 2020 alone £18 billion of public funds went to overseas suppliers, rather than supporting their UK counterparts. A consequence is that SMEs are effectively shut out of the public procurement system, with big corporations winning 90% of contracts deemed suitable for small and medium-sized businesses. This means that SMEs miss out on £30 billion-worth of contracts annually, and despite repeated Government promises to buy British food, this is just not happening.

British businesses are being let down by the procurement system. The British steel industry, of which Rotherham is a proud hub, is one of the industries suffering from this lack of Government support. The UK steel industry employs over 40,000 people and directly contributes £2.9 billion to the economy. However, steel contracts continue to be handed out to foreign companies. The British Constructional Steelwork Association’s analysis of steel use in the HS2 project found that only 58% of steel contracts were awarded to British suppliers, despite the UK steel industry having the capacity to carry out 100% of the work.

For these reasons, I was proud to bring forward my private Member’s Bill, the Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) Bill. It was developed with a cross-sector group of experts, to whom I pay tribute. The Bill sought to encourage the Government to award more public contracts to British farmers, British manufacturers and British producers by increasing transparency regarding contract awards. This would be done by requiring contracting authorities to publish in contract award notices how they had complied with various requirements in the Bill.

I am therefore genuinely pleased to see that a large section of the regulations is dedicated to contract award notices. Notably, I welcome the inclusion of pipeline notices, planned procurement notices and preliminary market engagement notices, which will allow businesses to better prepare for bids for public contracts. During the development of my Bill, I was told that publishing contract award notices was time-consuming and laborious. That might be true, but the rewards to British businesses surely outweigh the admin, so I am hopeful that today’s legislation will open up more public contracts to SMEs.

However, I reiterate a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith): we must make sure that the hub is as easy and accessible as possible. The regulations are not perfect and we are keen to see improvements. I would like to see the inclusion of more measures to back British farmers, uphold good employment practices and better support SMEs through public procurement. As the Minister will know, UK Departments currently have to report where steel is procured from. That is a welcome step, and I firmly believe that the UK food industry would benefit from a similar intervention.

The UK public sector spends around £2.4 billion a year on food procurement, yet there is no accurate measure of the amount of food procured from British suppliers, which is of huge concern to our farming industry. Due to the lack of central Government policy on farming and food, public bodies are effectively establishing their own policies, potentially to the detriment of British farming. To address these issues, my Bill would have compelled contracting authorities to publish what proportion of the food being procured originated from UK suppliers. This was designed to encourage more public contracts to be awarded to our farmers.

The economic benefits of backing British farming are obvious, but there are also ethical benefits. We are a world leader in animal welfare standards, and an increased focus on buying British food would contribute to cruelty-free procurement becoming the norm. I was proud that the National Farmers Union, the Countryside Alliance and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

[Sarah Champion]

Animals helped me to develop my Bill, and I hope that the Government will look favourably on this specific measure and implement it in the future.

I am disappointed that the regulations do not include an obligation for contracting authorities to support good employment standards, good working practices and social values. I worked with the TUC when developing my Bill, and it informed me of the dire state of some employment standards in public procurement. To remedy this, I worked with the TUC on a measure that would have encouraged the awarding of public sector contracts to employers that treat their staff well and that would have stopped bad employment practices, such as fire and rehire, being tolerated within public procurement.

My Bill would have required contracting authorities to consider how they might act to support good employment standards and working practices, and it would have placed an obligation on them to include in contract award notices how they have complied with this requirement. I urge the Minister to reconsider and to include this in the regulations.

Despite making up 99% of UK businesses, SMEs do not receive their fair share of public contracts. The National Federation of Builders told me that one of its members has not secured a public sector contract for over a decade, even though it is well qualified to deliver and has kept on applying. The member found the hugely time-consuming process off-putting, and when it did not receive the contract, it received no feedback on why, which would have helped it to make the next application better.

Sadly, that situation is replicated across many sectors. I therefore ask the Minister to consider implementing a requirement for contracting authorities, when procuring goods and services from SMEs, to consider how they might improve an area's wellbeing and to report on how they have complied with this obligation.

When spending taxpayers' money, as much as possible should be spent on supporting British businesses and British jobs, as other countries do with their own industries. We were told that British businesses would be the first in the queue for UK Government contracts once we left the EU. The 2019 Conservative manifesto even stated, with regard to food procurement:

“When we leave the EU, we will be able to encourage the public sector to ‘Buy British’ to support our farmers and reduce environmental costs.”

That is yet to happen, so can the Minister confirm how the regulations will seek to address the barriers specifically around farming?

I urge the Government to implement the changes that my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli and I have outlined today, because we all want British businesses to do much better. I wrote to the Minister, at a previous Minister's request, about my working party coming to meet him to discuss how guidance could help British businesses to secure these contracts. I have yet to receive a reply, and I would be very grateful if he could provide one.

4.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his opening speech, in which he mentioned all the devolved nations. It will be no surprise to him that I will focus on Northern Ireland.

The previous speakers all spoke about the importance of public procurement to the economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are all very aware that the Procurement Act 2023 is due to come into force in October, with secondary legislation required to implement certain of its provisions. I again wish to highlight the importance of the devolved nations' specific circumstances. The Act applies to us, and it is important that Northern Ireland has as much access and input into the United Kingdom's procurement process as possible. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke about SMEs, of which we have an abundance in my Strangford constituency and across Northern Ireland, and it is important that they have that access. They are the backbone of business.

I have always been a big supporter of securing locally sourced British contracts, and that has been heightened since we officially left the European Union. It is about securing more jobs for our constituents, strengthening our economy across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and ensuring good value for money. Northern Ireland has witnessed that our shipping costs to sustain contracts with businesses inside the United Kingdom are considerably more expensive than in the other devolved nations. It seems that Northern Ireland is at a disadvantage. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what will be done to address that. Understandably, we cannot always rely on a train or lorry journey, but we want to do our part and play our role in the public procurement process, so I ask the Minister what more can be done to support shipping affordability for east-west contracts.

During the passage of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill through this House, the Democratic Unionist party put great emphasis on the importance of east-west connections economically, culturally, historically and financially. To build on that, we believe there should be a focus on east-west contracts. The Minister who responded at the time indicated that that was what the provisions would be about, but it is important for the Minister before us today to tell us more about what that means.

There have been issues with international procurement in the past, in respect of where we have secured certain contracts—for example, in ensuring that the materials we rely on are not subject to human rights violations such as forced labour, child labour and unsafe working conditions. Such violations have been witnessed in the clothing retail industry to produce affordable clothes, which are incredibly popular but often have a moral price that is too high. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. Human rights and freedom from persecution for religious minorities across the world are very important to me. In this House, we must ensure that we are not acceding to the purchase and manufacture of affordable clothes when their price is morally too high. There are many opportunities for the United Kingdom to pave the way and to be a front runner in supporting local, domestic procurement contracts in many different industries, such as health, defence, apparel, transport and much more.

Northern Ireland seems to be on a different level to the rest of the United Kingdom. The Minister indicated his wish to address that issue, and I look forward to hearing what he will say. Northern Ireland needs equality and a level playing field. The opportunities for Northern Ireland must be the same as those for Scotland and Wales, and for all of this great country of England as well. It is no secret that we already face a greater expense in shipping costs, so I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify what is being done to support Northern Ireland in relation to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Leader of the House, Alex Burghart.

4.57 pm

Alex Burghart: Gosh—the Leader of the House? One day, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It has been a pleasure to listen to hon. Members and to hear the widespread support for the regulations. There is widespread recognition that they are a great improvement on the regime that we have swept away. They form part of one of the landmark pieces of legislation since our departure from the European Union.

We heard support from across the House for a procurement system that greatly supports small and medium-sized enterprises. As I said in my opening remarks, that was at the forefront of Ministers' thinking as the Procurement Bill was devised. It was very much in the minds of the businesses and the contracting authorities that we spoke to as the legislation was put together. The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) gave an excellent speech and referred to Churchill's wonderful phrase that industry should be "more content". From the extensive consultations we have undertaken to prepare the legislation, we know these regulations will make "industry more content", and that this is very much what businesses have been asking for and looking forward to.

There are a number of things that will help small and medium-sized enterprises, not least transparency and our new online system. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) said, quite rightly, that the system must be easy to use. One of my first jobs as an adviser to Government was in child protection. I remember the disastrous integrated children's system that was in place under the last Labour Government, which took hours upon hours out of social workers' time. It was dreadful because it took them away from working with children and meant they had to follow a very bureaucratic process.

We must be committed to ensuring that people are able to enter data and use the system without taking away from the most important part of their job. The Procurement Act, the regulations and the supporting documentation also support social value. The national procurement policy statement, which we have published, is keen to make sure that we do not remain obsessed with the most economically advantageous tender, but instead move to the most advantageous tender. That is a broader understanding of what is useful to contracting authorities and to society, and enables the consideration of issues such as local jobs and local skills.

The right hon. Member for Warley mentioned skills, and he was quite right to do so. When I was Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, I was very keen to make sure that we were building up high-quality, internationally

competitive apprenticeships, which played to the skills that were going to be needed in the areas in which they were provided.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about levelling up. I saw one of the most powerful examples of levelling up when I was a Minister in the Department for Education. The Government created a freeport on Teesside, which was part of our job. The excellent Mayor of Teesside, Lord Houchen, who I am pleased to say has been wonderfully returned by his constituents, worked with business to build a hydrogen plant in the freeport. The deal that was struck was that the hydrogen plant would support local colleges in providing the high-quality apprenticeships that would get young people—and not so young people—the jobs in that community. That is levelling up: all parts of Government—both from Whitehall to a local level—working with providers of local skills and industry to make sure that people can be a part of the success story of their own communities. I am very proud that it is this Government who have helped to deliver changes such as this.

John Spellar: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Burghart: I am always delighted to give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

John Spellar: I thank the Minister for his positive remarks.

Cannot Government, as customer, prescribe ratios of apprenticeships within the contracts, particularly construction contracts, and stipulate, as was done at the Olympic Park, that if a company moves off site for whatever reason, including when a contract moves into a different phase, and a new company comes in, there is an obligation to transfer the apprentices across? That would be building a sustainable base for the future.

Alex Burghart: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows that that is often the case. We do have requirements for apprenticeships to be part of major Government projects. He quite rightly spoke about Government as an intelligent customer—intelligent not just in terms of getting the best price, but of getting the best overall value. I say to him again that the idea of having a system of most advantageous tender, not just most economically advantageous tender, was always at the heart of these regulations.

The right hon. Gentleman should look at the excellent work being done by the Crown Commercial Service. By bundling together purchases made by different parts of Government, we can make sure that we get best value—I mean value in the broadest sense. In the Cabinet Office—perhaps one of the less glamorous areas of Government—in which I am proud to serve, that work is under way, already saving British taxpayers billions of pounds and making sure that we have a better and more holistic view of what Government spend can do.

Work such as that, alongside legislation such as this, means that we are building a system in which not just industry is content, but Government and the taxpayer are too, as well as the small and medium-sized enterprises and the communities in which they sit. I recommend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Procurement Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 25 March, be approved.

Point of Order

5.4 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thus far, I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to get a meeting with the Minister for roads and local transport, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), with regard to the faltering progress of the planned Chesterfield to Staveley regeneration route. Having previously been unable to get a meeting with his predecessor, despite three requests last year, I raised the Chesterfield-Staveley route with him in Transport questions on 21 March. In his reply, he informed the House that he had met with other Members about the route in my constituency, and that he would write to me about it. The route is almost entirely within Chesterfield, so I do not know who those other Members were, but I wrote to him that very day to request a meeting. I followed that up on 26 April with another letter, again requesting a meeting, and today I notified him that I would raise the matter in the House if I had not heard by now.

The Minister never sent the letter that he promised back in March, so this is now my sixth attempt to get a meeting about the route. He seems happy to meet Conservative MPs to talk about the route in my constituency, but not the MP whose constituency it affects. Can you advise me, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how I might get a Minister from the Department for Transport to attend a meeting, and what steps Mr Speaker or I can take to ensure that all Members are treated equally, regardless of whether they are in the same party as the Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The hon. Gentleman is fully aware that ministerial correspondence is not a matter for the Chair. Happily, neither is the Minister's diary. However, those on the Front Bench will have heard the hon. Gentleman's remarks. I trust that they will respond courteously and swiftly.

Agriculture

5.6 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Sir Mark Spencer): I beg to move,

That the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.

I declare my farming interests, as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The instrument continues the important agricultural reforms that we are making in England—reforms that support the long-term prosperity of the sector. It applies progressive reductions to delinked payments for 2024. Delinked payments were introduced on 1 January 2024 in place of payments to farmers under the basic payment scheme in England. The reductions in the instrument were first announced in our agricultural transition plan in November 2020. They continue the progress of gradually phasing out untargeted subsidy payments over our seven-year agricultural transition period in England. We are now in the fourth year of that seven-year transition.

We remain committed to moving away from untargeted payments, which have served our industry so poorly. Most of the money has been paid to the largest landowners, and the payments have done little to improve food production or the environment over that time. I reiterate that the overall annual farming budget is being maintained at an average of £2.4 billion per year across this Parliament—money that is no longer being spent on untargeted subsidy payments and is not lost to farmers. Instead, it funds the sustainable farming incentive and other farming support.

As was the case under the basic payment scheme, we are applying the reductions to delinked payments in a fair way. Higher percentage reductions are applied to amounts in higher payment bands. We plan to make delinked payments in two instalments each year, which will of course assist with farmers' cash flow. By continuing to gradually reduce the subsidy payments, we are freeing up money so that farmers can access a range of environmental land management schemes and grants to suit all farm types. We planned for the agricultural transition, and we are delivering on it.

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am pleased that the Minister and the Prime Minister are keen on promoting more home-grown food. As the transition occurs, what proportion of total subsidies paid will be for promoting food? It still seems to be too small.

Sir Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend will understand that the basic payment scheme did not motivate food production at all, as it was not linked to it. As we move to the new regime, we are promoting better productivity through grants for better equipment. We are investing in new technology. Alongside that, we are pushing to improve gene editing and gene technology, to try to make agriculture more sustainable and more productive at the same time. As we go through this transition, we are certainly keen to increase the productivity of our agricultural sector.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister as always for his positivity about the farming sector. The farmers' union has asked me a specific, technical question that I would like to have on record. Does the

Minister agree that since the transfer window for delinked payments closed on 10 May, clarity is needed that that will not apply to cases of inheritance, with the ability to transfer ownership not affecting payments that can be made when a business is passed on through a death in a family? Should that not be reiterated to those who may believe that they would lose necessary payments? The Minister may not be able to answer that right away, but could he let me know?

Sir Mark Spencer: The hon. Member will be familiar with how matters of inheritance tax are for the Treasury rather than this Department, but we want to see that fair transition between generations so that family farms can be passed from one generation to the other to continue to maintain our landscapes and produce top-quality food, as we have for a long time. I will ensure that he gets the right answer to his question as soon as possible.

Our new schemes are investing in the foundations of food security and profitable farm businesses, from healthy soils to clean water. This year, we have increased payment rates for our environmental land management schemes by an average of 10%. Some payment rates went up by significantly more: species-rich grassland rose from £182 to £646 per hectare.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The frustration that farmers in the Cheshire part of my constituency have raised with me is about the speed at which money gets out the door and into farms. The Minister will also be familiar with the unprecedented weather patterns that we have had. What extra provision will be put in place to deal with some of the consequences of climate change and, in particular, flooding that we have seen recently?

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that important topic. We have listened to those farmers and improved the speed at which we pay for new SFI agreements, moving those payments forward to help farmers with cash flow. That is why we changed the basic payment scheme to ensure that we made payments not in one chunk in December but in two payments, with one in July and one around December.

The hon. Member also mentioned the unprecedented season that we are in the middle of and the pressure that will put on farmers in the autumn. That is why we introduced the support fund that is now trying to help affected farmers in the east of England in particular—I know that does not apply to Cheshire. We have committed to extending that scheme to try to help people. We are still in conversations with the National Farmers Union and farmer groups to try to look at what more we can do to mitigate the impact that the season will have.

Many of those farmers will not feel the effect of that weather in their cash flow until this autumn. Many of those who have not been able to plant arable crops have had the benefit of not having to pay out for fertiliser and agricultural sprays during this season—ironically, that will help their cash flow—but they will have an empty shed at the end of that process, which will put huge pressure on cash flows in the autumn when they would have had crops to sell.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I am pleased with the Minister's last remarks: he is recognising the problems that farmers have. This morning, I received

an email from the NFU referring to its recent survey and stating that short and mid-term confidence among farmers is at its lowest level since records began, and that production is expected to decrease over the next year. Given all the problems that farmers are facing, is he absolutely sure that now is the right time to make these reductions?

Sir Mark Spencer: I should be clear and gently push back when my hon. Friend mentions reductions. The budget for the basic payment regime was £2.4 billion, and £2.4 billion is still the budget. So the size of the cake is completely the same, but the way in which the cake is being cut is different. Those are the changes we are making. The way in which we are dividing that cake is different, which is causing some challenge to some farmers.

My hon. Friend mentioned farmer confidence and the fact that some farmers are saying that productivity rates will be lower this year than they have been in the past. I think there is some truth in that: many farmers—I again draw attention to my entry in the register—have experienced unprecedented weather events and have been unable to plant crops, so they will see lower productivity this season. We are very much aware of that, and we continue to talk to farming representatives about how we can help to mitigate some of the impact later this year.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is gracious in giving way, which I appreciate very much. If farmers cannot plant their crops, they cannot produce the food, as he knows. If they cannot produce the food, prices increase. The Government are committed to reducing inflation, as they should be, and we welcome the fact that it is coming down. However, if we do not help the farmers with food production, inflation has the potential to rise. What can the Government do to alleviate those problems?

Sir Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman highlights a long-term challenge that we face: if we are going to be impacted by climate change and increasingly difficult weather patterns in future, we need to ensure that farmers have the resilience needed to manage those. That means investing in gene technology to make sure that we have varieties that can deal with different swings in climate, new machinery, new technology and new farm equipment. We were able to take money from the basic payment scheme and invest it in grant schemes, in order to help farmers invest in the new machinery and technology to mitigate some of those impacts. There is a lot that we can and are doing to help them along on that journey.

Mike Amesbury *rose*—

Sir Mark Spencer: I will give way one more time, but I am conscious that other Members want to speak.

Mike Amesbury: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous with his time. Has any impact assessment of ELM been done? Has it been published? I feel that we are operating blind here.

Sir Mark Spencer: We have consistently and regularly engaged with farmers and stakeholders to listen to their concerns. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in

[*Sir Mark Spencer*]

January we announced increases in many of those sustainable farming incentive opportunities, because we listened to farmers telling us that some of those payments were not right and were not high enough. We listened and we increased those payments. We are constantly scanning and listening to the sector and working hand in hand with farmers to ensure that the schemes we devise and introduce are farmer friendly and are understood by the farming sector.

This year we have increased payment rates in our environmental land management schemes by an average of 10%, although some payments went up by significantly more. We have also doubled the management payment for the sustainable farming incentive, which is now worth £2,000 for the first year of an agreement. That will encourage even more smaller farms to join the scheme, on top of the many that have already done so.

From the summer we will launch up to 50 new actions that will allow farmers to access the scheme funding for things such as precision farming and, for the first time, agroforestry. The new actions give even more choice to farmers in what they can do, especially those on moorlands and grasslands. Nearly half of all farmers are now in one of our schemes. So far there have been almost 22,000 applications to the sustainable farming incentive under our 2023 offer, and there are now more than 35,000 live countryside stewardship agreements in place.

Farmers taking part in the sustainable farming incentive are typically more than making up their lost basic payments. The value per hectare of applications to date is £148. That, alongside delinked payments for small farms this year of equivalent to £117 per hectare, adds up to more than the value per hectare of the basic payment scheme before we started our reforms: £233 per hectare under the old basic payment scheme versus a total of £263 under delinked payments and the SFI.

Smaller farms potentially have access to more income than before. Under the basic payment scheme, half the money went to the 10% of largest farms. Under SFI, payments are based on the actions the farmers take rather than simply the amount of land they have. There are many credible ways in which SFI agreements can produce more income than the basic payment scheme for a typical farm.

The sustainable farming incentive can also help to deliver a reduction in costs and waste on farms to make them more resilient and improve food production—for example, by paying farmers to plant companion crops to help manage pests and nutrients, assessing and improving the health of farmers' soil, and growing cover crops to protect the soil between main crops. This year we will make it even easier for farmers to access funding by allowing them to apply, through one application process, for actions that were previously in countryside stewardship—particularly in mid-tier—and the sustainable farming incentive. That is part of our commitment to make it as easy as possible for those who want to apply.

We have also announced the largest ever grant offer for the agriculture sector, totalling £427 million. It includes a doubling of the investment in productivity and innovation in farming to £220 million this year. That will provide support for farmers to invest in automation and robotics, as well as in solar installations

to build on farm energy security. It also includes £116 million for slurry infrastructure grants and £91 million for grants to improve the health and welfare of our farm animals.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Minister for clarifying the details of today's announcement. Farmers in my constituency are delighted about being able to apply for the slurry grant, but the works imposed alongside it by Natural England mean that it is not viable for them to continue with their herds.

Sir Mark Spencer: Of course, we continue to engage with Natural England and the Environment Agency, which have an interest in ensuring that we get slurry infrastructure in the right place. If my hon. Friend has specific examples of the system not working, I would be delighted to take those cases up for her. We want to see investment in the south-west, and in other constituencies, to ensure that we manage on-farm nutrients and slurries in the best environmental way. Not only does that benefit the environment and those farms; it also helps the farm business, in that farms are managing their own nutrients and do not have to spend money on costly artificial fertilisers because they can replace some of that with organic manures.

We are providing a range of other support for farmers and land managers, including a third round of our landscape recovery scheme later this year. The farming resilience fund continues to provide free business support to help farmers to plan and adapt their business. To date, over 20,000 farmers have received that support. Our schemes and grants help to support viable businesses, to maintain or increase food production, and to achieve better outcomes for animals, plants and the environment. All that is possible only because of the regulations, which I commend to the House.

5.22 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to have the chance to discuss the motion. The environmental land management scheme was meant to be the centrepiece of the Government's farming policy—a new dawn for British agriculture post Brexit. Approving each annual transition should have been run of the mill, as farmers were eased into a new and better system. Labour agrees that we need a fairer system of payments based on the principle of public support for public goods. That is why we have not opposed the agricultural transition plan and will not oppose this instrument to set out the level of delinked payments. However, it is vital, as we discuss the regulations, that we look at the context in which they sit for farmers and the wider industry.

The truth is that, because of this Government, our farming communities are in crisis: 6,000 agricultural businesses have collapsed since 2017; tragically, farming now has the highest suicide rate of any sector in the UK economy; and, as we have heard, last week's NFU survey showed that farmers' confidence has hit record lows. Farming is a difficult business and times are hard—the recent flooding has caused real distress, destroyed crops and threatened livestock. But farming has been made much harder by a Government who do not value or back our farmers.

Under the Conservatives' disastrous withdrawal deal, farmers have faced a mountain of red tape and higher costs at our borders, blocking the export of high-quality

British produce. The Government's failure to invest in home-grown clean energy has left farmers crippled by skyrocketing energy prices. They have sold farmers' interests down the river with dodgy trade deals, opening the door to low-welfare, low-standard imports that undercut higher-quality British producers—a point made by a previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Even though we know how devastating flooding can be for rural businesses, this Conservative Government have left communities unprotected. This is a dereliction of duty by the Secretary of State.

That brings us to today's motion. This Government have botched the implementation of the environmental land management schemes, threatening the basic financial support that has long been a lifeline for so many family farms. The transition from the common agricultural policy to ELMS has been shambolic, with hard-pressed farmers left to pick up the pieces. It has left many unable to plan properly and facing mounting bureaucracy and red tape. Some farmers, particularly those in uplands and those with smallholdings, have been abandoned to fend for themselves.

Such is the incompetence of this Government that they have failed to spend hundreds of millions of pounds of the support that was intended for farmers—money that would make a difference to struggling farmers today; funds that should be in farmers' pockets now, not sitting in Government spreadsheets. Why are the Government not using that money—over £220 million of underspend—to offer help right now to farmers, who have been the people most affected by this dreadful flooding during the wettest 18 months since 1836? Belated plans for spending that money were announced with great fanfare by the Secretary of State in February, yet many months later it is still locked away in the Government's coffers. Will the Minister agree to publish this week a plan for how he intends to distribute those funds urgently to farmers who desperately need that support right now?

The NFU is calling on the Government to pause the roll-out of ELMS so that they can distribute the underspend under the basic payment arrangements. I completely understand and sympathise with the NFU's frustration, but it is not in anyone's interests to delay ELMS; we should instead be looking to make it work better, and the Government should be going much faster to get that underspend out to the farmers who need it so desperately. To make ELMS work better, we need to understand how it is currently operating, yet the Government still refuse to publish their impact assessment of the scheme. I wonder whether the Secretary of State and the Ministers are afraid of the public reaction if they did publish it, because the scheme is failing. It is frankly astonishing that we are being asked today to wave through substantial changes with no data or proper assessment. Since the Minister has that information, can he please explain why he will not publish it?

Labour recognises that food security is national security, and unlike the Government, we value the critical role that our farmers play in the security of this nation. We also value the role that farmers play in protecting our great British countryside. This year's wet weather is a further reminder of the importance of tackling climate change for the sake of our long-term security. Farmers want to play that vital role, but they need better backing from the Government: they need certainty, they need clarity, and they need to be able to plan.

The principles behind ELMS make sense, but the way the Government have run the scheme has been chaotic, and we can only assume that their refusal to publish the impact data is because they do not like what it says. It would be wrong to scrap or delay ELMS, which is why we will not oppose today's motion, but it needs to be made to work far better, and farmers need the underspend today that the Secretary of State promised months ago but still has not delivered.

The Government cannot continue to sit by and do nothing as our farmers face this crisis. The Government risk trashing not only our countryside and our food security, but thousands more livelihoods up and down the country. The Government need to get the support they promised out of the door, come clean on ELMS impact data, and get the scheme back on track. Farmers and our countryside deserve much better, but they have been sorely let down by this Government.

5.29 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): DEFRA is often a watchword for incompetence, and the approach to bluetongue is no exception to that. We need to be competing with Germany and Holland in the way we approach agriculture. This statutory instrument is particularly interesting—I declare my interests as listed in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, but also in that I farm—because our farmers in England did not riot like their European counterparts and, to be fair, their Welsh brethren for different reasons. This is an interesting time for farming. However, who thought it was a good idea to take this statutory instrument on the Floor of the House? But it will turn out to be so because, by doing this very action and closing off the last of the basic payments, the Government will have to look again at how much money farmers get.

The incomes of the 2,000 farmers in my constituency are going down because, as the Minister said earlier, more people are eligible for a piece of the cake. I would have perhaps described it more as a custard pie being rubbed into our farmers' faces, but the cake is the same size, and incomes cannot be the same size if it is being distributed to more and more people, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust and all sorts of other organisations are now getting more of that cake or pie.

At the end of the day, we need to look at the business that farmers are in and, if their business does not make money, they cannot go on. The ELM scheme does not increase payments to farmers; it simply redistributes them. Therefore, I would ask the Minister to get His Majesty's Revenues and Customs to look at the incomes of the 88,000 farmers, and make sure that they are not falling. We need to use the Treasury much more cleverly, we need better tax breaks, rather than handouts, and we need to look at the cost of red diesel, because that is a direct way of subsidising food production.

Ultimately, our food security is critical. Food security should be linked with health security. We had a report out today talking about the cost of obesity. The way to stop obesity is to ensure that the food we are eating is of the highest quality, and grown, raised and produced in England. We need more powers for the supermarket regulators. We need to amalgamate Natural England and the Environment Agency. We need to have risk-based inspections—really properly risk-based inspections—not the

[Sir Bill Wiggin]

Rural Payments Agency measuring how much hedge someone has. When it comes to hedges, I am particularly irritated because one of the standards pays generously for hedge laying—hedge laying is an expensive and difficult skill—but it excludes hedges that go along the side of roads, just in case the council come and cut the hedge. There is a massive difference between hedge cutting and hedge laying, so I hope the Minister will look at the standard on hedge laying so that hedges along the side of roads can be properly looked after, restored and provide wildlife security, which is why this is one of the standards.

We need to have a much more joined-up approach to what we are doing. We have a dangerous threat to farming and, if the polls are to be believed, that will be from an anti-farming Government. I know the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) made a good speech. I suspect there are not that many farmers in Croydon North, yet I agreed with a lot of what he said. He is doing the best he can, but I fear his colleagues will not be as sympathetic and that old “Oh, you only get subsidy to buy yourself a new Range Rover” agenda will come back if this Government are not returned at the general election. Therefore, we do need to accept this SI. We do need to ensure that we are putting more and more money into food security through our farmers. Otherwise, we might as well give it to Tesco, and nobody has advocated keeping food affordable by subsidising the supermarkets.

We must strengthen the supermarket regulators, sort out some of these standards, make sure that the farming recovery plan is expanded—I think that is going to happen—and make sure that we keep a proper watch on the income tax of farmers because, if we cannot keep them in business, we will have to export the damage that bad farming does by importing food from abroad. We cannot win by not supporting farming properly; we simply export bad practice to countries that really do not have the ability or the responsibility to look after themselves.

If we can get the Treasury more involved in DEFRA, make sure that the RPA is risk-based rather than comfort-based and deliver the cost savings that businesses in food production need, I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister, who is a magnificent champion for farming and has been dealt a particularly difficult hand on this SI, will continue to stick up for our farmers and make sure that our food and health are secure into the future.

5.35 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Like the official Opposition Front-Bench team, we do not seek to oppose this SI, not least because we do not want to give the Government any excuses to be slower in the roll-out of the new schemes than they already are, but it is absolutely right that we do not allow this moment to pass without there being a debate because I would not wish anybody either in this place or elsewhere to think that the roll-out of ELMS was going well—for most farmers it is going the opposite of well.

Britain desperately needs its farmers. Whether in Westmorland, in my own communities or across the whole of the country, we need our farmers to protect the built-up areas around rural Britain and in our urban

areas from flooding, with water retention and all the other things we can do to slow the flow in the uplands. We need our farmers for developing biodiversity and for tackling the greatest need, which is greater carbon sequestration. We need them because of our landscape heritage and because of tourism. Twenty million people visit Cumbria every year. It is the biggest destination in the country outside of London. They visit not just because the hotels are great, but because the landscape is epic. In the Lake district, we were given world heritage site status not many years ago and the UNESCO document granting it world heritage status gave as much credit to the farmers for how the landscape looks as it did to the glaciers that carved those valleys in the first place. So we are desperately in debt to our farmers, both in our neck of the woods and across the country, for various reasons, but none as great as the fact that they feed us. We see too little focus on the fact that Britain's farmers are first and foremost food producers in our discussion of public policy. This transition has been botched to the detriment of our farmers, to our ability to deliver environmental goods and especially to our ability to feed ourselves as a country.

At the last general election, £2.4 billion was the pot set aside for England's farmers. We know of course that £2.4 billion now is worth an awful lot less than £2.4 billion four and half years ago, in large part because of the behaviour of this Government in trashing the economy, fuelling inflation and therefore making everybody's pound in their pocket worth significantly less, but no more so than in the case of Britain's farmers.

Over the last two years, £400 million of that £2.4 billion each year has been unspent, which is utterly inexcusable. There is a danger in this, which I am almost scared to say publicly, although I do not imagine the Treasury has missed it: when the Treasury, whether in the hands of the party now or in those of a party that might be in power soon, sees that a Department cannot spend its budget, it asks questions about whether that Department needs its budget. Britain's farmers need every bit of that £2.4 billion and more, yet the incompetence of this Government to spend the money set aside for farming and the environment via agriculture means that we are putting farming at risk generations ahead. The Minister's reply to a written question from me just last week confirmed that last year the Government underspent by more than £200 million—that was just in one financial year.

Therefore, there is a range of things that are the fault of this Government which put our farmers at risk and under pressure, and seriously put at risk our ability to feed ourselves in this country and care for our environment. Then there are some things that are not the Government's fault. I do not blame the Government for the weather, I am sure the Minister will be pleased to hear me say. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) says I am not trying hard enough. I will perhaps find a way of blaming the weather upon the Conservative party. But, no, I do not blame the Government for the weather. However, we need to accept the consequences of the unusually wet weather of the past few months on farming in every part of the country, including those where the weather was not so awful, because the reality is that it has an impact on our ability to sow crops. We have seen crops rotting in the fields, unable to be reaped. The impact on arable farming

is obvious, but the impact on livestock farming is also huge. The availability and affordability of straw and other forms of animal feed later in the year and next year are particularly precarious. We have already talked about inflation, the cost of living for farmers and how margins are massively under pressure, but if feed prices go through the roof over the next year or so because of this weather, it will put our farmers into serious problems.

Let us not forget that livestock farmers have seen a massive impact, by which I mean the awful tragedy that in my constituency the 2% average rate of lamb mortality—that is always utterly tragic and heartbreaking for farmers and their families—is up to 15% this year because of the weather. We can imagine what that is like for farmers and their families as they deal not only with that mortality, but what that does to their businesses.

Alongside our compassion for farmers struggling through these terrible circumstances, we need to be aware of what the situation is doing to the cash flow of our farms. We hear the Government saying, “Right, there has been an underspend of £400 million over the past couple of years. We will get it out the door by grant support”. Grants can be useful. In the lakes and the dales in Cumbria, farming in protected landscapes—FIPL, as we refer to it—has been a positive thing. Some grants have done a lot of good for the farming sector, but let us not forget that, with most grants, the additional money will only be available after the election anyway, so it will not help people in the here and now, and we are expecting most of these grants to be delivered to farmers who can co-fund the project. If farmers have no money, what are they co-funding with?

It is more important that we think more intelligently about how we can support farmers with their cash-flow needs during this difficult time. The Minister says the cake is the same size, but is being distributed differently. I am afraid that for farmers the cake is not the same size for the time being. I have talked about the inflationary impact shrinking the size of the cake, but the fact is that several slices of the cake are stuck in the Treasury and are not out there with farmers, who see no sign of them.

One of the reasons we do not oppose this statutory instrument today is that, like everybody in the House today, we agree that ELM schemes are a good thing in theory. I have said it before, so I do not mind saying it again: as we search high and low for Brexit benefits, this potentially is one of them. The common agricultural policy was indefensible for all sorts of reasons, some of which the Minister spoke about. The ability for Britain to design a scheme that is better is absolutely to be lauded, which is why it is so frustrating that we are missing that opportunity so badly. The underlying principles of public money for public good is something that farmers across the country absolutely welcome. I welcome it, as do communities across Westmorland. What is deeply troubling is that the production of food in a country that only produces 60% of what it eats is not seen as a public good. That is criminal, ridiculous, foolish and unwise.

We are talking about the roll-out of ELM schemes and how we make these new schemes land. Among the positive projects is landscape recovery. We can see lots of good potentially coming through it. I saw a very good scheme up Kentmere just a few weeks ago, but I have also seen schemes rolled out badly and poorly, to the detriment of our environment, communities and

farmers. I saw the failure of a landscape recovery scheme in the Lyth valley that the Winster farmers were supportive of. It failed because it wanted to keep productive land dry. We should not be putting public money into stopping productive agricultural land being used for agricultural purposes. We should be making sure that less productive land is used for environmental purposes and that we bring farmers with us. When farmers see themselves principally as food producers, we need to work with their motivations to do good for the environment.

Bringing in these changes, particularly landscape recovery, before the Government have enacted many of the most serious and important of the Rock review's recommendations seems to be putting the cart before the horse. It is good that the Government embrace Baroness Rock's proposals for a code of practice for tenants and landlord relationships, but they have so far shown no sign of introducing a tenant farmers commissioner. I tabled a private Member's Bill calling on the Government to do just that. There is no point having a code, rules and regulations without a referee to enforce them and to protect tenants.

What troubles many of us at the moment, as has been mentioned, is that farmers are facing a frightening transition. For a variety of reasons—including the fact that 50% of farmers' basic payment will be taken by the end of the year—livestock farmers' incomes have reduced by more than 40% just during this Parliament. Who in this place could live with a 40% drop in their income in four years? It is outrageous. We need to take action here to defend that cash flow.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I wonder where the hon. Gentleman stands on the issue of how many sheep there should be in the Lake district. As he will know, there is a lively debate about whether the numbers should be reduced, and the future of the Herdwick. I would be grateful to know his views on that.

Tim Farron: As I said, our landscape in the Lake district is crafted by many hands, including sheep. I am deeply concerned that we may see the complete destocking of some of our fells. There is a notion that somehow we are overstocked—we probably were during foot and mouth, but that is more than a generation ago. There may be some give and take about what the numbers should be in different valleys, but I am deeply concerned not to see the roll-over of the stewardship schemes, because to continue in a scheme, folks are being asked to lose up to 80% of their stock. Let us ensure that we do things that work with the motivation of our farmers. We can do a woodland pasture, for example, and carbon sequestration and livestock farming can continue at the same time. If we do not work with farmers, we will not deliver environmental goods. I share the concerns that I suspect the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) has.

Let us look again at what has been discussed, and some of the proposals from other places. The hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) talked about the NFU's proposals, which I think have been slightly misunderstood. The NFU says that one way to get cash into farmers' pockets is to pause the cancellation of the basic payment system for the next year or two. That is not pausing the roll-out of ELMS—I want the Government to speed up that roll-out. I want more people in stewardship schemes, landscape recovery and SFI. The fact that 100% of farmers in my community are losing their basic

[Tim Farron]

payments but only one in seven of them is in an SFI scheme tells us all we need to know about why farm incomes are plummeting.

The proposal is worth taking into consideration. We could come up with a cleverly worked out, bespoke scheme to support farmers through this terrible period. How many months would that take to put into practice? How hard would that be to make work? We could do grant support, as the Government propose, but that will not happen until after the election. In any event, unless farmers have the money up front, the grants will be of little value to them. There is great merit in the NFU's proposals and I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to consider them, in thinking that we can continue to roll out ELMS and green our farming programmes, but not threaten the livelihoods of farmers in the interim. My great fear is that we are forcing excellent farmers out of the system, or they decide that the only way to keep the wolf from the door is to double their livestock numbers to take advantage of lamb and beef prices, and therefore opt out of environmental schemes all together. That would be completely counterproductive to what the Government, all the environmental groups and we rightly want.

It would be far better to ensure that we keep farmers farming. It would be tragic to see hundreds, if not thousands, of farmers around our country—hundreds in my communities alone—whose families may have farmed those valleys for generations, feel that because of this moment of flux botched by this Government, they might be the one to lose the family farm. How heartbreaking, terrifying and shaming would that be to many people in my communities and beyond? Let us protect those people's mental health, wellbeing and their ability to feed us.

The greenest, most environmentally positive thing that this or any Government could do is to keep Britain's farmers farming to feed our country. By doing so, we ensure that we do not import excessive amounts of food and damage the environment through all the extra carbon miles entailed, and we do not displace our demand on to other countries, many of which are poorer. We should not rob the poorest people of this world by raiding the commodity markets because we cannot afford to feed ourselves. The best environmental policies on the planet are but useless bits of paper in a drawer if we do not have our farmers, from Westmorland to every corner of this great country, delivering them. The botching of the transition is causing heartache, pain and poverty in my community. It is robbing us of food production for the country as a whole. It is damaging our environment and the Government need to listen to our farmers.

5.50 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I am very conscious that the transition has been uncomfortable. Although the Conservative Government and Conservative Members have always prioritised, and continue to prioritise, the primary purpose of farmers, which is to put food on our plates, I am also fully aware that one element of SFI is to help farmers to farm sustainably and to be sustainable, and that must be a key element of the transition.

I welcome the fact that there will be 50 new actions this year—the sooner the better, because I am somewhat uncomfortable about the time it is taking for farmers. They are losing guaranteed income that may be used in a variety of ways; often, frankly, to pay rent; in the past, sometimes, as a consequence to subsidise, in effect, rent going to other landowners rather than to the tenant farmers themselves. Although I see the benefit of what we are doing, it is important that the Department and the Rural Payments Agency make every effort to ensure that the transition is as straightforward as possible for farmers.

Last year, only six options were available—an increase on what DEFRA had originally planned—but to improve that, along with the take-up of the greater scheme and the premium from getting the best environmental outcomes of farmers working together, it is vital that the Department analyses what is happening around the country. It was never expected that every single farmer who received BPS would make the transition—they might have chosen not to, recognising some of the extra demands—but I would be grateful if colleagues in the Department looked further at some of the add-on decisions as a consequence of people joining the SFI and a combination of factors. I am thinking of the recent destocking undertaken by Natural England, which led to the Dartmoor review. There was an excellent outcome and I appreciate the work the Government are doing not only to look at Dartmoor, but around the country. My right hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench know they cannot make the transition happen without farmers and landowners, and nor would they want to. Nobody should think that the Government are trying to get farmers to stop farming—far from it—but we want to ensure that the impact is positive in both ways.

Thinking through some of the changes ahead, I note that the Liberal Democrats are not voting against the regulations—I hope that will be on their election leaflets—so they will be supporting the change. We need to ensure that the options that are coming through, come through quickly. As the money transitions down and we get a lever from one end to another, there will always be a variation in how much money a year would be spent. I believe that more farmers will be taking up the options and that will lead to an increase in average spending in years to come, so it is still vital that analysis is undertaken.

In my constituency, 305 people are receiving BPS. As of last month, 94 had applied for SFI this year and just 75 had been accepted. That is only about a quarter of the farmers who were receiving BPS who will now get payments this year. I do not know if they will get more money than they had in the past, but it does mean that three quarters are not doing so. What concerns me is that the farmers in my constituency are some of the most environmentally minded of all the farmers in the country, so I am keen for analysis to be undertaken to understand why three quarters of the farmers receiving BPS today are not now applying for SFI. I cannot find that out myself. The RPA refuses—plain blank refuses—to tell me which farmers receive BPS today. I am not interested in that in terms of campaigning; I am genuinely interested in trying to understand, farm by farm, what it is that I can do, as a former Secretary of State and as a Member of Parliament for that constituency, to put forward their case and their understanding. Nationally, the NFU has to put across a broader range of issues.

I appreciate that it has made an intervention regarding this statutory instrument for only a small number of recipients. I understand that we need to keep the journey going, but it needs to be done with as much analysis and understanding as possible.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State continues to ensure we try to get this right, and I look forward to further announcements this month. I think back to Thomas Binns, who stood up for upland farmers. He wanted to make that change and was making sure that DEFRA listened. We certainly did listen and we learned. For the first time we went beyond just the income forgone, which had been the traditional EU approach in calculating different figures. Moving to a more market systems basis opens the door to much more private investment. The green finance strategy, alongside this important transition, is a key part of how we make farming sustainable for the future.

On other aspects, can the Minister say a bit more about the stacking of options and whether that is still possible? Again, that is something farmers have asked for and I believe he has listened. We did remove the bureaucracy. They are now called delinked payments. We also stayed ahead of the game and ensured we addressed the key issue of hedgerows, and implemented those regulations, too.

I have one final request to my right hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench. BPS is going and we have the delinked payments, but we need to go beyond those farmers. For example, in my constituency pig farmers never got BPS in the first place—they were not eligible for that support. What are we doing to ensure we open the doors to welcome them into SFI and countryside stewardship? There has to be a conversation, and farmers sell best to farmers. I have to say that the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Sir Mark Spencer) is one of the most eloquent champions I know, both within the Department and out at the county shows and on the farm visits that all Ministers do, but we need to ensure that we bring people with us and make it as straightforward as possible, doing what we can on the maps and doing what we can with the agents, so that people feel they really are part of the journey and part of the solution, and that, most importantly, in farming sustainably they have a sustainable farm themselves.

5.58 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I declare an interest as my family are sixth-generation farmers in Somerset, with my brother still farming.

The Liberal Democrats support the shift from basic payments to the ELM scheme, but I am still desperately worried about the general lack of support from this Government for British farmers. I am not alone. I have spoken to farmers right across my constituency, from North Barrow to Muchelney, who have all raised with me their fears about the industry. They want to farm. They want to rear animals. They want to grow crops. But the landscape is becoming more and more difficult for them to produce food for our tables. Tomorrow's annual Farm to Fork summit will focus on UK food security, a topic I have spoken about here many times.

However, as the House will know, one of the major risks to national food security will be the loss of British farmers and agricultural businesses. There has been a

long-term downward trend in the number of farms in the UK, with a staggering 110,000 closing their gates for the last time since 1990. Climate change continues to be strongly felt by British farmers—and nowhere more than in Somerset, a county that is so often at the forefront of it. The last 18 months have been the wettest since records began, and that, alongside squeezed margins and the reduction of support, has left many farmers on a cliff edge. The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and the Soil Association have recently warned that many farmers are on the brink of quitting because of the enormous financial and mental strain.

Not long ago, I met a farmer in my constituency who farms near Langport. He told me that his land had been flooded for nearly six months over the winter, that that had cost him thousands of pounds in lost crops and water draining, and that it would limit his ability to use the land for grazing his cattle during the summer. However, it is not this year but next year that he will feel the financial impact of the winter flooding. He has been forced to turn out his cattle early on to grazing land that simply has not recovered from those floods. As a result, he will not be able to make silage from the fields, and will be forced to reduce his herd by half next year because he will be unable to make enough food to feed his stock during the winter months. He understands that farming land must sometimes be sacrificed to flooding in order to save thousands of homes further down the river catchment, but he should be able to realise compensation as a consequence; the alternative will be to risk losing his business. He told me that following the end of basic payments and the limited options available within the sustainable farming incentive scheme, the farm is solely dependent on income from agriculture to cover the lost earnings due to flooding.

Farmers in Somerset are fully aware that flooding is only likely to increase over the coming years, and will probably last longer and cause more damage, but it is not just in Somerset that this problem is felt; it is a nationwide problem. Farmers need to be resilient, and they need proper public support for providing public goods. I implore the Minister to listen to Liberal Democrat calls to raise the ELMS budget by £1 billion immediately, so that farmers can be properly rewarded and helped to make the transition to environmentally sustainable farming. Such calls have also been made by key industry stakeholders such as the Nature Friendly Farming Network. Raising the budget, while also introducing a range of other public funds for public goods schemes and specified support for farmers in lowland flood areas such as Somerset, could provide a major boost to the nation's food security. We need to ensure that those who provide the nation's food are properly supported, and we need to recognise that the crisis affecting the farming sector requires urgent action.

I look forward to attending the Farm Safety Foundation's annual conference next week, when it will celebrate its 10th birthday. The conference will focus on mental wellbeing within the sector, and on building resilience for the future of farming. The biggest causes of mental strain in farming are the spiralling costs, environmental pressure and uncertainty over the future following Brexit. Up to 94% of UK farmers under 40 say that mental ill health is one of the biggest hidden problems that they face from day to day. The Liberal Democrats want to provide funding for the Agricultural Development and

[Sarah Dyke]

Advisory Service to help farmers with transitions, giving them greater certainty and assurance. So far, the Government have been unwilling to provide that support.

As we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), DEFRA had a £170 million underspend on the farming and countryside programme last year. Farming businesses operate on a multi-year planning cycle, so they have a desire for predictability and steady cash flow. Without that, many are left without the security that they need, and without such security, the future of British farming is left unsecured, along with the nation's food security.

In this continued transition period, I urge the Government to increase support for our farmers and give them the financial predictability that they need to invest in their businesses and go on producing food for our tables, while also protecting our precious environment.

6.5 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I, too, draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a trustee of shares in Trevaskis Farm Ltd, our family business.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin), who questioned the wisdom of bringing the statutory instrument to the Floor of the House. I think it important that the Government have signified that this is an important issue—it is an issue that matters to farmers and that therefore warrants proper consideration on the Floor of the House. I also note that it has flushed out a consensus—somewhat unlikely, so close to an election—among all the major parties. Everyone now seems to accept that area payments, which are subsidies for land ownership, have no place in the future, and that the general thrust of the Government's plan, although everyone has articulated their differences on it, is indeed the right one. It is welcome that we have that cross-party consensus on the overall direction, because this is a long-term endeavour and it is important that all parties, to a greater or lesser extent, buy into the journey that we are on.

It is also important for us to understand why the Government decided to get rid of direct payments—payments for the ownership of land, which is what the basic payment scheme and, before it, the single payment scheme essentially were. This dates back to fairly recent history in the mid-2000s. In 2005, there were negotiations on reform of the common agricultural policy, and as part of the so-called Fischler reforms, there was a great deal of talk about decoupling farm subsidies from production. Economists throughout the European Union, and here in our own Treasury, were obsessed with the need to get rid of what they called production subsidies, which they regarded as being market-distorting, but they only ever intended the payments for the ownership of land to be temporary. Indeed, when this was discussed by the European Union in the early 2000s, it was mooted that the direct payments, or area payments, would be phased out by about 2020.

However, what we really did by introducing direct payments was to replace one subsidy—for production, which was market-distorting—with another, which was equally distorting. There is a fair amount of evidence

that within the first two to three years of the introduction of direct payments for the ownership or tenure of land, about half the entire BPS budget disappeared in inflated land rents, which meant that those who owned land were able to charge higher rents to those who needed to rent land in order to farm. That is a classic example of what happens when we introduce a market-distorting subsidy, which is what the BPS payment was.

It is sometimes said that the BPS payment is an income support payment—that it helps to support farm incomes, and that it has a value almost as a social security payment—but I think that is absolute nonsense, and I did look at the issue carefully during my time at DEFRA. The truth is that 50% of the BPS budget goes to about 10% of the wealthiest landowners in the country. If we were seeking some sort of income support mechanism to help farmers who could not afford to carry on, and we wanted to keep them in the landscape that they were in for social reasons, we would means-test that benefit. We would not have a system whereby the vast majority of the budget went to the wealthiest landowners while some of those trying to make a living in marginal landscapes received nothing, or next to nothing.

It is often said, too, that the BPS helps to support food security. Again, that is absolute nonsense. By its very definition, the introduction of a subsidy for land ownership was, as it was described at the time, a decoupled payment. It was explicitly delinked from any food production. Look at the way the BPS payment worked in the last 10 years or so of its life. Look at the big sectors in the UK that produce most of the agricultural output. Look at horticulture, the top-fruit industry and companies such as G's, which produces a big proportion of this country's salads. Look at the pig and poultry sectors. None of those sectors gained anything whatsoever from the BPS payments, even though they were the backbone of food production in this country.

There would probably have been thousands of people across the country who were able to claim BPS payments just because they had more than 5 hectares of land, even though in many cases they were messing around with a few ponies and not producing any food at all. When I was in DEFRA, I discovered a rather extraordinary statistic: 30% to 40% of sheep farmers never received BPS payments. The reason is that the landowner kept the BPS payment and got the sheep farmers to act on a grazing licence, making them ineligible to claim the payment. The sheep farmers producing the food got nothing, because the landowners who were renting out the land captured the BPS payment. For all those reasons, it made sense to get rid of area subsidies.

Some people have said that, in a year when a lot of weather events have brought into sharp focus the risks associated with agriculture, maybe we need something like the BPS to help mitigate the risk. Again, that makes no sense whatsoever, because the sectors that really shoulder the risk are those involved in veg production and top-fruit production, and the BPS payment is a drop in the ocean in their accounts; it is not a significant part of their business model. In my constituency, I have some of the biggest brassica growers—growers of cauliflowers—in the country. They have had a horrendous year, but the few tens of thousands of pounds that they get from the BPS payment is neither here nor there in the scheme of things.

There is a final reason why the SI is absolutely right: this House has already taken the decision to delink the legacy payments from the need to own land, and we now have a fixed reference period, which is what the delinked payments between now and 2028 will be based on. It makes no sense to delay the trajectory of winding down those payments, given that some farmers might have exited agriculture altogether, and others might have come into agriculture as new entrants and will not be eligible for the BPS payment. Having delinked payments from the need to own or have tenure of land, we must now stick to the programme and move forward.

I disagree with the caricature by the Opposition Front Benchers that we have not stuck to the plan for the introduction of the phase-out, ELMS and the agricultural transition. I have to say to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) that that is nonsense. The truth is that the agricultural transition plan of 2019 set out, with great clarity, the eight-year transition that we would follow. We would gradually reduce the BPS payments and then delink them in 2024, because we recognise the financial dependence that some farmers had on such payments. Even earlier than that, we made it explicit in the Agriculture Act 2020 that there would be an agricultural transition over eight years. Indeed, when the Bill was first introduced to the House in 2018, we made it explicit that we would have such a transition. In Committee, we debated at some length whether that was the right length of transition. The Government have absolutely stuck to the plan that has been set out since at least 2018, and they deserve credit for doing so.

For all the reasons I have given, we got rid of BPS altogether and decided to move away from area subsidies for land ownership. Not every part of the UK did that. The Labour Government in Wales decided to keep a partial direct payment—an area subsidy—but to add lots of additional conditions to it, including the requirement to plant trees on 10% of a farmer's land. That has led to protests in Wales, because it is a deeply unhelpful policy and is counter to the interests of Welsh farmers. We should give farmers a choice about how much they do on the environment, not dictate to them that they must act and then give them just a partial slice of the BPS payment they used to have. For the same sorts of reasons, the European Union has had huge difficulties and huge protests. Again, it has tried to retain a subsidy for the ownership of land, which makes no sense. To try to justify it to the public, the EU loaded even more conditions on to it, bringing all sorts of contradictions to the fore.

I believe that it was absolutely right for the Government to take a different approach. We should stop talking about subsidies, because there will no longer be any subsidies to farmers in the future. The Government have statutory targets under the Environment Act 2021—notably, for the delivery of species abundance—and they are a market player. They are paying farmers and landowners for the delivery of ecosystem services, and those services attract a margin. We are no longer just paying farmers a subsidy for owning land, and we are no longer saying to farmers who do a good turn for the environment, “We’ll give you income foregone—we’ll compensate you for your loss.” We are now saying to farmers, “We have targets that we want to hit, and we will allow you to make a profit margin on the delivery of ecosystem services that will help the Government to meet their environmental objectives.”

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) referred to a 40% reduction in incomes. He was talking about a reduction in the BPS payment, but there is a difference between farm income and that payment, which I will come on to. My hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire invited the Minister to ask His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to collect data on farm incomes. The Farming Minister and the Secretary of State will know that DEFRA already does that, and the farm business survey, run by the Department, is very long running. It shows unequivocally that since 2016, when we had a devaluation of sterling against the euro, farm incomes have been boosted considerably. It shows that dairy farms saw sharp increases in profitability between 2016 and 2023, and the same is true of arable farms. To a lesser extent, the same is true of some beef sectors, although in less favourable areas—suckler beef production has remained quite marginal. The potato sector and others have not done so well but, overall, farm business income has seen a sustained boost.

None of that takes away from the fact that this is an appalling year. Farmers will lose money because they have suffered dreadful weather and dreadful crop losses, which I completely understand and acknowledge. As we contemplate future policy, however, we must see this in the context of overall farm profitability over the eight years since the referendum result. The truth is that, overall, farm incomes have been stronger than they were previously.

I welcome the fact that the Government have brought forward this statutory instrument. I know that reducing the BPS payment is obviously not popular with many farmers, but as a point of coherent policy, it is absolutely the right thing to do. Ministers deserve credit for sticking to the programme.

6.17 pm

Sir Mark Spencer: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate. I also thank the Secretary of State for being in his place to demonstrate his support. Two former Secretaries of State turned up in the Chamber to offer their support, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), for their measured contributions to today's debate.

As we have said, it is vital that we continue to gradually move away from untargeted subsidies, as planned. Such payments have inhibited productivity improvements, and are fundamentally unjust. Our farmers deserve better. Applying reductions to delinked payments means that we can fund our other farming schemes. Our new schemes are designed to support farmers to be profitable and resilient, while delivering improved environmental outcomes and supporting sustainable food production.

In January, we announced the biggest upgrade to our farming scheme since leaving the EU. We will be adding up to 50 new actions for which farmers can be paid on their farms, which means that there will be more choice than ever for our farmers, and our increased payment rates ensure that they will be rewarded fairly under our environmental land management schemes. There are a wide range of schemes, grants and advice that farmers can access right now, and I encourage farmers to take advantage of these offers, which will support their businesses in both their profitability and their environmental

[*Sir Mark Spencer*]

footprint. For example, our new schemes are providing support to farmers to help them reduce costly artificial imports and increase their productivity.

Food production is, and always will be, the primary purpose of farming, but delinked payments are not about food production. Instead, we are investing in our new schemes, which support farmers to produce food sustainably alongside improving the environment. The vast majority of land in the sustainable farming incentive continues to produce food. The Government take food security very seriously.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I apologise to the House for not being present at the opening stages of this debate; I was in the Public Accounts Committee. I also declare my interest as a working farmer. Does he agree that there is a danger in this system that if farmers' incomes get squeezed, it is the infrastructure that is likely to suffer? Will he make sure that there are sufficient incentives in the new scheme for farmers to invest in infrastructure—in cattle barns, in grain stores and in drainage? These sorts of things are likely to suffer and therefore productivity could also suffer.

Sir Mark Spencer: I am grateful for that intervention. That is why we are offering grant schemes for such infrastructure projects. For example, there will be grant schemes to improve on slurry infrastructure, on calf housing and on beef housing, to make sure that we not only invest in that infrastructure, but do it in a way that is sensitive to our environmental and animal welfare footprints. That is exactly what we are trying to achieve. While I am talking about infrastructure, it is also vital to the rural economy that we support things such as local abattoirs to ensure that they are there for the future. We have introduced the abattoir support scheme for those small abattoirs, to make sure that that infrastructure is in place to support the farming network as we move forward.

The Government take food security very seriously. Underlining our commitment to improving food security, at the National Farmers Union conference this year the

Prime Minister announced the introduction of the annual food security index. This underpins the three-yearly UK food security report. Applications under our 2023 sustainable farming incentive already cover over 2 million hectares of land. The scheme has already had a higher uptake than in the first few years of countryside stewardship and is on track to achieve a higher uptake than the first year of environmental stewardship. We know that 81% of farmers that took part in research rated the existing sustainable farming incentive offer positively, which is an increase from 51% at a similar point in the pilot. This shows that we are listening to farmers and making improvements to the scheme so that it works on the ground for those individual farmers. We are making even more improvements in our 2024 offer.

Turning to some of the comments, it is worth noting that there is consensus in the House that this is the right thing to do. There was some criticism, and some political points were made by the Opposition, which is entirely their right, but this Conservative Government are backing our farmers, improving food security and protecting the environment. Let us take a moment to look at what is happening in Wales. The Leader of the Opposition were a blueprint for what they would do in the UK if they got into power, but if Welsh Labour's approach was applied to England, an estimated 20,000 farms would be forced out of business. That would be a complete catastrophe for the rural economy and for farming in England and would detrimentally affect food security in the UK. In Wales, Labour politicians have suggested that farmers hit by TB should simply go out of business. We on this side of the House will never turn our back on farmers that face those challenges. We will always be there to support them and make sure that we back them. Following that blueprint would take us back to square one. This instrument is essential so that we can fund our schemes that support farmers to be resilient and sustainable over the long term, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Agriculture (Delinked Payments) (Reductions) (England) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 16 April, be approved.

Risk-based Exclusion

[*Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Procedure Committee on 18 December 2023, on Commons scrutiny of Secretaries of State in the House of Lords, HC 338, Qq15-22 and 48-54; correspondence between the Procedure Committee and Mr Speaker, on risk-based exclusions, reported to the House on 18 December 2023, 17 January and 29 January 2024; correspondence from the Procedure Committee to the Leader of the House, on the exclusion of Members, reported to the House on 7 June 2023, Session 2022-23.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to motion No. 3 on risk-based exclusion, as on the Order Paper. I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the following amendments to motion No. 3, as listed on the Order Paper: (o), (h), (i), (j), (n), (p), (c), (k), (l), (m), (q) and (d). I know, it sounds like an eye test, but I am sure I have got it right. I shall call Members to move their amendments formally at the end of the debate.

6.25 pm

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

That—

(1) this House approves the Report from the House of Commons Commission, A risk-based exclusion policy for the House of Commons – updated proposals, HC 386, save that the threshold for risk-based exclusion should be when a Member has been charged with a relevant offence;

(2) the following Standing Order be made:

“Risk-based exclusion policy

- (1) When the Clerk of the House is informed by the police that a Member is charged with a violent or sexual offence a risk assessment will take place.
- (2) The risk assessment will be carried out by a Risk Assessment Panel, appointed by Mr Speaker.
- (3) In carrying out a risk assessment the Panel will have regard to—
 - (a) the nature of the alleged misconduct;
 - (b) whether there is any safeguarding concern;
 - (c) the risk to the Parliamentary community, or a particular individual, group or groups within it;
 - (d) information from the police; and
 - (e) any undertaking that the Member in question is subject to an existing voluntary agreement not to attend the Estate.
- (4) The Panel shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker, the Director of Parliamentary Security and such other members of the House administration as it thinks fit.
- (5) The Panel will decide on appropriate measures to mitigate any risk, and such mitigation may include one or more of the following—
 - (a) exclusion from the Parliamentary estate;
 - (b) exclusion from domestic travel funded in whole or in part through the House of Commons Estimate; and
 - (c) exclusion from foreign travel funded in whole or in part, directly or indirectly, through the House of Commons Estimate.
- (6) Members must not lobby the Panel in a manner calculated to influence the outcome of a risk assessment process.
- (7) A Member subject to exclusion from the Parliamentary estate may apply for a proxy vote.

(8) If the Panel considers a Member should be subject to exclusion it shall inform the Speaker, and the Speaker shall authorise the House administration to take such measures as are necessary to ensure the Panel’s decision is implemented.

(9) The Panel may review its risk assessment in the light of new information, and as a consequence of that review may recommend ending any exclusion, varying any existing risk mitigation measures, or introducing further measures as a result of its review.

(10) The decisions of the Panel in relation to a particular case and actions taken thereafter shall not be made public and shall be kept confidential (except insofar as is reasonably necessary to ensure the decision is effected).

(11) A Member’s exclusion will end if—

(a) the Panel so decides and informs the Speaker accordingly;

(b) the Speaker and the Panel are informed by the police or another competent person that the police have concluded their investigations and the charge has been withdrawn; or

(c) a criminal trial has been concluded.”

(3) the operation of Standing Order (Risk-based exclusion policy) be reviewed by a panel appointed by Mr Speaker, and the report of that panel shall be laid before the House no later than six months after the date of this Order; and

(4) Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by Proxy) be amended as follows:

(1) In paragraph (2)(d) after “injury” insert

“(o) risk-based exclusion from the Parliamentary estate”; and

(2) After paragraph 5(b) insert

“(o) The Speaker shall not specify the reason for which a proxy vote has been given in any such certificate.”

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this, we shall discuss the following:

Amendment (o), in paragraph (1), leave out

“, save that the threshold for risk-based exclusion should be when a Member has been charged with a relevant offence”.

Amendment (h), in paragraph (1) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out “is charged with” and insert “has been arrested on suspicion of committing”.

Amendment (i), in paragraph (1) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out

“a risk assessment will take place”

and insert

“Mr Speaker shall authorise the House Administration to take such steps as are necessary to ensure that the Member is excluded from—

(a) the Parliamentary estate;

(b) domestic travel funded in whole or in part through the House of Commons estimate; and

(c) foreign travel funded in whole or in part through the House of Commons estimate.”

Amendment (j), leave out paragraphs (2) to (6) of the proposed Standing Order.

Amendment (n), after paragraph (2) of the proposed Standing Order insert—

“(o) The Panel shall have power to meet notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, in person or by electronic means.”

Amendment (p), after paragraph (2) of the proposed Standing Order insert—

“(o) The Panel will not be given the name of the Member being risk assessed.”

Amendment (c), leave out paragraph (7) of the proposed Standing Order.

Amendment (k), leave out paragraphs (8) to (10) of the proposed Standing Order.

Amendment (l), in paragraph (11) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out sub-paragraph (a).

Amendment (m), in paragraph (11)(b) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out “and the panel are” and insert “is”.

Amendment (q), in paragraph (11)(b) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out

“the charge has been withdrawn”

and insert

“no charge has been made”.

Amendment (d), leave out paragraph (4).

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of the House of Commons Commission, I rise to speak to the motion standing in my name on the Order Paper. I will keep my opening remarks short and try to answer right hon. and hon. Members’ issues at the end of the debate.

The motion before us provides for four things: for the House to approve the updated proposals on risk-based exclusion published on 14 December 2023 and modified by the Commission at its meeting on 18 March; to agree a new standing order to implement the risk-based exclusion policy; to require Mr Speaker to appoint a panel to review the operation of the new Standing Order, to report within six months; and to allow MPs who are excluded from the parliamentary estate to apply for a proxy vote. There is also an amendment tabled in my name on behalf of the Commission, which would enable the risk assessment panel to meet during recess. This is a technical amendment—

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I will not give way during my opening remarks. I will come back to any issues that the hon. Gentleman raises.

This is a technical amendment required to ensure the proper functioning of the panel and therefore the scheme. These proposals reflect extensive consultation with Members, parliamentary Select Committees and other relevant stakeholders. This includes a debate on 12 June last year in which Members raised a number of thoughtful points, which the Commission has taken into account, including the point at which risk assessment is triggered. This is one of a number of measures that are being reviewed and brought forward by the Commission to improve standards of behaviour and safeguarding. I thank all members of staff and hon. Members for their contributions, which have brought the Commission to agree these proposals and put forward today’s motion, and I look forward to hearing further contributions this afternoon.

6.27 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): You have called me rather sooner than I thought you would, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought the Leader of the House would be making a more substantive opening speech.

I thank the Leader of the House for bringing the risk-based exclusion motion for debate and a vote here today. I strongly support the proposal and the principle behind it. It is long overdue and, as it stands, represents the bare minimum of what is required in the interests of safeguarding and good working practices. I would also like to thank those who have worked to get us to this point: the staff and the trade unions who have been raising and pressing these issues for years; the House of Commons Commission; Mr Speaker, who has been long pushing these things; the House Committees who have considered and inputted into the process; and all those Members who have spoken in the many debates and responded to the consultations.

When we have these debates, we should remember who is listening to us. While the temptation is to make these discussions about ourselves, many of the people watching will be victims of harassment or abuse. They will be looking closely not just at what we say but at the way we conduct ourselves. At the heart of this is our responsibility to ensure that everyone in Parliament has a safe working environment and that we uphold the highest standards and expectations. That is a far cry from where we were in the recent past. Issues of serious wrongdoing, harassment or a bad culture in the workplace have been a constant cloud over this place. The headlines bring the entire House into disrepute and add to the erosion of trust in Parliament and in politicians.

Parliament is a uniquely strange workplace where the bosses are not employed at all, yet they employ others with little oversight. They are only really accountable to our electorate, not to an employer, and they have no employment contract. Members have constitutional rights that allow us to do the job of representing our constituents freely and without fear, and we are also at risk of vexatious or targeted attacks. But the way we operate can leave others at risk. This makes navigating workplace issues of this kind all the more complex, yet increasingly necessary.

We have made important strides in recent years, but we need to go further. For too long, Parliament has relied on informal processes to deal with serious allegations. Now, through the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, complaints of abuse, bullying or harassment are dealt with quickly and robustly, with profound and sometimes difficult consequences. As the independent review, out this morning, shows, there is now a clear, fair and anonymous route for complaints to be dealt with and resolved. Let us hope that this now acts as a deterrent, because we know that the best cure is prevention.

However, despite this progress, there remain serious gaps. Where an allegation of sexual or violent misconduct is so serious that it is investigated by the police as potentially breaching a criminal threshold, there is no mechanism at all for the parliamentary authorities to take safeguarding action or sanction until such a time as someone is convicted. In these cases, we currently rely almost entirely on a voluntary arrangement for Members not to come on to the estate. Such voluntary arrangements are effective only until they no longer are,

with the Whips often doing the difficult job of making them work. Not only is this a serious safeguarding issue, but it puts Parliament very much out of kilter with most modern workplaces, over which we govern and set the standards.

This risk-based exclusion motion is a crucial, if limited, step on the path to changing that. It sets out that when a Member is charged with a violent or sexual offence, a risk assessment panel will consider whether they might pose a risk to the parliamentary community. Exclusion is not automatic, and the motion also contains clear criteria and a process for an exclusion to be lifted. For complete clarity, can the Leader of the House confirm that this exclusion procedure will apply to those who are currently under charge? Members affected will also be eligible for a proxy vote, to ensure that their constituents still have a vote during this time. The threshold for the police to charge someone with such offences is very high and would have applied to only one or two Members in recent years.

It has taken a long time to get to this point. The Commission first started considering these proposals back in 2022. Today, it will be important to get at least something done to make some progress. However, the Commission originally agreed that the process would kick in at arrest, not charge, as tabled only a few weeks ago. It was heavily consulted upon, including with the police, staff representatives and others. I supported the trigger being arrest then, and I still support the trigger being arrest today. I know many across this House agree. It is more appropriate for safeguarding and for ensuring that staff can feel safe, and it would be standard practice in other workplaces.

I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for their amendments on this matter, which I support. I am concerned that the higher threshold of charge will cover so few cases that it risks discrediting the entire exercise. What is more, had the proposal originally been conceived around charge, I am not sure we would have agreed on the need for either a panel or a proxy vote, as they have in the other place, where exclusion is automatic. That is why, if the policy for risk-based exclusion remains at charge, I am also minded to support the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills).

During our many recent debates, a number of reasons to oppose these proposals have been put forward. First, some Members are concerned that a risk-based process will prevent Members from carrying out their constitutional role to represent their constituents. I disagree. The tiny number of MPs that this policy is ever likely to affect will still be able to represent their constituents in writing and by tabling written questions, holding advice surgeries and attending meetings and events off the estate, and so on. Moreover, they will be able to vote by proxy, will still be paid and will still hold the title of Member of Parliament in every other way. Indeed, one of the shortcomings of this motion is that it does not cover constituency offices, potentially leaving constituency staff vulnerable.

Secondly, there are concerns about prejudicing any case, and about Members not being seen as being innocent until proven guilty, but the purpose of a risk-based approach is to mitigate the risk of harm and to safeguard staff, and it is without prejudice.

Thirdly, some people point to the voluntary system that is currently in place, but I would say that it has proven wholly inadequate for all concerned, and it is not fair to anyone who has the task of overseeing it.

Finally, some raise legitimate concerns that police investigations take a very long time where the anonymity of the accused is not protected. I agree. It has been a matter of much debate in this House that the statistics behind prosecution and conviction in rape and sexual assault cases are shockingly bad, and it is no secret that our criminal justice system is failing in this regard, but that should not be a reason for objecting to this motion. It is a separate matter that needs to be appropriately addressed by the Government.

In conclusion, we have come a long way in addressing the culture and bad behaviour in Parliament. Setting a proper framework for the risk-based exclusion of Members is an essential, if limited, step on this journey, but it is only a small part of it. I hope we can all agree that, although we have come a long way, we still have further to go in creating a better culture and higher standards in Parliament.

6.36 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to speak as Chair of the Procedure Committee. We have looked at various iterations of risk-based exclusion since we were first presented with the Commission's proposals in 2022. The decision of when exclusion should apply is not easy. Although I fully support the idea that we should have some form of risk-based exclusion, the point at which it is triggered is a matter for debate. Members on both sides will put forward very persuasive arguments, but I have to say that, based on the evidence heard by the Committee and the safeguards that will be put in place, I err towards the trigger being at charge, rather than arrest.

Charge is a public point, whereas arrest is not public. It is very difficult to see how Members of Parliament who are excluded but not publicly named could maintain their anonymity. People will see that they have a proxy vote, and they will therefore wonder whether they are on baby leave or long-term sick. It will become clear that the Member has been excluded from the precincts.

Charge is public—it is known and it is very clear that it has happened—and it is a very high bar. We have concerns, and there were concerns in the evidence given to the Committee, about when arrest might happen. I appreciate that we are talking about serious sexual and violent offences, and it is unlikely that an arrest would be made on a spurious, vexatious accusation, but it is possible. Across the United Kingdom, arrest can happen at different points, depending on the force and the legal system. Charge therefore makes it clear that there is a very serious allegation that warrants the matter being taken further.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I hear what the right hon. Lady is saying. How does she answer the charge that we in this place may be hypocrites—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot be hypocrites in this place. I am sure that the hon. Lady can find a more appropriate word.

Stella Creasy: We in this place may be inconsistent in our approach to these matters because, following the case of Wayne Couzens, we agreed that anybody from the police accused of serious misconduct should be removed from the parliamentary estate—that is accused, not even arrested. How do we square the circle that what we think is appropriate for the police is not appropriate for ourselves?

Dame Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I said, this is a balanced judgment; there is no right or wrong answer. I am persuaded by many arguments in favour of exclusion on “arrest on suspicion of”. However, on balance—given the job we do, the role we have and the potential for vexatious complaints—I feel that exclusion at the point of charge is right. I am not saying to the hon. Lady that we will not be accused of inconsistency; we very well might be accused of that—we regularly are.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Did the right hon. Lady’s Committee give any consideration to the fact that what constitutes a charge, and what that means in terms of procedure, is different in Scotland from what it is south of the border? In England it is the initiation of criminal proceedings; in Scotland that decision is taken at a later stage by the procurator fiscal.

Dame Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes the point I referred to earlier: there are different points in the judicial process at which a charge or arrest is made in the different legal systems of the United Kingdom. We have three different legal systems and charges can be brought at different times.

This is a balanced judgment—there is no right or wrong answer—on the basis of what is being proposed: to remove the right of a Member of Parliament to attend the Palace of Westminster, which is an ancient right we have held for hundreds of years. We are proposing to introduce something unique and different. Based on the evidence we heard and the advice we received from the Clerks and others, exclusion on charge feels like about the right point to make that decision.

Sir Chris Bryant: Where this whole debate has gone completely wrong is by being obsessed with exclusion. It is actually about making a risk-based assessment of what needs to be done, in a certain set of circumstances, completely proportionate to the point and the severity of the crime being considered, to ensure that this place is safe. I really deprecate the fact that this is being called “risk-based exclusion”. I suspect we will be talking about very few people who might be excluded, but if there was a proper assessment of risk at arrest and proportionate measures were taken to ensure that everybody here was working safely, surely that would be the right way to move forward.

Dame Karen Bradley: I can never resist the hon. Gentleman, and that is why I will always give way to him. He makes a very good point. There may be a role for another process that does that, but for the exclusion process it feels that the right point is at charge.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend’s Committee considered the difference between whether the allegation or accusation

related to a member of staff or another employee of the House, or to somebody completely unconnected. I could be persuaded that arrest might be enough for exclusion if the matter related to somebody who worked here, but if it was unrelated, and if there was no question of the Member not being given bail because risk was assumed to be low in general, then I would come to a different conclusion. That is another complication that I might ask for my right hon. Friend’s opinion about.

Dame Karen Bradley: That was not a matter the Committee considered, but my right hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need to think of this as a process and not an event, because things can change and develop. Today we are deciding whether to introduce into our Standing Orders a process for exclusion, but in future we may well decide that the measures did not go far enough and that we need another process. The Commission has taken years to look at the matter. I am glad we have got to the point where we are finally discussing it and we have the chance to vote on the proposals, but it is a process, not an event.

Sir David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): If we decide to exclude at the point of charge, did my right hon. Friend’s Committee consider whether, instead of this entire procedure, a simple application by the House authorities to a magistrates court for conditions of bail would be more appropriate? That would cover not just this place, but any risk anywhere.

Dame Karen Bradley: We did not consider that point, but we did look at the interaction with the judicial process and concerns about the possibility that a clever barrister might use the fact that a risk-based assessment had been made as some form of defence around fair trial. I am not saying that would necessarily ever happen, but we considered that point and set it out in correspondence to Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House.

Sir Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain what weight was given by her Committee to the fact that, unlike other people who work in Westminster, excluding a Member of Parliament is not just the exclusion of one individual, but the exclusion of the representation of 80,000 other individuals? That is a very different position, both in effect and historically.

Dame Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend’s point relates to the proxy vote. The measures allow for a proxy vote, as I will come to in a moment.

Members of the Committee expressed different views but, on balance, we decided, as set out in our correspondence, that charge is the right point for exclusion; we should not have proxy votes, as I will come to; and we were concerned about the make-up of the panel. The other place has decided that charge is the right point, but it does not have the panel, which was an area we considered. We were also concerned about interaction with ICGS. They are two different processes: ICGS does not involve the police, but the police could be looking at the same complaint. We were concerned about putting people off going to ICGS, where anonymity is crucial, if, at the same time, there was some sort of risk-based exclusion,

because a point in the judicial process had been reached and the Member was excluded under the risk-based assessment.

As many right hon. and hon. Members have said, the exclusion would not cover the constituency. If anybody is a risk to the public in that way, then we should not stand by and allow them to continue to carry out constituency surgeries, or visit schools, nurseries, places where there are vulnerable people or people's homes. If somebody is a risk, they should not be able to carry out their constituency work in the same way. The proposals before us do not cover that.

It is worth explaining why the Committee was nervous about the idea of giving a proxy vote to somebody who had been excluded on this basis. Members of the Committee see proxy votes as a privilege. The House has agreed that a proxy vote can be given to those on baby leave and those with long-term sickness, but a Member cannot be given a proxy vote for bereavement, a sick child or any other reason why they may not be able to attend this place. However, the proposals give a proxy vote to someone who has been excluded on the basis that they pose a risk by being in this building. That did not sit comfortably with many members of the Committee, so the Committee decided it would not support the proxy vote.

Sir David Davis: I apologise for intervening a second time, but I want to come back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox). He said, quite rightly, that constituents would be penalised by Members being excluded but one risk of providing a proxy vote is that it persuades people they are not being penalised. In practice, as we have seen with the post office scandal, being here and representing people is the important thing that is being stopped by these proposals.

Dame Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend is right that excluding a representative's voice from these Benches is a severe punishment for constituents.

I will make a final point in my role as chair of the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. BGIPU has agreed it will follow whatever is decided by this place on travel, so outbound delegations will not feature anybody who has been excluded on the basis of a decision taken by the panel. We will ensure that decision is upheld. I believe the other various parliamentary groups are looking at the same thing.

I realise you have indulged me, Madam Deputy Speaker, with the time I have taken. To conclude, on balance, I support what the Leader of the House has put forward and I will be voting in favour of that.

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

6.49 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): When the House initially debated the Commission's proposals last summer, I challenged Members who like to refer to this place as the "mother of all parliaments" to make good on that epithet by ensuring that we lead by example and establish best practice. I repeat that call today. These reforms are, first and foremost, about taking real and tangible steps to protect and support staff and, indeed, other Members through mitigation measures.

In the development of the proposals, as the Leader of the House pointed out, there has been widespread discussion and consultation with a number of organisations and individuals—I pay tribute to all those who have contributed, particularly the House of Commons staff who have worked so carefully and so diligently on the proposals over many months.

My feeling is that this has dragged on for so long, completely inappropriately. At their heart, the reforms are about protecting staff and the wider parliamentary community from harassment and abuse. They have been long called for and very significantly delayed. The motion in January struck the appropriate balance between the rights of staff and the parliamentary community to protection from harm, the right to due process for the individual implicated, and the rights of that individual's constituents to democratic representation. It seems now though that the balance has been shifted away from the protection of staff by the Government, raising the point at which a risk assessment takes place from arrest to charge.

It is clear that there are a range of views on the correct threshold to begin that risk assessment process. However, leaving to one side for a moment that specific trigger point, it is important to stress that the main responsibility of the panel would be to consider the nature and severity of the alleged misconduct, whether there is a safeguarding concern and to determine the presence of a possible risk factor.

Turning to the contribution of the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), Chair of the House of Commons Procedure Committee, Parliament's authority, as I understand it—this is something that we have discussed in the House of Commons Commission a lot—does not stretch to constituency offices. All the members of the Commission are aware that that is something that we were not able to take into account. The latest review of the ICGS process, which was revealed this morning, has some really excellent recommendations that will have some effect in tightening it up.

It is worth noting that a number of mitigations will be open to the panel on a case-by-case basis. These might include, for example, preventing one-to-one contact with the Member, preventing Members from accessing bars on the estate, complete exclusion from the parliamentary estate, or indeed taking no action. The panel would also be informed of any existing voluntary arrangement between the Member and their Whip to stay away from the estate.

Crucially, those undertaking that risk assessment process would not, I believe, take any action that could compromise a police investigation or undermine any prosecution. The panel would not be given the name of the Member being risk-assessed. At no point would it be made public that information had been shared by the police about a Member, that a risk assessment had been undertaken, or that a Member had been excluded.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): For me, a lot of this spins on the formation and the training of the panel. One amendment to the motion said that it is anticipated that an MP and probably two Deputy Speakers would form the panel. What training would they need to be able to navigate such complex legal sensitivities? Does the hon. Lady have concerns,

[Dr Ben Spencer]

as I do, about the role of the Speaker as an Office in this process? In particular, what would happen if the Speaker were a victim in a case, or indeed if the Speaker or the Deputy Speakers were charged? How would the Speaker recuse himself or herself from conflict of interest in that situation?

Deidre Brock: The motion mentions

“the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker, the Director of Parliamentary Security and such other members of the House administration as it thinks fit.”

I believe that would be the case regardless of what we agree on today. As for the Speaker being involved, I am sure that the Chair of Ways and Means as well as the Deputy Chair of Ways and Means have been suggested as possible members of that committee. An amendment has been tabled on whether that member might be a Cabinet or shadow Cabinet member. That does not concern me. We should all believe that all our Members are fit to serve on such a committee and be prepared to do so.

Let me return now to the proxy voting record, which would not state the reason for a proxy being granted. Information would be shared with the minimum number of officials required to implement an exclusion, under a strict commitment to confidentiality.

With those essential protections, the SNP believes the motion should be brought back in line with the January version, which would more closely implement the Commission’s proposals. We will therefore be supporting the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). Again, we must not lose sight of the fact that these proposals are about protecting staff or fellow MPs. To raise that threshold further severely limits the ability of these proposals to succeed in doing so.

The length of time that this has taken frankly shames us all. Westminster is often accused of being an institution stuck in its ways and unable or unwilling to change. Please let us ensure that is not the case today.

6.55 pm

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I accept and believe that it is important that we have some means of protecting people in this House. This is something that we have been trying to do, and the introduction of the ICGS has helped in that process, making people confident that there is a route through which they can complain and where they can have their best interests assured and safeguarded.

The problem with this motion is that it is simply unconstitutional. If we want to go down this route, we need to legislate for it. From time immemorial—actually since 1340—unmolested access to this House has been the right of every Member and that is for a very good reason. These privileges are not for us as individuals, but they are, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sir Liam Fox) said, because of the 80,000 people whom we represent.

The ability to take away that right of attendance has always been held exclusively by the whole House. There is one exception I can think of to this and that is in 1648 with Pride’s purge—[*Interruption.*] We have some

chuntering from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) as we so often do. Yes, the Speaker may name somebody and ask them to withdraw, but any suspension requires a motion—a divisible motion. We have expelled Members historically. We have suspended Members and continue to do so. That involves a vote of the whole House. If we expel a Member, that Member has the right then to stand for Parliament and be sent straight back again. That is a fundamental right not of us, but of the people who sent us here.

The John Wilkes case is famous. The House disliked an individual Member and expelled him, but he stood and he succeeded and he was returned. Politically, that is of great importance. In this instance, we are suggesting that a small committee will have the power to deny constituents representation. That is not within the power of this House, unless it acts as a whole. A small committee cannot deprive Members of the right of attendance. It is a right, as I have said, that goes back to 1340. The only way to override such ancient rights—this is the whole basis of our system of common law—is by legislation, not by motion.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is of course right about the constitutionality of this, but we all know that, in practical terms in recent times, things have been done differently and that people have been excluded by agreement however obtained from the Whips. Surely what we have here is something that would be more transparent and would apply with equal measure to everyone?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Gentleman says that a Member agreeing not to come in is the same as banning a Member from coming in. That is clearly not true.

It would not take very long to turn this motion into legislation, and that would be the proper constitutional way of doing this.

The proposal is, to my mind, entirely ineffective. We know that the powers of arrest of the Serjeant at Arms are pretty much phantasmagorical. I am sorry to embarrass the great Serjeant, who is sitting in his place. He is a most distinguished figure, but the idea that he could turn up and arrest somebody for failing to appear at a Select Committee is pretty much theatre rather than an effective threat. Our ancient powers of imprisoning are no longer there, so what happens when this person, excluded by a small cabal, decides to turn up? What are we going to do? We will have a vote of the whole House to expel him—the proper process in the first place.

Sir Chris Bryant: Notwithstanding the right hon. Gentleman’s previous remark, I mostly agree with what he says. There is a problem here. When the Standards Committee reported on this, we made the point that exclusion is the very last thing that should be considered. In most cases, a Member in this kind of situation would choose to accept the decision voluntarily. However, we also said that if a Member chose not to, the House should vote on whether the Member should be excluded. Would the right hon. Gentleman be happy with that process?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman: any exclusion must be a decision of the whole House. That is our most ancient constitutional

right. The idea that it can be stopped by three people—even, Madam Deputy Speaker, one as distinguished as the Chairman of Ways and Means—is not in the spirit of our constitution.

Sir David Davis: Is the substance of what my right hon. Friend says that if we enacted this procedure, it would be subject to challenge in the courts?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am saying that it would be ineffective because a right hon. or hon. Member would simply maintain the right to turn up. There would be no power to arrest that person when turning up, therefore what would we do next, and what would we do if a person so outraged by the allegation said, “Well, I’m going to call a by-election, stand for Parliament and be returned”?

A general election is coming in the next few months. What would we do if a Member subject to this procedure were reselected by his constituency association and returned? By ancient principle, a Member who is returned cannot then be barred for something that happened in the last Parliament. Are we going to start saying, “The people of constituency X have duly voted in somebody who we suspended in the last Session, and who we are going to re-suspend”? Just before the last general election, Keith Vaz was subject to a report that was not entirely in his favour. Everyone recognised that that suspension could not carry over a general election.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I have immense respect for my right hon. Friend’s knowledge of constitutional matters. As an excellent former Leader of the House, why does he think that the Government have introduced an unconstitutional measure, rather than apply the due court process by having the House of Commons make the decision?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: It is because we have become confused about the limits of exclusive cognisance. The House has exclusive cognisance about its own affairs, but acting as the whole House. Look at the case of the exclusion of Bradlaugh. That was an action of the whole House. What did we do when Bobby Sands was elected to Parliament? We changed the law so that people subject to a criminal sentence could not stand for Parliament. We did not try to set up some approvals committee that would decide who could put their name forward; we followed a proper constitutional process. To answer my hon. Friend, I am astonished that our learned Clerks, who must have advised on this, have allowed such an extraordinary power grab by Standing Orders to undermine a fundamental of our constitution.

I know that when Members of Parliament talk about privilege it sounds as if they are talking about themselves, but it is about our constituents’ right to be represented. They are not represented only by votes. Indeed, most of the time they are least represented by votes, which go the way of the Government majority, with one vote more or less not making a hap’orth of difference. They are marginally represented by written questions, but not much. I have given answers to written questions; sometimes they seem to be as unilluminating as possible. I always tried to improve the illumination where I could. The real representation is in this very room. It is not even in

Westminster Hall or in Committee; it is in this great cockpit of debate. A cabal taking away that right is against the constitution.

I will make a couple of little points about the proposal. I do not have a strong view on whether the term should be “arrested” or “charged”, as long as the process is proper and constitutional. I think that it would be perfectly fair even if it was automatic, if it were done by a proper constitutional process. That is not really the issue, but I think that what is proposed is deeply unfair. I will point to two things.

First, the panel will not be given the name of the Member being risk assessed. Dare I say, tell that to the marines. We know in this place that it is inconceivable that a panel of two Deputy Speakers and a panjandrum would not know the name; we would all have been told it by the Lobby correspondents. That is how I find out everything that goes on here, usually from *The Mail on Sunday*, which has a hotline to what is going on. Those on the committee would know very soon, so that seems to me to be phoney, and not recognising reality.

Secondly, the report states that

“Members must not lobby the Panel...We carefully considered whether a Member subject to risk assessment should have the right to make representations”.

If someone is being risk assessed, how can they maintain that they are low risk if they are not allowed to represent themselves? I think it is extraordinarily unfair that they will be tried in absentia by a cabal, undermining the rights of their constituents. If we want to do this, let us find time for legislation, and let us do it properly.

7.6 pm

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is strange to agree so much with the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg). I think that he is a bit shocked that I agree with him as well—I see that he nods.

Let me return to two central things. First, this is about Parliament being like every other workplace in the country. Of course there are ways in which we are exceptional—we often emphasise those too much, perhaps—but what was fascinating when we debated the original proposals from the Commission in the Standards Committee was that the lay members all said that in every line of work they were in, this would be standard practice. It would happen in various different ways in different organisations, but certainly in every part of the public sector and in any major employer in the land, this process, in some shape or form, would be absolutely standard. We are simply trying to ensure that this workplace, like any other in the land, is safe not just from external threats but from behaviours that could put staff, members of the public and colleagues at risk.

Secondly, the proposal is about assessing the seriousness of the risk in any given set of circumstances—which heaven knows could vary enormously from the case of one person to another—and then taking proportionate and only proportionate measures to mitigate that risk, as any responsible employer and workplace surely should, and as any other workplace would be required to do, in law written by us. It is about the assessment of risk and proportionate measures to deal with the risk; it is not, in my mind—and I think that it is a terrible shame that it has been billed as such—about exclusion.

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

Exclusion should be, as it is in nearly every other business, the very last point to go to. It would be at the extreme end, when an assessment had been made that the risk was relatively extreme.

Many other things could be done that fall far short of exclusion. For instance, one of the oddities about this building and all the buildings on the parliamentary estate is that we often work, as an MP, with a single member of staff, or two members of staff, behind a big oak door. Somebody might want to make a risk assessment if a Member were, I would say, arrested for a sexual or violent crime relating to a member of staff. They might want to make an assessment that that Member should no longer be in that kind of office and that their office should be one shared with other members of staff, other Members of Parliament or in a more visible space. That might be the perfectly proportionate decision to take, and that could be done entirely without the public knowing and entirely as a neutral act.

This is a really important point: the court of public opinion has no formal rules of evidence, operates entirely to its own agenda, and—in my experience—rarely delivers justice or anything that we would think approximates justice. That is why, notwithstanding the point made about how rumour spreads around here, it is so important that any measure taken should be done confidentially. I think that in nearly every case it would be taken with the agreement of the Member concerned. It should also be considered an entirely neutral process. My worry about the obsession with exclusion as the endpoint of what we are looking at is that it starts to look like a punishment rather than a neutral act.

That is why, in nearly every case, if the assessment of the panel were that there was a significant risk that could be mitigated only through a suggestion of exclusion, the Member would be well advised to follow that advice voluntarily. I think they would in nearly any set of circumstances. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for North East Somerset that, in the end, it must be a matter for the House if there is to be forced exclusion; otherwise, there is a danger that we bring the whole process into disrepute and it will not last for more than five minutes.

Sir David Davis: The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points. I have two concerns about the process. The first is about abiding by our long-standing rule of innocent until proven guilty. The second is that the people being penalised by this measure are our constituents, not us. Does he imagine guidelines for the panel that take those two things on board in the way he just described?

Sir Chris Bryant: It is perfectly possible to do that. I can imagine many different circumstances where somebody was arrested for a violent or sexual offence and the panel decided that they would not go down the route of exclusion. The Member would still be able to be present and take part in debates; it is just that certain other factors would be considered, such as saying, “You can’t go on foreign travel on behalf of the House, you can’t go on travel in the UK paid for by the House, you can’t participate in IPU delegations, you can’t use the bars, and we’re going to rearrange your offices.” All of those

things could happen entirely without disrupting the Member’s ability to represent their constituents to the fullest possible degree. As I say, this is always about assessing the risk in the specific set of circumstances and mitigating those risks only in a proportionate way. In most cases, my suspicion is that exclusion would be disproportionate and therefore not necessary. That is why it is unfortunate that the motion has been couched in this way.

Dame Karen Bradley: I am slightly confused. The hon. Gentleman is making excellent points—they are all good things that we should consider—but the motion is specific in saying:

“The Panel will decide on appropriate measures to mitigate any risk, and such mitigation may include one or more of the following...exclusion from the Parliamentary estate...exclusion from domestic travel...and exclusion from foreign travel”.

It does not talk about exclusion from bars or changing offices. If it did and we were talking about how we might mitigate risk, we might all be in a different position.

Sir Chris Bryant: The motion does not preclude those things, either. In fact, the first report produced by a Committee was by the Standards Committee when we took evidence. Interestingly, we said:

“First, we propose that the power to exclude Members from the precincts should form only one part of a wider, formalised risk mitigation process. The evidence we heard from comparable bodies, including the police, suggests that interim suspension is normally a last resort.”

Indeed, we went on to say:

“The House Service could, for example, if it were thought necessary and appropriate”—

I would add “proportionate” to that—

“move the MP’s member of staff to an office shared with other staff, or allocate the MP an office which has a higher degree of visibility.”

Of course, all those things could happen perfectly easily without the motion and could happen now.

I have just a couple more points. On arrest or charge, I find it problematic to land just on charge. That is very late—much later than in any other comparable body in the public sector or the private sector in this country. It is not comparable with the law of the land in terms of what most employers would have to do to be a reasonable employer.

It is important that it is proportionate—that is, first, to the crime itself. That is already met by the motion in one sense, as these measures are about sexual or violent offences. The panel might also want to consider whether we are talking about one instance or several allegations. Secondly, has there been one arrest or two arrests? Has the Member been arrested under caution? We get to various other stages long before charge, such as police bail. Are we saying that we should not even consider these measures when somebody is on police bail? That seems odd to me. I would think that is us falling short of our duty.

The panel should also consider the individual’s co-operation. If the individual Member is being very co-operative, that suggests that we would not need to consider taking major further measures. Then—this point was made earlier—we should think about who the person is that we are talking about. If they are a member of staff working in this building, presumably

one would want to assess that the risk was higher and therefore one would need to consider further mitigatory measures.

I have two final points—

Sir Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Chris Bryant: Oh, all right. I was going to try to make them final.

Sir Philip Davies: The hon. Member talks about bail. Presumably, the police bail could instil a condition that that person should not go within a certain distance of the person who has made the allegation, so this process is not needed. The police are perfectly capable of putting in those bail conditions.

Sir Chris Bryant: But let us say, for sake of argument—it is only for sake of argument; I am not referring to any individual case at all—that the allegation is that the Member of Parliament has in some way sexually assaulted one of their or another MP's members of staff here. There are other members of staff in the building. So the police bail may refer to whether they can approach the person who made the allegation, but it would not be able to deal with all the other members of staff who operate in the same purlieu here on the estate. That is why taking the proportionate measure is important.

Earlier, I wanted to ask the Leader of the House a simple question about her own amendment—I know it is very technical and tiny—which says that the panel would be able to proceed during an Adjournment. Would it also be able to proceed during a Prorogation? I hope that she can answer that later.

Finally, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset is absolutely right—the Standards Committee made this point several times when this was being debated from the first set of proposals—that, in the end, a mandatory exclusion of a Member should be a decision of the whole House. That would be a relatively easy thing to add to this process. I note that he had an amendment that has not been selected; for whatever reason, I do not mind. If we are moving to exclusion, I think that it would be cleaner if we had a process where, in the main, the Member would normally be expected to—and would probably, I think—co-operate, but if they chose not to, it would be a matter for a motion of the House, which should be taken without debate and without amendment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I will have to impose a time limit of seven minutes.

7.18 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant). I think that I agree with most of what he said.

There is an old joke about asking directions where the answer is, “Don’t start from here.” Given a fair choice, I would not start with the motion in front of us, but I do support the idea that the House should be able to exclude somebody who has been accused of or

charged with a serious offence. That is in the interests of the safety of the people who work here and visit here and of the reputation of the House, so I think I support the principle.

However, there are various issues with the actual motion we have in front of us. It appears to have been written for a process that should have applied when someone has been accused of something or arrested for something, but has ended up being applied when someone has actually been charged with something. If we were starting from scratch and saying, “What should we do if a Member is charged with a violent or sexual offence?” I am not sure we would come up with the process that we have here.

That was the logic of the amendments that I have tabled, which seek to say that if somebody has actually been charged in that situation, they should just be excluded until that process has been resolved either by the charges being dropped, or by them being acquitted or convicted. It is hard to see, based on the experience we have had of people choosing to self-exclude, that the panel would ever meet and choose not to exclude somebody who had been charged—that seems extraordinarily unlikely. So what is the advantage of having the panel in that situation? It would only add in some level of discretion and some risk that what is reported in public is that the House thinks this person has been charged with something so serious they have to be excluded, but that somehow we do not think this person is really guilty so they have not been excluded. That would taint the process to no advantage.

My suggestion is that, if the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) is not carried, and this process continues to apply solely on charge, we just scrap the panel completely and the person is excluded until the whole process is resolved. That is fairer, neater and more clearly understood and it would be a better situation to have. I wish this process could be a lot quicker and that getting from accusation through to arrest, to charge and to conviction or acquittal did not take a year or two years, because if it did not, this would not be such a significant process. Somebody would be out of Parliament for a few months at most, not a few years. However, that is not the world we appear to live in, and so having clarity, where everybody knows the position, would be better than having the panel.

I have a few other points. This House appoints Members to the Standards Committee and elects the Chair; what we have here is a more serious process where somebody can be excluded for a very long period, effectively by Members who have not been elected by the House for that purpose. We can argue that when the House selects Deputy Speakers to a very serious position, that is a reasonable part of their role, but I am not sure that the choice to have the third member—possibly the casting vote—be a member of the Commission is a sensible one.

The Commission is formed of a member of the Cabinet, a member of the shadow Cabinet, an SNP-appointed person and then three others appointed by the Government or the Opposition. We have generally tried to steer clear of having the Government exclude Members from Parliament—I think my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) would strongly agree—so that was a terrible choice for

[Nigel Mills]

who the casting vote might be. It should have been the Liaison Committee, or a member of the Panel of Chairs, or somebody who is senior in the House and has had some kind of endorsement from the House, but is not tainted by being a Government appointee.

I think that in evidence to the Procedure Committee both the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House said they would not want to be on the panel in that situation, so now we are down to four members who could do that work. What if one of those members was accused? What if one of them was the victim? How would we form the panel? Perhaps, when we come to review this question in future we could find a better way of doing that.

My final point is on the proxy vote. It would have been fair enough, if we were applying this process at accusation or arrest, to say, “Well, somebody may not be guilty or even be charged with this, so to exclude them completely would be the wrong thing to do. Let’s at least give them their vote.” We have had a Parliament in recent memory with a very small majority, and an exclusion in such a situation could have changed the result of some votes, so I can see a logic for a proxy vote in that situation. But can anybody really see the logic of a proxy vote for somebody who has been charged?

We do not give proxy votes for people who are representing this House on other assemblies around the world; we do not give them to people who are on official House Select Committee visits or other official business. That we would give a proxy vote to someone who was in a courtroom, in the dock, on trial for rape, is ridiculous. If we believe acting at the point of charge is right, the Member should be excluded and have effectively no role until their name is cleared. If the hon. Member for North East Fife’s amendment is not carried, I urge Members to scrap the panel, which adds nothing and makes the situation worse, and not have a proxy vote. I think that would be a terrible tainting of the House’s reputation.

7.24 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I start by referencing the foreword to the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme report published today, for which I commend Sir Paul Kernaghan. Paragraph 3 says:

“A scheme like the ICGS must recognise the different working cultures and constitutional requirements, whilst at the same time contribute to a non-negotiable objective of helping to deliver a modern environment in which everyone is respected and valued. The Royal Military Police’s motto is *Exemplo Ducemus*—‘By example shall we lead’. I have taken the view that Parliament’s internal arrangements should also, as far as possible, lead by example. I have consciously sought to make recommendations that are both practical and reflect the highest possible standards.”

I am conscious that that is talking about the ICGS, which is a different process, but sometimes, when we end up talking about dates such as 1340 and 1648, I am not sure people necessarily think that is relevant to today.

My amendments are about safeguarding. I am grateful that the Chair of the Procedure Committee, although she disagrees with me, recognises that that is a key point of contention in relation to the motion we are considering today. When we last discussed these proposals in a general debate, we were talking about proposals in

relation to arrest. They have now been changed to charge, and my amendment simply seeks to get the view of the House on what is the right point. I appreciate there is a balance to that.

On the question of consultation mechanisms, we have talked about evidence given to the Procedure Committee, the Standards Committee and the Commission, but I stand here as a member of the fourth party in this House and it is interesting that I have had support for my amendment from other smaller parties as well. It is important, when we are debating these matters, that all voices are heard.

People are always very quick to point out that we are not employees. Indeed, as a former police officer, I was also not an employee then; I was appointed and I swore an oath to serve. However, we do have responsibilities to our own employees as an employer, and I should mention I was a member of the Speaker’s Conference in that regard. I think the public take a view of our employment status, in that they recognise we are not employees, but I agree with those hon. Members who have made the point that as far as possible we should be trying to align ourselves with modern workplaces and practices and with the laws that we pass here in respect of them.

Where MP’s terms and conditions have caused issues in recent years, it is when we have in this place perhaps over-emphasised ourselves as being exceptional and unique, and forgotten that we are not here just simply to represent our constituents and peers; we are representatives of those constituents and peers. We are those people too, and if we do not encourage people to think about MPs that way, we will never get the diversity and representation in this place that we want. I think the public are less concerned about us exercising our rights since Cromwell, and we should be thinking about how we minimise the impact on representation.

I agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) that exclusion is one of a series of measures contained in this motion, and may be applicable only in a very small number of situations. It is about risk and it is about safeguarding. I refer to an email I received from Ken Gall from the trade unions here in the Commons—I think the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) referred to it as well:

“Following the publication of the Angiolini report, senior House officials including the Speaker met with the Deputy Commissioner of the Met Police...to discuss the fact that Wayne Couzens...had worked on the parliamentary estate.”

He notes that the House released the following statement:

“The PaDP leadership also now automatically informs Parliament’s Director of Security about serious disciplinary issues, and any officer accused of gross misconduct is automatically removed from working on the parliamentary estate.”

I think all of us would argue that was proportionate, necessary and a risk-based response. However, we are in danger of saying that the risk posed by a man accused of serious sexual offenses is unacceptable when that man is a police officer, but not when the man in question is an MP.

I also want to refer to the comments made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). As part of the safeguarding assessment that we make, we should think about the full circumstances of the case. It may be appropriate to take a different approach when the offence is in relation to somebody who works in the estate, as opposed to someone external.

Why arrest and not charge? Because I want our practices to align with those in other workplaces. It is important to remember that the majority of people in this workplace are not MPs or Members of the other place; they are members of staff. This is their workplace too. My proposal also aligns with the Government's own external statements of intent, particularly in relation to violence against women and girls. Again, Ken Gall points out that the Government's response to the Government Equalities Office consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace referred to adequate legal protections and prompting employers to take action to prevent harassment. I am not sure how failing to exclude from the workplace a man arrested on suspicion of rape would not fall into the category of an employer not taking all reasonable steps to protect women. The House is not an employer of MPs, but it is an employer of others.

In my remaining minute, I will talk about the role of the Whips and the politicisation of the process. Voluntary exclusion happens now. The higher the bar is, the more politicisation of the process there will be. The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) talked about knowing from a panel exactly who it was. Frankly, we know the people who have voluntarily excluded themselves from the estate on that basis. Having the bar too high would negate some of the safeguarding measures that we might try to take.

Let me say, as a former police officer—the only one taking part in this debate, I think—that arrest on suspicion does not take place just on the basis of an allegation. Yes, some vexatious complaints occur, but what message do we send from this place if we say that our concerns on this are more important than safeguarding? Balance, as the Chair of the Procedure Committee said, is important.

Several members of staff have come up to me today to thank me for tabling my amendment. I ask those who are thinking of voting against it to think about the message they would be sending outwith this place.

7.31 pm

Sir Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), as I so often do. This is a very unsatisfactory process, to say the least. I endorse everything that he said.

We are where we are in terms of this particular motion, and I will mention a couple of things in it, relating mainly to the debate about whether or not the proposed Standing Order should apply at arrest or at charge. I very much agree with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley). She was right to say that the measure would find the right balance by applying at charge, partly because, as has been said, our constituents have a right to be represented in the House of Commons—we should not forget that—but also because of the time these things take. Someone being deprived of being here because they have been arrested even though they have done nothing wrong is not just a hypothetical; it has actually happened, and they were excluded from here for a substantial amount of time. Are we completely blind to those situations? We should be completely aware of that, and we must not allow it to happen again.

I must say that I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) was unusually naive in his view about what might happen if we had the situation at arrest. He seems to think that if we had a panel meeting at arrest, exclusion would be a last resort, and that a whole suite of other things would be gone through before we got to that. To be perfectly honest, he has been here long enough to know that that is an absolute load of old tripe. He knows full well that the moment somebody is arrested, the panel would say, "We must be risk-averse," and the person would be excluded straightaway. And I guarantee to him that if they were not excluded straightaway, an awful lot of people in this House would demand that they be excluded straightaway on the basis of arrest. If he does not think that is the case, I am afraid he is completely and utterly out of touch with what goes on.

Wendy Chamberlain: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, given that I have just spoken. What assessment does he think the Whips make on that basis?

Sir Philip Davies: Well, the point is that that is a voluntary process. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset has made clear, if somebody feels that that is not a suitable process, they can come in here. This is about us formally excluding people from here. That is a very different issue altogether—one that we should not take lightly; and one that, I suspect, is being taken too lightly.

Rehman Chishti: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Philip Davies: I will not, because others want to speak and I do not want to take their time.

I will raise two other points. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) is absolutely right about the fact that when this motion was originally tabled, it was about arrest, and the Government have just changed the wording to "charged" but kept the rest of it in place, which is completely unsatisfactory. Personally, for the reason that I have given, I would get rid of the panel altogether, because I suspect that the outcome would be the same on every single thing, whether arrest or charge, to be perfectly honest. I am not entirely sure what the point of the panel is. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that when the matter relates to a charge, the panel is completely unnecessary, and we should get rid of it.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend give way very briefly?

Sir Philip Davies: Go on then—as it is my right hon. Friend.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I think the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) is more constitutional—although still far from perfect—because whether to exclude under certain circumstances is a decision for the House, rather than a decision for the House to delegate. His amendment to this rather bad motion is at least an improvement.

Sir Philip Davies: There is no better endorsement than that, as far as I am concerned, so that will do for me and, I am sure, for my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley.

[*Sir Philip Davies*]

The Order Paper indicates that amendment (c) is expected to be pressed to a Division, and I hope that it is. It was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who cannot be here because of all the parliamentary business that he is engaged in today, but I have signed it, Madam Deputy Speaker, and would be prepared to move it. It comes back to the point—one that my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands made—about this motion being sort of cobbled together with a different original purpose.

Amendment (c) is about removing proxy voting from somebody who is subject to a charge. I do not think that there is any justification at all for somebody who has been charged with a serious sexual or violent offence to be given a proxy vote, when people with far better reasons for being absent from the House are not given that privilege. It would be an outrage, in my opinion, if they were treated more favourably than other Members who had just as good a reason for not being here. I very much hope that the Leader of the House will accept the amendment, which I think reflects the mood of the House. Proxy voting is a step too far, and it is a consequence of not amending the motion when the decision was made to change the wording from arrest to charge.

I would like to say a lot more—I said last week that this debate was not long enough, given the seriousness of the issue, and I maintain that view—but I want to allow others to speak. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset when he says that this is an unsatisfactory process, and if he were to vote against the whole motion, I would have a lot of sympathy with him, but I hope that colleagues accept that “charged” strikes the right balance by being fair to everybody—including our constituents, who are the most important people for this House to think about—and in terms of safeguarding the people who work here. I also hope that Members will accept amendment (c), tabled by hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and me, to scrap proxy voting in that situation. That would at least make the motion better than it would otherwise be.

7.39 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I rise, in an unusual moment, to agree with the hon. Member for Shipley (Sir Philip Davies), and with the point that the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) also laid out in a lot of detail. The reason why the proxy voting, the panel and the other things were originally in the motion was that the motion was originally based on arrest. This House did not get a chance to vote on that. From the cursory opening speech made by the Leader of the House, it seems that even she is not that keen on the fact that the motion got changed. As such, I rise to talk about her original motion and the original motion of the Commission. I totally agree that if the basis is charge, we should get rid of the proxy voting and so on.

Sir Julian Lewis: In the spirit of consensus, may I point out to the House that when I responded to an intervention that the hon. Lady made last Wednesday, I made an error? I said that I was not aware that the word

“arrest” had been included in the original proposal. I then immediately rushed off to check that I was right, and found that I was wrong. I am glad to have had the opportunity to set the record straight.

Jess Phillips: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I hope that he took the fact that I was seeking to correct him in the spirit in which it was intended. I will just point out that on the issues of arrest, sexual violence and safeguarding, I am usually right.

Sir Chris Bryant: Not to be humble about it.

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Today, just on this one day, I have spoken to two women who were raped by Members of this Parliament. That is a fairly standard day for me. I notice that they are not the people who have been mentioned much so far today. Some of them told me what they wanted me to say in this debate. I will just read out some of what was sent to me: that exclusion “at the point of charge sends a clear message to victims that not only will we not investigate unless a victim goes to the police, but we won’t act unless they’re charged, which happens in less than 1% of cases, so what’s the point?” That was essentially what that victim said to me.

The Chair of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), told us about all the people she had had in front of her. I wonder how many of the victims of these crimes came and gave evidence, or were given an opportunity to give evidence in private. I am going to stand here and speak up for them, because every single one of them wishes for exclusion to be on the basis of arrest.

The idea that an arrest can happen on a vexatious charge has been raised, which suggests that nobody in this building who has said that has ever dealt with an arrest in a case of sexual violence or serious violence. The amendment to change the motion to “arrest” happens to be in the name of somebody who, as we have already shown, is always right on this, and that of a former police officer, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I know that in this House we are not always keen on experts, but I urge the House to understand that it takes a huge amount for somebody to be arrested. You cannot just ring West Midlands police and say, “Jess Phillips assaulted me”, and they come round and arrest me within the hour. What world are we living in? It is absolute madness. If we do not do this on the basis of arrest, we are saying that we do not trust the police officers in our country.

The hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is not in the Chamber today—I have informed him that I will mention him. He has tabled amendments, and if the one tabled in our name falls, I will absolutely vote for his, so this is not a particular criticism of him. When we were both tabling our motions, I asked him, “What about safeguarding?” He said, “The thing is, we are not employed, so employment law does not come to us.” I asked him whether he had children or grandchildren, and I said, “Would you like it in your child’s school if one of the teachers had been arrested for rape and still went to teach your kids?” He said, “The thing is, we are

self-employed.” I said, “Okay. Childminders are self-employed, so would you be happy with a rapey childminder who has been arrested looking after your three-year-old? I wouldn’t be.”

Why do we think that we in this place are so special? Why are we all talking as if all the people who work in this building do not have a right to feel safe when they walk around? The women I spoke to today do not feel safe, and they told me to come and say that. The women who work in the office on my floor all said to me, “Go and say this for us today, Jess.” Why do we think we are so special?

I notice that today the constituents of the hon. Member for Christchurch are completely bereft of representation. The argument that we would be taking away our constituents’ rights does somewhat suggest that no one in this building should ever take a day off on the slip—“Don’t be going on holiday; what about your constituents?”

Sir Philip Davies: First, I think we should acknowledge that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is on a parliamentary delegation. He is not being slipped in the sense that he is on holiday or whatever, and I think it would be wise if the hon. Lady reflected on that.

Secondly, given the passion with which the hon. Lady is speaking, which we all accept—we all agree about the victims—does she agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) that if somebody were arrested for a serious sexual offence, exclusion should be the last resort, or does she think that that person should be automatically excluded?

Jess Phillips: I guess it would entirely depend on the sexual offence, but even though I jokingly said earlier that I will be on the panel, I can recognise enough my own particular bias in this regard. I do think that exclusion would be the answer, but the truth is that so will most people.

To address the point made by the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) that this Chamber is where we represent people, are the constituents of the hon. Member for Christchurch—I am using him as an example, because the hon. Member for Shipley (Sir Philip Davies) said that he was not here—or anybody else’s constituents bereft? Are the constituents of all the people who are not in the Chamber now not being represented? The argument that keeps being made is, “I am doing it for my constituents”, but I bet that I could find people in every Member’s constituency who do not feel they are being represented particularly well.

Sir Philip Davies: I am sure the hon. Lady must recognise that when it comes to representing our constituents, there is a very great difference between not attending one particular debate and being excluded from Parliament, perhaps for up to two years or so.

Jess Phillips: The trouble is that that is what is currently happening. The hon. Gentleman, or anybody else who does not want there to be a two-year wait between arrest and charge, might like to join me in all my advocacy. When I worked in this field before I was in this building, it was not two years between arrest and charge, so maybe the Leader of the House could reflect

on her party’s own record in that regard. Of course it should not take that long. I think it was the hon. Member for Amber Valley who said, “If it was quick”—well, we all want to see that for everybody involved, but there is this idea that we are superior beings who should not have to be concerned about safeguarding laws that are totally standard practice across the whole of the country. Do you know who gets excluded now? It is the person who got raped. We say, “This magical being has to be able to stay because in 1348, blah, blah, blah.” What about the person who got raped who works here?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: My point was that this should be done properly. The hon. Lady makes a compelling case for arrest, but only if it is done in a proper and constitutional manner.

Jess Phillips: Like, I say, I am often right on these things. I am going to err to the right hon. Gentleman’s judgment on that point. What I am saying—I do not mean to besmirch him—is that we seem to act like we are superior beings. The people who currently get excluded are often young women—I have dealt with cases where it was young men—who never work in politics again. The woman I spoke to first thing this morning has never set foot in this building again. She has given up politics—we have extinguished that light. We gave it up, we excluded her, and we allowed the person she alleges did that to her to walk around in this place. Everybody who votes against arrest would be willing to allow that person to walk around, possibly being a danger to somebody else, for another two years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I have three more speakers to call. There is nothing wrong with interventions, but I would be grateful if speakers stuck within the seven-minute period, because otherwise it will get to 10 minutes, and we will not have time for the Minister.

7.49 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): I rise to support the Leader of the House’s motion, and it is a pleasure to follow the powerful argument made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips).

I speak as a former Law Officer of the Crown—Attorney General under two Prime Ministers and Solicitor General before that—but perhaps more relevantly, as a practising barrister in the criminal law field for 17 years before I was elected to this honourable House. I very much accept the need to protect the people working here—of course, I do—and that includes other Members, staff of the House, staff of Members, visitors and everyone else. I personally prosecuted cases, and I think I am the only speaker on either side today who has actually prosecuted sexual offences and defended them in court over a 17-year period before 2010.

I care about these issues from a professional standpoint, and I want to speak about that aspect, but also about the constitutional aspect. I agree very much with my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg). After all, Charles Bradlaugh, to whom he referred, was the Northampton MP in the 1880s. He was repeatedly excluded from this House for

[Sir Michael Ellis]

refusing to swear the oath—at the time, one could not affirm—and that is a constitutional point about how the House maintained its right to reject someone who had been voted in to serve in this House.

There is a key principle here—a golden thread—that runs through our system, which is that a person must not suffer imposition before guilt has been proven. It is offensive to the laws of national justice and, in fact, contrary to human rights to do so. There is a principle, and this principle is ancient. In fact, it dates back to the ancient Romans. Later than ancient Rome, the 6th-century “Digest” of Justinian cited the general rule of evidence, which I was taught 30 years ago in my law degree, which is that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Everything we do in this House must be based and predicated on the principle that proof lies on him who asserts, not on him who denies. That is the legal principle, which in Latin is “*Ei incumbit probatio qui dicit, non qui negat*”, and when it was mentioned in the 500s AD—over 1,500 years ago—it referred back to Roman times.

That is how ancient this principle is—it was introduced to Roman criminal law by the Emperor Antoninus Pius—and it has become part of the constitution of this country. What we do in this House is predicated on our constitutional principles, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset said and as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), as a historian of this House, will also know. However, it is not just that it is ancient; it is important that even the Hebrew Talmud has said that a person is innocent until proven guilty, and I have read that the presumption of innocence is fundamental to Islamic law. The principle that the onus of proof is on the accuser or claimant is strongly held, based on a hadith documented by Imam Nawawi in the 13th century. Everything we do here should look to that, as in Blackstone’s “*Commentaries on the Laws of England*” of the 1760s, which are still taught today, when it states:

“It is better that ten guilty persons escape than one innocent suffer.”

Having spent 17 years at the Bar practising criminal law—prosecuting and defending—before being elected to this place, I strongly agree with that sentiment.

Rehman Chishti: I also prosecuted and defended in the criminal courts before coming to this place, and I of course accept “innocent until proven guilty”. Indeed, I have dealt with cases in which individuals have been accused and then found to be not guilty at the end, so I will save my question for the constitutional point that has been raised. If the constitutional point is that this is unconstitutional, after that everything else falls, does it not?

Sir Michael Ellis: My hon. Friend has made his point, and I am conscious of your admonition about time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will move on.

I would say that the bar—the legal test—for a constable arresting an individual is necessarily very low. A mere suspicion is sufficient, or what is called a reasonable belief. That belief could turn out to be wrong, and many people arrested are never charged, while in fact many people who are charged are never convicted. This is not about MPs; it is about the principles of justice,

at least it is for me. To admonish or to punish individuals in relation to their work in the public interest, which is what MPs of course do, on arrest is wrong. It may also very well encourage malicious complaints, and let us not forget that there is a history of that.

I will cut my remarks short, bearing in mind your admonition, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to emphasise that my remarks, coming as they do from a lawyer, are necessarily perhaps rather legalistic and constitutional, but they are no less passionately held. I have great respect for those on both sides of the House who have spoken as they have. We all care about justice, we all care that right is done for all and we care about victims being treated properly. However, in my respectful submission, we must avoid breaching long-established rules of natural justice, which are part of our constitution. Otherwise, history will look back on us as it does on other periods of historical unfairness and injustice. We must maintain our historic fairness. I support the Leader of the House’s motion.

7.56 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I support the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). I remind the Chamber that it is now almost 11 months since the proposals on risk-based exclusion were first debated here, and it seems as though we have had a lot of discussions outside about how to best protect everyone who works here. I think there is a general acceptance, constitutional issues aside, that something needs to be done, but there is a clear disagreement about the threshold for intervention.

It is clear that there is a need for a threshold for an assessment to take place. We are talking here about a threshold for an assessment, not a threshold for an exclusion, which is why I support the amendments providing that the threshold should be arrest, rather than charge. After all, if there has been enough evidence gathered to charge someone with a violent or sexual offence, in almost any other workplace there would not be any discussion about suspending that person; it would just happen, because most employers in this country believe providing a safe and secure place of work for their staff is a given. That is the place the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) has come from with his amendments.

In fact, I am of the view that in most workplaces suspension would happen automatically following arrest. However, the amendment I support does not go that far. It just says that arrest is the point at which we should begin to consider the risk to the people who work here, and that is the key point: we are thinking about the risk to the people who work here. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) eloquently put it, people do not just ring up the police and get someone arrested on a whim. There is an awful lot of investigatory work done before we get to that point.

This is about striking the right balance between ensuring people are able to work in a safe environment and ensuring that the people Members represent do not feel disenfranchised by virtue of a Member’s absence. On our constituents’ view, this is not just about how a Member represents them here; as we have said, there are lots of other things that can be done outside this Chamber to

represent people. However, there is also the other side to this, which is about how a constituent would feel if they wanted support from their MP because they were working in a place that was not dealing with a sexual predator, and they were turning up to work anxious and fearful that they might bump into them—if, for whatever reason, the employer was not allowing anything to be done because the police had not formally charged the individual. I hope we can all see how that could put the victim in an impossible situation. How can we support our constituents to insist that the employer does the right thing if we do not insist on doing those things ourselves? If we cannot get our own House in order, how can we effectively challenge the worst employment practices out there? Should we not be aiming to be one of the best places for people to work? We cannot hope to recruit and retain the brightest and best in this country, if we have a working culture from another era. Of course, this is a very special place to work—it is a privilege to be here—but that does not mean we should have to put up with suboptimal standards in how we conduct ourselves. We should aim for a culture where everyone is respected and working conditions are among the best in the country, and when those standards slip we must ensure a robust and swift process is in place.

One of the objections to some of the amendments seems to be that Members should not be subject to the same rules and standards to which we hold other people. That is wrong in principle and feeds into the sense—which a lot of people have—that we are out of touch with the real world. I also feel there is some conflation, possibly deliberately, between the use of this procedure and the finding of guilt. I would never accept that an expulsion or exclusion equates to a finding of guilt. This process will not replace the role of a court and I believe that the risk assessment process and the adjudication panel that has been suggested would deal with this in a sensible and considered way, and we would have ample opportunity to weed out vexatious complaints, although for the reasons I have stated I do not think we would even get to that point.

What we are asking to be done is no different from what we ask of others outside this place. We are asking for the same standards to be applied here as in every other workplace. The original report on this stated clearly that flexibility is the key. Mitigations can be put in place that fall short of exclusion and there are lots of examples of that. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) gave a number of measures that could be taken before we reach the last resort of exclusion. That is what any other workplace would do; it would assess the risk and take mitigating steps.

I am afraid we are into a very binary debate about whether this proposal means we should exclude or not. There are a number of different ways in which we can protect our staff without having to reach that point. This again shows that this place believes the rules do not apply to us in the same way that they apply to everyone else, that we do not value the victim's voice, and that we do not believe people in here should have safe working environments and confidence that they can work in a safe environment. The public should look at us and think about whether we really do value the contribution of our staff, when we put them into these positions in the first place.

I will finish with the words of Dame Laura Cox, whose work started this whole process. She said that this place has a culture of

“deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence, in which bullying, harassment and sexual harassment have been able to thrive and have long been tolerated and concealed.”

We have made progress in dealing with that, but some of the arguments tonight show that some people just have not understood that we have more to do.

8.2 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Let me start by saying that I actually do agree with the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), who is on his phone, that this should be a constitutional issue, and I agree with the hon. Member for Shipley (Sir Philip Davies) about the daftness of some of the ways this system works, and with the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills). This is an imperfect proposal, but it is now over seven years since we started talking about tackling sexual harassment and sexual abuse on the estate, and since we heard that there had been rapes and sexual assaults in this building, involving people who work in politics and our colleagues, and allegations of such. So the question for us all tonight is: do we keep doing nothing or do we take some action and make progress?

My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) is right: it is not about exclusion; it is about risk. What are we doing about the risk—a risk that we tell other workplaces they have to act upon? I will not use the term hypocritical but I do offer the term double standards and say that we are at risk of being called inconsistent, inexcusable and unjustifiable if we do not match the ambitions we set for other workplaces here for ourselves.

I say to every MP in this House, “You should want this to be the case, because while we don't have an employment contract, we sign them for our staff, and therefore the laws that exist about what responsibilities you have as an employer apply to how you treat your staff. The question is whether you can truly look them in the eye and say that this is a safe workplace.” This is a workplace where our young women employees get taken out by each other to be warned about other MPs and, indeed, staff in this place. There is the whisper network, and that would not cut it at an employment tribunal.

These policies are about living up to what we expect of other workplaces. They are about addressing situations such as when someone comes into our constituency surgery and says, “The local headteacher has been arrested but they are still teaching children,” or, “There's a surgeon at the hospital who has been arrested for sexually assaulting a patient, but they are still in there. What are you going to do about it?” Do we say, “Until they're charged, I don't think there's a problem”? We would not be able to justify that to our constituents; why on earth would we justify it when talking about ourselves?

It is suggested that people are arrested on a whim, but they are not. It comes down to a central point: the cognitive dissonance in this place. We have constant debates about violence against women—how we are going to tackle it and make it a priority. We must recognise that we too often do not believe victims, but we are saying in this instance that because we are special sausages, this will not be a priority.

[Stella Creasy]

We have to start believing and acting on those beliefs. The proposal may be an imperfect process, but finally it is a way of saying that we do believe, sadly, that power corrupts. Sadly, there are people who abuse their power dynamics and power relations. We must understand that, as the consultation that started this said, gentlemen's agreements on what should happen are insufficient.

Political parties—the elephant in the room in this debate today—are complicit, too. There are cosy wrap-ups with the Whips Office to try and manage situations, when almost every single person who has come forward has lost their job—a job they loved in a career and party they cared about. We do not protect the victims; we protect the perpetrators. Every political party needs to look itself in the eye and ask why seven years on, people are saying that the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme process, which is imperfect in its own right, is still better than our political processes. That is why we have debates like this.

We hold ourselves to different standards compared with what we expect in workplaces and our constituencies. Those are standards we should apply as MPs ourselves as employers. That is the issue, if nothing else. We have demanded of the police that in order to keep people safe on this estate, they bar from it anyone accused of a serious violent or sexual offence—not even arrested, which a Member who is no longer in his place said was so easy to get. We have asked for people who have just been accused to be barred to keep us and our staff safe, but we do not ask that of ourselves. It is inconsistent, double standards, contradictory—potentially a word that begins with “h”. Above all, it damages our reputation. This is a workplace where MPs have unparalleled access in our constituencies to people because we are the MP. We do not need to have a DBS check. This is a workplace where no one is required to tell HR if they enter into a relationship with somebody, yet in most workplaces that is standard—and, frankly, it protects people because it recognises the difference between a power imbalance and the inevitable love that comes as a result of delivering too many leaflets on too many long weekends.

This is not a workplace in the modern world and our staff are suffering as a result. Seven years on, the cases keep coming forward. Seven years on, the cases are being covered up. Seven years on, people are losing faith that we will ever get it. So, yes, this proposal is not perfect, but this proposal is a step forward, and Members should vote for it and vote for amendment (o). To get back to what we originally talked about, we should recognise that if someone is arrested for a serious sexual or violent offence, that does mean that there needs to be a risk analysis. If Members do not vote for this, I tell them not to sit in their surgery when someone comes and asks what they should do about their workplace, and not to say to me that they are listening to victims of sexual violence and that they understand why violence against women and girls in this country is still such a problem.

We are not such special sausages that we cannot be complicit in that culture. That is the risk tonight if we do not vote for amendment (o) and at least try to get this process rolling. It is not perfect—it can be amended—but if we vote it down tonight or try to find a way of making it impractical to apply, our staff will not forgive us. Good, talented people will walk away from politics

because it is a dangerous environment, and our constituents will simply not understand why we do not hold ourselves to the standards we ask of them as employers and other people.

For the sake of all of us, special or not, sausage or not, let us do something finally about this. Let us put safeguarding at the heart of what we do, and let us try and move into the 21st century for once.

8.9 pm

Penny Mordaunt: May I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate tonight? I will try, in the limited time I have, to answer the technical points that Members have raised.

The first was from the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). She wanted me to confirm whether, if someone was currently under charge, these procedures would apply to them, should we bring them in today. The answer is yes. Indeed, if new information came to light after someone had been charged, the process with the panel could be re-enacted. It is a risk-based approach that would apply to people currently under charge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) asked whether these procedures would apply to all Members of the House, including the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, and they would. If they were panel members, they would clearly recuse themselves, as they would in other scenarios.

I thank the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley), and her Committee for the work they have done. I thank her for her support for the Commission's proposal, and I understand her concerns about proxy voting. I just say to her that we heard evidence from constituencies that had had Members of Parliament out of action, if I can term it like that, for some time. That has a devastating impact on constituencies and communities, and it relates to the issue that many Members have raised this afternoon about the length of time these things take and how poorly served people are in that respect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Sir Philip Davies), who was speaking in part about amendment (c) tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope)—I can confirm we will have the opportunity to vote on that tonight—also raised the proxy scheme.

Many Members made the comparison between the profession we are in and other professions, particularly the police force. The police themselves may also be subject not infrequently to vexatious claims made against them for all kinds of reasons. The volume of Members of both Houses who have come to see me during this process who have been the victims of vexatious claims was surprisingly large.

Jess Phillips: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: May I make some progress? I will allow interventions; I just want to get through the points that have been made.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) spoke about

what the Government are doing. We are facilitating a debate. I am glad it has been a genuine debate on an important matter, but this proposal from the Commission has been discussed on a cross-party basis.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) talked about the legal differences between Scotland and England. There are differences between the English and Scottish legal systems, but in both systems charges are brought only when there is a reasonable view that there is enough evidence that that person has committed a crime. Therefore, in both systems the risk-based exclusion scheme would be triggered when enough evidence has been obtained. The situation would be consistent.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) raised a variety of points. Of course, this proposal is one option. It is an option that Mr Speaker and the Commission feel this House should have, but clearly many other things already in existence could safeguard individuals, whether those are voluntary or powers that other people on the estate—for example, the Serjeant at Arms and others—have for excluding people from bars. Other things can also be put in place to safeguard staff.

On the hon. Gentleman's particular point about Prorogation and Dissolution, the proposal would not apply in those cases. With regard to the former, it is a very short period, so it was viewed that there would not be a practical impact. Again, that can be reviewed in the proposed six-month review. In Dissolution, it would not apply, but it would not be needed because people would be off the estate.

Sir Chris Bryant: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I will come to the hon. Gentleman, but let me crack through the other points.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) gave some examples that slightly misunderstood what the scheme is doing. We are not talking about a Member being expelled from the House, or losing their place as a Member of the House, but being excluded from the estate for a limited period. It is for Parliament, in accordance with the principle of exclusive cognisance, to organise its own affairs. It is orderly therefore for this House to consider the proposals in the way that it is. He invites us to consider a scenario where a Member of Parliament resigned as an MP and then stood for re-election and asked whether this process would still apply to them. If they were still under charge, yes, it would.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: Will the Leader of the House give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I will come to my right hon. Friend once I have been through the points that have already been raised.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) for his attention and for giving the House the option to vote on his amendment. When the Commission was looking at this matter, we looked at potential scenarios—not at charge, but at arrest—where someone might be arrested for a violent offence, but it would not be deemed appropriate to exclude them from the estate. One example we looked at was someone who was a victim of domestic abuse. That is where that particular line comes from.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who has great experience in this area, and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and others talked about a raft of issues related to arrest. One issue that did arise when people were looking at this matter is an obvious question: if bail conditions have not been applied to an individual, is it right for a panel to impose its own? The panel could face a small number of situations where bail conditions and restrictions had not been placed on an individual, but the panel felt that further restrictions would need to be looked at with regard to the estate.

The hon. Member for North East Fife raises an important point about charge versus arrest. I will offer the arguments forwarded for consistency on charge for the sake of thoroughness of debate. A criminal investigation is commenced where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence has been committed. A person can be subject to a criminal investigation right through to the point of charging without having been arrested. The police will only arrest if it is necessary to do so, but they do so in a whole variety of cases. The argument put forward against the amendment is that it would create a distinction between on the one hand an MP who has been arrested because the police considered it a necessary procedural step—it should be kept in mind that arrest does not indicate that the allegation is more serious or credible—and on the other, an MP who has been investigated for an offence at the same level of seriousness, but where the arrest was deemed unnecessary.

I will come to the point that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) raised, although I am afraid she will find some of my answers depressing, and I ask her to brace for that. The first is that—my fellow Commissioners will back me up that I have raised this—the House of Commons Commission, which is asked to bring forward motions of this nature, is not fully sighted on all the problems. Commission members do not have a 360° view of all the issues on the estate. Clearly, cases are going on that are in complete confidence. There is a problem in asking the Commission to do work of this nature—the people who are doing that are best sighted on the whole of the problem.

The hon. Lady and others raised the charge that we consider ourselves in this place to be somehow different from other members of the population—and our staff. I think that is wrong, in part because of arguments that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) made, which I agree with, and because Members of Parliament can be victims in this situation, too. Historically, women MPs have been victims. It is not helpful to say that there is a divide between how Members of Parliament see themselves and others—I do not think that is true.

Even more concerning for the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, and myself is that some of the most serious cases that we are aware of—and that I find most disturbing and worrying from a safeguarding point of view—would not be covered by any of the proposals, including at arrest. This is not a comprehensive solution to the problem, though it is a step towards part of the answer.

Jess Phillips: Of all the people who said that they had had loads of vexatious claims, how many ended in arrest? I imagine almost none. Is the right hon. Lady saying that because she has heard of cases where the police would

[Jess Phillips]

never be called and there would be no arrest, we should make it charge, not arrest? I am confused by what she is saying. And if there is such a problem, what is she doing about it?

Penny Mordaunt: As I said at the start, the House of Commons Commission and others are looking at a number of things. We have had a review published today on strengthening the ICGS. I have a great deal of sympathy with what the shadow Leader of the House said about ensuring that people are directed towards that scheme, it improves and speeds up and the investigation and operational issues are dealt with. That has greatly strengthened the options that people have on the estate.

Sir Chris Bryant: I may have counted this wrongly, but I think the Leader of the House said on six occasions that this proposal is from the Commission. It is not, is it? It is her proposal. If it were the Commission's proposal, it would be at arrest, not charge.

Penny Mordaunt: That is not correct.

Sir Chris Bryant: Yes, it is.

Penny Mordaunt: No, it is not, with all due respect to the hon. Member. The Commission originally proposed arrest. We brought that to the Floor of the House. There were concerns before it arrived, and therefore we decided to have a debate, not a vote on it. Three key issues were raised in that debate, and charge versus arrest was one of them. All three issues have been dealt with by the Commission. The House has the chance tonight to vote on proxy voting, the panel, arrest versus charge and the scheme itself. It is for the House to decide that. It is a sorry situation that the hon. Gentleman would paint this to be something it is not. It shows a distinct lack of situational awareness.

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: On exclusive cognisance, as was established in the Bradlaugh case, this House has the right to determine its own procedures, but it has never had the right to delegate the exclusion of a Member to a panel. That has always been the responsibility of the whole House, otherwise we have a right dating back to 1340 of unmolested attendance. Exclusive cognisance cannot override our ancient rights in that way. We can, of course, expel individual Members. That is the flaw in this proposal.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his helpful point. In addition to what I said earlier, the Commission's choice was between retaining the confidentiality of the situation—the advice that it received on not jeopardising an investigation in an ongoing case was very compelling—and ignoring that and bringing this to the Floor of the House. The Commission decided that the former was the better course of action.

Jess Phillips *rose*—

Penny Mordaunt: We do not have much time left, but I will give way.

Jess Phillips: I just want to know who gave the right hon. Lady that advice about confidentiality, and what qualifications they have.

Penny Mordaunt: The Commission received that advice from the House authority's lawyers, and that was the course of action that we decided to take. [Interruption.] It is correct.

Hon. Members have the opportunity tonight to vote on four key issues: the proxy voting scheme, the panel itself—thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley—whether it should be arrest or charge, and the scheme itself. That is for the House to decide.

Amendment proposed: (o), in paragraph (1), leave out “, save that the threshold for risk-based exclusion should be when a Member has been charged with a relevant offence”.—(Wendy Chamberlain.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 170, Noes 169.

Division No. 150]

[8.25 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Efford, Clive
Ali, Rushanara	Elmore, Chris
Amesbury, Mike	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Anderson, Fleur	Eshalomi, Florence
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Esterson, Bill
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Evans, Chris
Barker, Paula	Farris, Laura
Begum, Apsana	Farron, Tim
Benn, rh Hilary	Farry, Stephen
Betts, Mr Clive	Fellows, Marion
Blake, Olivia	Foord, Richard
Blomfield, Paul	Foxcroft, Vicky
Bonnar, Steven	Galloway, George
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Gardiner, Barry
Brock, Deidre	Gibson, Patricia
Brown, Ms Lyn	Glindon, Mary
Bryant, Sir Chris	Grant, Peter
Buck, Ms Karen	Green, Sarah
Burgon, Richard	Greenwood, Lilian
Butler, Dawn	Greenwood, Margaret
Byrne, Ian	Griffith, Dame Nia
Cadbury, Ruth	Haigh, Louise
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Hall, Luke
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hanna, Claire
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hanvey, Neale
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hardy, Emma
Colburn, Elliot	Harman, rh Ms Harriet (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Cooper, Daisy	Hayes, Helen
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Cowan, Ronnie	Hobhouse, Wera
Crawley, Angela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Creasy, Stella	Hollern, Kate
Cruddas, Jon	Hopkins, Rachel
Cummins, Judith	Hosie, rh Stewart
Daby, Janet	Howarth, rh Sir George
Dalton, Ashley	Hussain, Imran
Davies-Jones, Alex	Jarvis, Dan
De Cordova, Marsha	Jones, Darren
Dixon, Samantha	Jones, Gerald
Dodds, Anneliese	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Jones, Sarah
Duffield, Rosie	Khan, Afzal
Dyke, Sarah	Kinnock, Stephen
Eagle, Dame Angela	Kyle, Peter
Eagle, rh Maria	Lake, Ben
Edwards, Sarah	Leadbeater, Kim
	Lewis, Clive
	Lightwood, Simon
	Linden, David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)

Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mather, Keir
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Moran, Layla (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Murray, James
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reynolds, Jonathan

Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin (*Proxy vote cast by Gerald Jones*)
 Sobel, Alex
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Strathern, Alistair
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, rh Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Twist, Liz
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Andrew Western

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ansell, Caroline
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brady, rh Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Butler, Rob
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carter, Andy

Cartlidge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Sir Philip
 Davis, rh Sir David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Francois*)
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael

Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Everitt, Ben
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Fox, rh Sir Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 Fuller, Richard
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jardine, Christine
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Levy, Iain
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lord, Mr Jonathan

Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by Sir John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Mann, Scott
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Mills, Nigel
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Nici, Lia
 Penrose, John
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh Sir John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Russell, Dean
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Sir Mark
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, rh Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Wood and
Mr Gagan Mohindra

Question accordingly agreed to.

8.39 pm

More than two hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, 8 May).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind the House that amendment (h) is consequential on amendment (o), to which the House has already agreed.

Amendment made: (h), in paragraph (1) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out “is charged with” and insert “has been arrested on suspicion of committing”.—
(*Wendy Chamberlain.*)

Amendment made: (n), after paragraph (2) of the proposed Standing Order insert—

“(o) The Panel shall have power to meet notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, in person or by electronic means.”—
(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker: I remind the House that amendments (p) and (q) are consequential on amendment (o), to which the House has already agreed.

Amendments made: (p), after paragraph (2) of the proposed Standing Order insert—

“(o) The Panel will not be given the name of the Member being risk assessed.”

Amendment (q), in paragraph (11)(b) of the proposed Standing Order, leave out

“the charge has been withdrawn”

and insert

“no charge has been made”.—(*Wendy Chamberlain.*)

Main Question, as amended, put.

A Division was called.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Division off.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) this House approves the Report from the House of Commons Commission, A risk-based exclusion policy for the House of Commons – updated proposals, HC 386;

(2) the following Standing Order be made:

“Risk-based exclusion policy

- (1) When the Clerk of the House is informed by the police that a Member has been arrested on suspicion of committing a violent or sexual offence a risk assessment will take place.
- (2) The risk assessment will be carried out by a Risk Assessment Panel, appointed by Mr Speaker.
- (3) The Panel shall have power to meet notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, in person or by electronic means.
- (4) The Panel will not be given the name of the Member being risk assessed.
- (5) In carrying out a risk assessment the Panel will have regard to—
 - (a) the nature of the alleged misconduct;
 - (b) whether there is any safeguarding concern;
 - (c) the risk to the Parliamentary community, or a particular individual, group or groups within it;

(d) information from the police; and

(e) any undertaking that the Member in question is subject to an existing voluntary agreement not to attend the Estate.

(6) The Panel shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker, the Director of Parliamentary Security and such other members of the House administration as it thinks fit.

(7) The Panel will decide on appropriate measures to mitigate any risk, and such mitigation may include one or more of the following—

(a) exclusion from the Parliamentary estate;

(b) exclusion from domestic travel funded in whole or in part through the House of Commons Estimate; and

(c) exclusion from foreign travel funded in whole or in part, directly or indirectly, through the House of Commons Estimate.

(8) Members must not lobby the Panel in a manner calculated to influence the outcome of a risk assessment process.

(9) A Member subject to exclusion from the Parliamentary estate may apply for a proxy vote.

(10) If the Panel considers a Member should be subject to exclusion it shall inform the Speaker, and the Speaker shall authorise the House administration to take such measures as are necessary to ensure the Panel’s decision is implemented.

(11) The Panel may review its risk assessment in the light of new information, and as a consequence of that review may recommend ending any exclusion, varying any existing risk mitigation measures, or introducing further measures as a result of its review.

(12) The decisions of the Panel in relation to a particular case and actions taken thereafter shall not be made public and shall be kept confidential (except insofar as is reasonably necessary to ensure the decision is effected).

(13) A Member’s exclusion will end if—

(a) the Panel so decides and informs the Speaker accordingly;

(b) the Speaker and the Panel are informed by the police or another competent person that the police have concluded their investigations and no charge has been made; or

(c) a criminal trial has been concluded.”

(3) the operation of Standing Order (Risk-based exclusion policy) be reviewed by a panel appointed by Mr Speaker, and the report of that panel shall be laid before the House no later than six months after the date of this Order; and

(4) Standing Order No. 39A (Voting by Proxy) be amended as follows:

(1) In paragraph (2)(d) after “injury” insert

“(o) risk-based exclusion from the Parliamentary estate”; and

(2) After paragraph 5(b) insert

“(o) The Speaker shall not specify the reason for which a proxy vote has been given in any such certificate.”

Substandard Housing

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

8.49 pm

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): I have spoken in many Adjournment debates over the last 37 years, but seldom with an audience in such high drama—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. They seem to be leaving. Perhaps we should wait until things have settled down a little before continuing.

George Galloway: I hope it is clear that they are leaving not because I am rising to speak, but because of the dramatic events we have just witnessed. I hope it is duly noted that I was the one-vote majority.

I dedicate this debate to a two-year-old boy. His name was Awaab Ishak, and he was the boy who died of damp. Awaab died because he lived in a house so affected by dampness and the mould that ineluctably followed. Innumerable complaints were made, unattended to, of dampness in the house owned by his landlord Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, one of the worst housing associations in England—pity Awaab—in a town with an incompetent, inefficient and, indeed, corrupt Labour council. The housing association has been in special measures because of its extreme incompetence and social exclusion. It is officially accused of othering many of its own tenants. Little Awaab would now be getting ready for school, but he is dead. And he died of damp.

Of course, this problem is not unique to Rochdale. Millions of homes in our country are unfit for purpose and unfit for human habitation. Government policy over many years has exacerbated that which has been inherited from previous generations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. He is absolutely right that millions of homes in this great United Kingdom have the same problem.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although rents have substantially increased—in my constituency, there is a £126 increase in the new annual contract, an increase of 18% in one year—the standard of housing has not improved, and no improvements have been made? Does he agree that, while rents have increased, standards are slipping, and that councils need greater enforcement powers to ensure a basic standard of living can be legally secured? Everyone should have a good house to live in, in which they feel safe and secure.

George Galloway: Britain is a rich country that can gaily increase its defence budget, that can boast of its wealth on international league tables, yet millions of its citizens are living in inadequate housing and, in Awaab's case, dying in inadequate accommodation. It is a national disgrace, and I am grateful to the Members who have stayed for this debate, which affects everyone's constituency, or almost everyone's constituency.

Rochdale has a special place. We are at the top of every league that people would not want to top, and at the bottom of every league that people would want to top. I will give some vital statistics: 11.7% of our houses

are officially deemed to be in housing deprivation, compared with the national average of 7.8%. That is in a town that was once something in England. It was a notable place, 20 minutes from the gleaming spires of Manchester city centre, where people rightly enjoy a high standard of living and prosperity. The national average is 7.8%; in Rochdale, it is 11.7%.

We have 35.8% of our people officially living in fuel poverty, compared with 27.8% nationally. We have 20.5% of our people suffering poor health—one in five of the people in Rochdale suffers poor health—compared with a national average of 17%. Even in the asthma stakes, we are at the bottom of the league: 7.4% of our people have asthma, compared with 6% nationally.

This scandal is down to the matrix I discussed earlier, of a Tory Government in power and an utterly incompetent—bewilderingly so—Labour local authority. Now a Labour super-Mayor is presiding over those gleaming spires in central Manchester, enjoying popularity, as undoubtedly he, at least in part, deserves, for helping prosperity in the metropolis. But in the towns around Manchester, in particular in Rochdale, we have been left to sink, and nobody is doing anything about it.

Sir Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I have done so privately, but may I formally congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his by-election success? In my opinion, he is the finest orator in the House of Commons and it is all the better for having him here, even though I do not always agree with him. As he was my former parliamentary neighbour, he will know that this problem extends to places like Bradford as well. Does he agree that housing associations should not be allowed to extend their property empire while they have existing property that is clearly not fit for purpose?

George Galloway: As I omitted to mention in response to the previous intervention by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we have a situation where rents go up and services go down. That is true in Labour authorities all over the country. I call them “so-called housing associations”; I was always opposed to them and I never supported the arm's length management organisation. Please, I prefer council housing, where the tenants get to elect their landlord and can unelect them if they are doing a poor job. The whole wheeze was to push the ownership of the houses to so-called associations that are, in effect, only private companies. The privatisation of council houses that the taxpayer paid for and the people collectively owned is at the root of the problem.

In Rochdale, we have a particular problem that killed little Awaab. We have a borough-wide housing association, Rochdale Boroughwide, that is not fit for purpose. It is there at the grace and favour of a Labour council, whose relationship with it is intricate and intimate. Even though I am under parliamentary privilege, I will not go much further than that—intimate and intricate. Until recently, nobody could challenge them. It was a one-party state—a Labour one-party state—with a revolving door between the Labour party, the council and the housing association.

But this is not only in Rochdale. As the hon. Member for Shipley (Sir Philip Davies), who I am proud to personally call a friend—not politically, of course, but we were good neighbours for quite some time—has pointed out, damp houses are a problem for all of us. They are

[George Galloway]

dangerous—these houses can kill. We all know the old saw that a stitch in time saves nine. How much more obvious does this need to be? If we fix those 3.5 million inadequate homes—households in which families are living—what would we save in health service costs, in social care costs? How many fewer ambulances would be called out if there were not hazards in houses that could be, and should be, easily fixed by the landlord? How many hospital beds are taken up by people with bronchial and associated problems, because they are living in a damp house?

I was born in a slum—in an attic. There was just one room, with a sloping roof. I was horrifying my children this very morning, telling them how I had to sleep in a drawer. They thought that my mother pushed in the drawer at night. If that were the case, I would not be here now. I know how things were in the bad, bad old days. Everything is relative, I accept that. Now I live a good life, and I assume that the Minister does, too. But empathy requires us to take a walk in the other person's shoes, particularly when we represent them; particularly when their votes are the reason that we are here. We are supposed to be their voice. I invite the Minister to take a walk with me metaphorically this evening, but literally sometime soon in my constituency, and to see the way that thousands of people are living in poverty—fuel poverty, housing poverty and hazardous houses. I did not even know the concept of a hazardous house—there was not much room for hazards in our one-room attic. But I now go into houses in Rochdale and see things that could kill somebody—but for the grace of God—any day of the week.

It is a national scandal that, over the past 14 years, billions have been withdrawn in funding for house improvements and repairs. Hundreds of thousands of houses that could have been brought up to standard have not been—cannot be—because the Government funding is not there. The Government might say that they need the money for more wars, for more weapons, for more armies, navies, air forces or whatever else they choose to do with our national treasure. I am not trying to touch the Minister's heart; I am trying to touch his mind. These improvements that are vitally needed will save the state money. Our people will be healthier, our people will be happier and the politicians who represent them might be able to feel a bit more proud about the job that we have done. Save Rochdale, Minister. Save little Awaab Ishak's neighbours from possibly meeting that dreadful, damp, mouldy death that that little boy suffered.

9.3 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): This is a very important issue and one on which the House should rightly spend time. Poor quality homes are a blight on the lives of those who live in them, with the potential to significantly damage people's health. That in turn means that people cannot live as fulfilling a life as they would wish and, from an economic perspective, that they might not be able to be as productive as they would want. It even extends to social mobility. It is a long-standing mission of all parties to try to make homes warm, safe and decent.

Tonight, we are discussing both substandard housing in general and, due to the hon. Member raising it, Rochdale in particular. As has been outlined, Rochdale was the scene of a great tragedy in 2020, with the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak—the death of someone who had his whole life ahead of him. It was one of the worst tragedies in a modern civilised world—the death of a child.

The law already requires landlords to ensure that the accommodation they provide is free from serious hazards, including damp and mould, and that homes are fit for habitation, but as was seen in Rochdale four Decembers ago, some are failing to meet that basic standard. Following that tragedy, the Secretary of State was clear that it was unacceptable. He summoned the landlord, Rochdale Boroughwide Housing, to explain why such a catastrophic failure had been allowed to happen.

The Secretary of State followed up by barring that housing association from access to funds to build new houses, and by stepping up enforcement measures more generally. More broadly, the Government introduced Awaab's law in 2023, requiring landlords to investigate and then fix reported health hazards within specific timeframes; to issue written summaries of their investigations to ensure that residents are kept informed; and, where necessary, to offer suitable alternative temporary accommodation to tenants where the property cannot be made safe.

The next step in making that legislation real occurred at the start of this year, with a consultation that opened in mid-January. It closed a few weeks ago, and we plan to respond to it shortly and introduce the necessary secondary legislation as soon as possible. In addition, the Government provided £15 million of taxpayer subsidy to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2023 to tackle the worst cases of damp and mould, which includes works to many properties in Rochdale.

On a broader level, it is very important that enforcement bodies use the powers available to them where it is proportionate and necessary to do so—something that can already happen today. That is against the backdrop of progress that has been made. I do not seek in any way to take away from the importance of the subject that has been highlighted, or from the terrible tragedy that has been rightly brought to this House both now and before, but it is hugely important that we also acknowledge where we are. There has been progress on this very important matter of policy in recent years across all tenures.

There are two big measures within the English housing survey, one about category 1 hazards and one about the decency of the homes that people live in. Both have seen progress. First, the number of owner-occupied properties in England in 2010 where category 1 hazards were present was over 18%. By 2022, that had been halved. For the private rented sector, the issue had been halved over the same timeline from 24% to 12%. In the social rented sector, it was 10% in 2010; by 2022, it had reduced to 4%.

On decent homes specifically, in 2010 the percentage of non-decent homes in the owner-occupied sector was more than a quarter—25.6%. By 2022, that had almost halved to 13.7%. For the private rented sector, it was nearly 40%; it has now reduced to just over 20%. In the social rented sector, it was almost 20%; now, it is just over 10%. That is progress, improvement and movement, but there is obviously more to do.

The Government have previously announced their intention to update the decent homes standard, and we are working on doing so. We continue to work closely with local authorities and housing providers to try to make progress in this important area, and the ombudsman continues to show leadership in its work on this vital agenda.

There has been movement forward in the last decade, but the focus needs to be continued, not least to ensure that we learn from the tragedy of Awaab Ishak and what others may be suffering from now. This issue is bigger than any one Government. That is why there was

progress under the last Government, which the hon. Member served in, why there has been progress in all the Parliaments that he has sat in, and why there is a continued commitment to that. Progress has been made, but there is still further to go. We shall continue to work with resolve and determination to ensure that improvements are made.

Question put and agreed to.

9.9 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 13 May 2024

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Palestinians: Visa Scheme

4.30 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 648577 relating to a visa scheme for Palestinians.

I thank all the individuals and organisations who supported the petition for their hard work in achieving the threshold, particularly Gaza Families Reunited, which I had the privilege of meeting in the run-up to this debate. For many of those involved in supporting the petition this is an issue that impacts on their loved ones.

Gaza Families Reunited is made up of 350 Palestinians living in the UK with family in Gaza. They are calling on the UK Government to establish a Gaza family scheme to enable Palestinians in the UK to bring their loved ones to safety from Gaza until it is safe to return. They note that the Government have previously introduced successful bespoke pathways for those fleeing persecution in Ukraine and Hong Kong, and argue that the same can and must be done for Palestinians from Gaza. They point to the Ukraine family scheme as something on which the Gaza family scheme could be modelled.

Since 7 October, which saw 1,143 people murdered by Hamas and around 3,500 injured, with 252 hostages taken, of whom 128 remain unaccounted for, we have all seen the devastating humanitarian consequences for all who are caught up in the conflict. It is impossible to understand the pain felt by those waiting to hear the fate of their loved ones taken hostage, or the grief of families mourning 34,000 killed in Gaza. We hear terrible statistics so frequently that they begin to lose their meaning. However, each of those numbers are people; they are people who have or had loved ones, hopes and dreams, and whose lives have been irrevocably altered by the conflict.

I thank Noah Katz, who chairs Lancaster and Lakes Jewish Community in my constituency, for giving time and sharing how we can advocate for peace rather than stoking division, as well as our common views on the need to see hostages released and a ceasefire. Although the Jewish community in Lancaster is small, it has strong links with friends and family in Israel. In the seven months since 7 October, they have provided support for local Jewish families. The local Jewish community has adopted the Bibas family, as part of the “Seder Seat For a Hostage” campaign by the Board of Deputies of British Jews. I thank Noah for the way they support Jewish families in Lancaster, including my own.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend agree that between the synagogues, mosques and churches in our constituencies we see an incredible extension of the concept of community and heart coming from our different faith communities,

school groups and others? They promote togetherness and try to approach different problems from a community point of view.

Cat Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. When we look at the philosophy of faith groups and, indeed, the philosophy behind every major world religion, it is one of peace and love.

To date, 34,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, of whom a significant majority are civilians. Over 77,000 Gazans have been injured, and over 75% of the population of Gaza—1.6 million people—have been displaced, often more than once.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent speech she is making. The Foreign Secretary has called the scale and suffering in Gaza “unimaginable”, yet the Conservative Government are content with sitting on their hands, watching the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left in Rafah suffer and wait to be killed without offering refuge. Does my hon. Friend agree that our constituents expect compassion from their Government, and that a vital part of that compassion is to have a family visa scheme for those trapped in Gaza with family members in the UK?

Cat Smith: I hope that this debate will provide the opportunity to express the compassion that I believe Members of this House feel on the matter. I know the Minister is listening.

In my conversations with Gaza Families Reunited, I heard about one family in particular that had been displaced five times—each time a terrifying experience. Aid is still not reaching Gaza in sufficient quantities, and the humanitarian crisis is worsening daily. The UN World Food Programme says that due to food shortages, Gaza is entering “full-blown famine”. That will only be made worse by the beginning of the invasion in Rafah—the same place Israel encouraged Gazans to move to in order to be in relative safety. Hundreds of thousands of Gazans are yet again being displaced and are being forced to leave the only routes out of Gaza.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. There are reports that almost half of the agricultural land in Gaza has been destroyed, and this morning it was said that the health system across Gaza could collapse in a few hours. Does she agree that this only adds to the urgency of this Government doing all they can to provide safety for those fleeing this horrific conflict?

Cat Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, food insecurity is deeply concerning.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate her on securing the debate and making a powerful speech. Like many people in this room, I was proud to be able to intervene in support of Ukrainian refugees, who were accommodated by friends and family in this country. We have a large Afghan community, and many people were disappointed at not getting similar treatment. Once again, many people

[Ms Karen Buck]

who have family and friends in the Palestinian community feel that there should be parity of treatment for people based on need, rather than on where the conflict originated.

Cat Smith: All I can do is agree with my hon. Friend. My experience was that our constituents were only too willing to be hospitable when it came to us taking Ukrainian refugees—indeed, there is that great culture. I believe we have compassion in caring for our neighbour when they are in trouble.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) *rose*—

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) *rose*—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) *rose*—

Cat Smith: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), and then the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

John Cryer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; she is being generous. On family visa schemes, when I wrote to the Minister asking if there was a possibility of family visas, he wrote back saying that “our approach must be considered in the round rather than on a crisis-by-crisis basis.” Does she think that this is a fairly novel approach? When there were crises in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Hong Kong, schemes, whatever their merits, were set up to deal with those individual crises. Why cannot that be applied now?

Cat Smith: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has been looking ahead because I will come on to this, but I agree that we cannot take a crisis-by-crisis approach. There is a huge problem for many people fleeing conflict all over the world, and the lack of safe routes is something that came up in conversations I had in meetings before the debate with organisations such as the Refugee Council. I am conscious that I have taken a lot of interventions from my party, and I saw two colleagues from other parties who wanted to intervene. I will give way to my colleagues from the SNP and from the Green party.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Chair of the Petitions Committee for opening the debate and framing it the way she has. She is right to touch on the situation not just in Rafah, but in Gaza. Given that the Foreign Secretary is on the record well in the past of referring to Gaza as an “open-air prison”, and with things only projected to get worse in Rafah, is it not the case that many of us can only conclude that, from the view of the UK Government, a Palestinian life is worth less than one of someone of another nationality?

Cat Smith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s assessment of the situation. Indeed, I suspect that quite a lot of what the Foreign Secretary has said in the past would serve well to influence current Government policy.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Member is being generous; I thank her for giving way and congratulate her on her introduction so far. Would she agree that the current system is simply not working, because the requirement

to enrol biometrics at a visa application centre is simply impossible to meet? The one in Gaza is closed, and people cannot get to Ramallah or Jerusalem. In effect, people are caught in this sickening Orwellian Catch-22 where they cannot enrol their biometrics because they cannot leave Gaza, and they cannot leave Gaza because they cannot enrol their biometrics. This is a sickening situation to leave people in. Does she agree that this is yet more evidence of the need for a bespoke family reunion scheme, as was done for Ukraine and Hong Kong?

Cat Smith: I very much agree, and in a few moments time, if I can make some progress with my speech, the hon. Lady will find that that is exactly the point I will make. I give way one final time before I make progress.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): On that point, the Home Office says that it can offer deferral of biometrics in some family reunion cases, but sadly for many families who are waiting for those decisions, it becomes too late because they die in Gaza just waiting for the decision. I hope the Minister will tell us what he is doing to rapidly speed up the process and remove unnecessary barriers so that family members can get to safety.

Cat Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; once again, I find myself in agreement. I will make a little bit more progress with my speech, Mr Vickers, and not try your patience too much.

The Government’s position, outlined in their response to the petition in December, is that the UK recognises that there are people impacted by the war who may wish to join family in the UK. However, the Government are not making plans to create a bespoke pathway for Palestinians, but continue to prioritise immediate family reunification for British citizens and for people with a pre-existing right to live in the UK for over six months. The Government state that Palestinians can come to the UK through existing immigration routes, but the petitioners wished me to draw particular attention to the lack of safe routes out of Gaza for Palestinians, and indeed for anyone in a conflict zone.

For their application even to be considered by the Home Office, people must attend visa application centres to give their biometric data, but there is no VAC in Gaza—it has closed—and they cannot get through to Jerusalem or Ramallah. Until recently, of course, people could pay thousands of US dollars to get out via a private company, over the Rafah border to Egypt, but that is now impossible due to the situation at the Rafah border. That is another option that has been closed off; Gazans are now effectively trapped with no way of giving their biometrics. There is an option to apply for a deferred biometric enrolment, but I understand that since the start of the conflict in October every single request for deferral in Palestine has been refused by the Home Office.

People living in the UK who have families in Gaza that they have not managed to get out can do nothing but watch their families suffer daily. One petitioner, Ghassan, whom I met last week, said that his family had been displaced and evacuated within Gaza many times before he managed to get them across the border to Egypt. He said that

“there is no safe place in Gaza.”

That is the tragic reality on the ground today.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Member is being very generous with her time. While she is mentioning the people affected, could I just raise the case of my constituent, Emily Fares, who has multiple family members in the region? They were in Rafah, but half of them have now disappeared because they were afraid in anticipation of the likely Israeli military campaign there. She tells me that these are people who have degrees and skills, who could offer so much here if only the door was not so resolutely closed against them. It begs the question: how is the humanitarian question being answered here in the UK, and why are we refusing the skills of these people?

Cat Smith: I hope that the Minister has heard the right hon. Lady's intervention, and that he might respond to some of her points in his remarks.

For those who are able to get out of Gaza and into Egypt, their future is uncertain. Palestinians have no status in Egypt, so students, teachers, small business owners and so on are left in limbo, out of immediate danger but unable to start rebuilding their lives. It seems clear to me that events in recent years in Ukraine, Gaza, Afghanistan and beyond mean that, as a country, we need to look again at how we support and protect those fleeing conflict. At present, there appears to be a grim lottery when it comes to the question of who we are prepared to do everything we can to help.

The immediate priority, however, must be Gaza, given the devastation of the conflict and the lack of support for Palestinians in surrounding countries. As with those from Hong Kong and Ukraine, we can see a very clear need for a visa scheme for Palestinians. The petitioners are asking a very basic question: why should people living in the UK not be able to apply to sponsor their family members in order to keep them safe while the conflict is ongoing? If we were able to implement a visa scheme for the people of Ukraine, why can we not implement a similar one for the people living in Gaza?

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Cat Smith: I am going to make a bit of progress.

Of course, there must be a right of return attached to any scheme. Sadly, the history of the region has all too often been one of dispossession and loss, and it is essential that any Palestinian leaving Gaza can return to rebuild their lives there as soon as they feel able to do so. There is a very real feeling among Palestinians I have spoken to, and those who have watched in horror the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, that Palestinian lives somehow do not matter as much as those caught up in other conflicts. I hope the Minister today will disabuse them of that notion—certainly as far as the Government are concerned—by responding positively to the petition.

I can see that Westminster Hall is very full and I know that many colleagues are hoping to speak today, so I will draw my remarks to a close to allow as many as possible to participate as fully as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called during the debate. I will set no formal time limit, but as Members can see, the debate is very heavily subscribed, so would they restrict their comments to about six or seven minutes?

The mover of the motion has been very generous in taking interventions, but it would help if we can limit them from now on.

I call Apsana Begum.

4.45 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Vickers.

"The plight of Palestine refugees remains the longest unresolved refugee crisis in the world,"

according to the United Nations. This was the situation even before the current war on the civilians of Gaza. Through the signatories of the petition today, including a large number of my constituents, the strong feeling in our communities is evident and clear. In Gaza, we are witnessing collective punishment, destruction and displacement of human lives on a horrific and unprecedented scale. Ongoing indiscriminate bombing has turned a chronic humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe. For those who survive, there is an imminent risk of death by disease and starvation. Millions are displaced, but where are they to go? As I speak, there is simply no safe space left for those fleeing from Rafah. It would be helpful if the Minister could update us on where he thinks people are to flee to.

Previously, many of us called for safe routes when Russia invaded Ukraine, and some visa schemes were set up for Ukrainians. How can it be that there are no safe routes for Palestinians to reach sanctuary in the UK, even if they have family here?

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful point. I have been touched by the fact that many of my constituents have written to me to ask that very question: how can it be that we have a scheme for the Ukrainians but not for Palestinians? That concerns them, and they need to hear from the Government why it is the case.

Apsana Begum: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I hope that the Minister addresses that point in his response.

How can it be that there are no safe routes for Palestinians to reach sanctuary in the UK, even if they have family here? In fact, humanitarian visa routes are rarely available to Palestinians in any form, despite one in six of the world's refugees being Palestinian. I have asked repeatedly in this House why Palestinians are all too often treated differently. The dehumanisation and devaluation of Palestinian life has been stark and, to be totally frank, utterly appalling. History teaches us that a people are dehumanised so that they can be killed, displaced and starved with impunity, and indeed, so that they can be denied assistance and asylum when they are clearly in need. I know that many of my constituents have been utterly shocked at the racism, Islamophobia and double standards. Something has been fundamentally broken or revealed, however we look at it.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): My constituents feel very similarly to my hon. Friend. We have rehoused a number of people from Gaza who came as family members of British Gazans when the war broke out, and I have seen the open-hearted nature of the help for those families. There has been concern about there not being resource for what is actually a

[Jess Phillips]

relatively small group of people who this visa scheme would apply to, but in fact, all the Gazans we have resettled into Birmingham, Yardley were actually doctors, and are bringing huge amounts of resource. Our communities, even in the face of the racism my hon. Friend talks about, are ready with open arms to help.

Apsana Begum: I agree with my hon. Friend that we are a place of sanctuary, and we welcome refugees.

The political establishment has been totally out of touch with the majority of British people on this. That will not be easily forgotten. As young people across east London ask me, how is it that the Government condemn certain countries for their human rights records and crimes, but not others? Why does the right to self-determination seem to be spoken about for some, but not others? Why are some national flags celebrated but others denigrated, or even effectively banned? Why are some deaths mourned and others explained away? Why is it that, for the Government, too many Palestinians have been killed or are starving, but there is no condemnation of those who killed them or are starving them?

Like many across the UK and around the world, I have always been opposed to the bombing and displacement of civilians, but this Government have supported it in Gaza. What did they think would happen when they supported the openly declared intent to reduce the entire Gaza strip to rubble? Whenever this Government have been asked about the long-term plan for millions of civilians in Gaza, they have been unable to answer. Instead, it was this Government who withdrew funding from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency shortly after the International Court of Justice's interim ruling. It is this Government who help to ensure that Israel has the weapons to kill women and children. Indeed, it would be helpful if the Minister could update us today on the latest assessment of whether weapons from the UK have been used to kill children. Whenever asked about how UK-traded weapons are used, the Government provide pro-forma, general lines about ongoing reviews and the licensing criteria. If those reviews are actually happening, why can we not know what they reveal? Especially now, when those living the reality of this horror are reaching out for support to survive, it is this Government who turn their back on humanity.

For some time now, parliamentary political discourse has used migration—even the absolute horror of people dying in the English channel—cynically and as a political tool. It is the age-old phenomena of scaremongering and scapegoating. As the Government erode our civil liberties and democratic rights, as they disenfranchise and disempower, and as they attack the very fabric of our communities through austerity, they foster fear and division and they falsely point to migrants as the cause of our alienation. In truth, it is overwhelmingly clear that the global drivers of refugee movements are intrinsically connected to the legacies of colonialism and empire, which live on to this day. There is no doubt the British Government have a responsibility to step up for the people of Gaza fleeing collective punishment, and yet, shamefully, there is no doubt that they are still choosing complicity rather than compassion.

4.52 pm

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for leading the debate. It is incredibly important, for a number of reasons, to consider that Palestinian individuals affected by the war should be allowed into the UK, just as we have done for Ukraine. Currently, there is no bespoke visa scheme for Palestinians to allow them to come to the UK in much the way that there has been for Ukrainians.

I will keep my remarks fairly short, and I will touch first on the international community aspect. As we saw on Friday past, 143 countries at the United Nations General Assembly voted to recognise Palestine as a state. I think that Palestine has to be recognised as a state as soon as possible. I believe strongly in the two-state solution, and only then can Palestine have the recognition and the building blocks to join the international community as a fully paid-up member. Also, aside from that aspect, I want to go back to a point mentioned by the two previous speakers in the debate, the hon. Members for Lancaster and Fleetwood and for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum). They mentioned that perhaps favouritism was shown to some communities and not others, and I very much hope that that is not the case.

I can only speak on behalf of my constituents in Bolton North East, and today in the audience I count almost a third to perhaps a half of our audience members as having a link to Bolton in some shape or form. This issue is incredibly important for my constituents. The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and I saw that on Saturday when we attended a rally at Bolton Town Hall in support of the cause of the Palestinian people, and the Gazan people in particular. My constituents care very much about this issue, and they believe that Palestinian lives are as important as anyone else's.

Bolton is a place of fantastic diversity, and we have incredibly good form in welcoming people from all across the world. I am very proud to have a Muslim community in Bolton that numbers almost 20%, mostly from Gujarati Indian backgrounds, but also Pakistani, British and others. It seems like I and the hon. Member for Bolton South East, whose constituency is beside mine, are working as a team: we attended the opening of a new medical centre in Bolton founded by an Afghan-British national. That shows the impact that people from across the world can have on modern-day British society. We should see people not as a burden but as an opportunity.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I have to say that Orkney and Shetland does not boast the same ethnic diversity as Bolton, but I have been overwhelmed by the number of emails that I have received on this issue. The lesson to take from that is that British people as a whole, whatever their ethnic background or heritage, see people in harm's way and want to help them. That is why there is the scale of support for a visa scheme of this sort.

Mark Logan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. If a scheme to welcome Palestinians came out at some point in the future, there might be a challenge between us to house a Palestinian; I would be happy to do that if such a programme existed.

With my Parliamentary Private Secretary hat on, I stand with the Government on all policy issues, of course, but I have a question for the Minister that my constituents are asking. Are Home Office civil servants considering alternatives—one identical to the one for Ukraine or others—that could help the people of Gaza? At the end of the day, the Gaza strip has roughly 1.8 million to 2 million people: about the same population as my home region of Northern Ireland. People have fled to Rafah, which pretty much maps on to the same area as Heathrow airport; it has been referred to as a city of children. Action needs to be taken. We can do more, as a country and a people, for the people of Gaza and Palestine in this time of need.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentioned that he supports the policies of the Government. Will he then ask the Government to ensure that this scheme is carried out straight away and that the centres provide local support for people who want to enter the UK? As has been said, people have not been able to register at biometric offices, so there should be additional staff at the Egypt border to facilitate those people. Above all, does he agree that there should be an urgent ceasefire so that the scheme can take place properly and be adhered to?

Mark Logan: I thank the hon. Gentleman so much, and I agree with much of what he said. Those in Gaza trying to get to the United Kingdom or other countries via Egypt face considerable cost. I hope that we are looking into that as a Government to find a way to alleviate the pressure on those applying. My constituency office works closely with another MP in Greater Manchester. A toddler had been very unwell but was unable to come to the UK when the war broke out. We have only recently found out that they have been repatriated to the UK.

I agree wholly. For months on end now, we have been calling on behalf of my constituents for an immediate ceasefire. Obviously, the scheme that we are debating today is a short-term fix. The people of Palestine—ultimately, the Gazans—want to be in their home, which is Gaza; they do not necessarily want to be in the UK for the long term. This is a short-term fix, but we need to look at the long term: peace in the middle east—Gaza in particular—and a two-state solution.

Jess Phillips: I promise, Mr Vickers, that I will not do too much more of this, but I believe I was also involved in the case that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Any family reunification usually involves grandparents, children, husbands or wives, but there are tens of thousands of orphans in Gaza who have no immediate family and may very well be ill, but they may have aunts, uncles or cousins here in the UK. Any scheme that we design should ensure that it understands that most people's—certainly children's—immediate families in Gaza are all dead.

Mark Logan: It is very sad that we have to be here today looking at what has happened over the last seven months. We were looking at figures in a meeting just held in Portcullis House for those killed—36,000 people—and a total of 100,000, including those who have been injured, since the outbreak of this. The trauma that that will cause today, tomorrow and well into the future is something that people will find incredibly difficult.

Looking at our own case in Northern Ireland, 3,500 people died in the troubles over the space of 30 to 40 years, but this is compacted times 10 into the space of seven months. It is deeply saddening. I will end by reiterating that there is so much we can do as a country and as the international community, as we saw on Friday past with 143 people getting behind Palestine and calling for a two-state solution—not just as a slogan, but to be an action point.

5 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Five hundred and sixty-seven of my constituents in Blackburn have signed the petition that led to this debate, and I am grateful for their continued efforts and support to raise awareness of this devastating situation. Over 34,000 Palestinians have now been killed since 7 October. Sadly, that includes 14,500 children. Over 78,000 people are injured and more than 8,000 are missing, presumably dead under the rubble. A catastrophic humanitarian crisis continues to unfold.

There are people at risk of serious harm, including from indiscriminate violence in armed conflict. Can they claim asylum in the UK? No, because they must be physically present to do so. The Government highlight the availability of safe and legal routes to get here, namely refugee resettlement programmes, refugee family reunion visas and nationality-specific humanitarian visa schemes. However, there seems to be a reluctance to recognise that these are very rarely available to Palestinians as they are currently ineligible for refugee resettlement in the UK, and a refugee family reunion visa depends on their having a sponsor already granted asylum.

This is a very emotional subject for me, because every day on the television I see people starving. They have no water, food or medicine, and it seems that no one actually cares. Mainstream visa options are often insufficient. Palestinians with immediate family in the UK can apply for a standard family visa, but that requires family ties to the UK, which many do not have. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) raised the issue of children who have lost their families and have nobody to look after them, sponsor them or get them here.

Sponsored work or study visas are not designed for humanitarian purposes, and the associated costs and practical requirements are often prohibitive. Visitor visas are often refused by the Home Office, which is less likely to accept visitors who may claim asylum in the UK, despite the devastation that is happening in Palestine. In 2023, the Home Office refused around one in three visitor visa applications from Palestinians. With the visa application centre in Gaza also closed, people face great practical difficulty in even lodging a visa application.

Existing visa options are simply insufficient in this case, and the Government know that. We know that they know this, because they widened the scope of the visa regime for Ukrainian citizens and their family members following criticism at the time that the system was not working. It was not working and they fixed it. Members will recall that British citizens and permanent residents were enabled to sponsor a much wider range of family members for a visa than is generally permitted, and those sponsored could bring their immediate family. The requirements to attend a visa application centre were also waived, and it would be good if that happened in Palestine.

[Kate Hollern]

I am aware of the Government's response to the e-petition in December 2023, in which they said there were "no plans" to introduce a special visa scheme for Palestinians, and I ask the Minister why. I wrote to the Home Office in November seeking advice on the Government's plans to support refugees from Gaza, and specifically asking whether his Department intends to implement a scheme similar to the recent Homes for Ukraine.

Calls for such a scheme have been growing for months. As I said, every day children are dying while we sit back and watch, and we need to act urgently. Lancashire Council of Mosques, which is based in my constituency, wrote to its members at the end of last year seeking views on its proposal to welcome orphaned Gazan children to Lancashire. Everybody knows that Lancashire is a very welcoming place, with caring and loving families who are willing to open their homes and hearts to these children. I was heartened by the generosity of that offer, which is testament to the compassion and humanity of the Blackburn community. In January, however, I received a disappointing response to my letter from the Government to the same effect.

There is no safe area in Gaza. A Rafah offensive must not go ahead, and the UK Government must do everything in their power to make sure that it does not happen. That includes immediately halting the sale of all weapons to Israel and helping with delivery of aid. Only today, on social media, I saw settlers totally destroying a delivery of aid, laughing and cheering as they did it. It is sad—it is sad that as human beings, we can stand back, watch that and not do enough to put a stop to it. We need to work towards securing an immediate and permanent ceasefire. I ask the Minister: where do the Government expect thousands of displaced Palestinians to go? Does he actually care?

Building on the precedent set by the Homes for Ukraine programme and other nationality-specific schemes that have been established previously, the UK Government now have an opportunity to extend compassion and solidarity towards the people of Palestine, and I urge them to do so urgently.

5.7 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Vickers—I was not expecting to be called so early on. I thank Gaza Families Reunited and all those who signed the petition, particularly my Edinburgh South West constituents.

I want to preface my comments by saying that I am a supporter of the Balfour Project, which seeks to do three things: first, to acknowledge Britain's historic role in shaping 20th and 21st-century Palestine and Israel, particularly in the light of the Balfour declaration and the policies of the British mandate; secondly, to support Palestinians and Israelis in building a peaceful future based on equal rights, justice and security for all; and thirdly, to work for the British Government's recognition of the state of Palestine.

While the British Government recognised the state of Israel in 1950, Palestinians remain stateless, exiled, refugees or second-class citizens in their own land. I saw the degree to which Palestinians are second-class citizens

with my own eyes when I visited in 2016 with Caabu and the charity Human Appeal, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in that regard. The United Kingdom therefore bears a historic responsibility for what has happened to Palestinians since the Nakba, which should be at the forefront of the Government's and Ministers' minds when considering this request for a visa scheme for Palestinians. This visa scheme is urgent because of the terrible situation in which Palestinians in Gaza find themselves. The United Kingdom has a historic as well as a contemporary moral responsibility to help out.

Many of my constituents in Edinburgh South West are acutely aware of that and have contacted me asking me to support this petition, a ceasefire and the immediate cessation of any arms being sent from the United Kingdom that are being used against innocent men, women and children in Gaza. Some of my constituents have a particular interest as they are exiled Palestinians or have family in jeopardy as a result of the situation in Gaza.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I, too, have been contacted by numerous constituents urging the Government to set up this visa scheme, including Lama, who has three elderly aunts sheltering in a church in Gaza, and Anwar, who has already lost numerous family members. His parting words to me when I met him were, "Are our lives so cheap?" I say to Members and the Minister that if we all agree that their lives are not so cheap, why on earth do the Government not set up a scheme on a par with the Ukrainian scheme? Importantly, there must be a right of return for those who seek refuge here or elsewhere, given the displacement trauma that so many generations of Palestinians have suffered.

Joanna Cherry: I agree with the hon. Lady and particularly her last point about the right of return, but the right of return must not be cynically used by the Government to justify not having a scheme. My constituents come to see me, as they do regularly at my surgery, to talk about the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza, particularly constituents with a connection. I am ashamed that the British Government have not done more to help. They have done so very little to help, and they are not honouring their historic and moral obligations.

I will talk about one constituent in particular; her name is Dr Eman El-Bahnassawy. She is a specialist dentist who managed to evacuate her 79-year-old mother from Gaza to Cairo at huge expense, as hon. Members will know. This old lady witnessed the Nakba as a child, and she has endured all the recent wars on Gaza. She is in very poor health and has already been displaced nine times during the current war. Her home has been destroyed by the bombing, so she has nowhere to go back to. Her daughter and her daughter's family—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) has a relative of my constituent in his constituency—are in a position to support their mother, but they face huge logistical difficulties in getting here. They look at the scheme afforded to Ukrainian refugees and cannot understand why, in all conscience, the British Government cannot replicate that scheme for people like them. I have tried to raise this issue with a number of Ministers on the Floor of the House, and at best I get waffle, but there is really no substantive response. The Government are dodging their responsibilities.

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who opened the debate so ably, explained the Catch-22 situation in which many Gazans find themselves, unable to get out of Gaza. During the passage of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, we were promised an announcement on safe and legal routes to the United Kingdom, but I raised that in the House again last week and was given a vague, equivocal answer. I want more detail and, in particular, I want to know what urgent action will be taken in relation to this situation.

As others have said, the UK Government have introduced bespoke pathways for those fleeing persecution in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Hong Kong. Where Afghanistan and Hong Kong were concerned, we had particular historic and moral responsibilities. The proposed Gaza family scheme is modelled after the Ukraine family scheme and would enable applicants to apply to temporarily join their families here. That is all we are asking, and it is not much. These people will want to go back to their homeland.

In the absence of a specific family route for people to leave Gaza and join family members in the UK, they can seek to rely only on existing routes such as the family visa or the skilled worker dependant visa, which are extremely limited. In and of themselves, those pathways involve prolonged waits and hefty fees.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with what the hon. and learned Lady is saying. Does she acknowledge the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) in opening this debate—that people taking one of the routes she has just suggested would need to apply for biometric deferral, and every single application since 7 October has been refused? Is she baffled by that, as I am, and will she ask the Minister to explain why?

Joanna Cherry: Cynically, I am not particularly baffled by it, because I know that this Government have a strange attitude towards their international legal obligations in relation to refugees. The Joint Committee on Human Rights, which I chair, has commented on that. The weight of the evidence we took from a number of different sources was that this Government do not really properly respect their obligations under the international treaties that they are signed up to—so, cynically, I am not baffled but I would like to know the Minister's reason for that.

Whatever the reason, the reality is that, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood said, these people are in a Catch-22 situation. Of course, the Rafah crossing is now closed and the situation is rapidly deteriorating, which makes this request all the more urgent, but even those who, like my constituent's mother, manage to get to Egypt are trapped in limbo once they are there; they cannot join their loved ones in the UK, for reasons I have already outlined, and they also lack access to state support to rebuild their lives, meaning that many of those who have fled the war are now living in uncertainty and destitution in Egypt.

In addition to the questions I have already posed to the Minister today, I want to ask him: when will the British Government facilitate the safe evacuation of people applying under existing routes, both now and in

the longer term? If they will not do so, why not? Why will they not set up a bespoke route for Palestinians in Gaza to reunite with their immediate and extended family in the UK, including a waiver or deferral of the biometric requirements, until it is safe to return? What is the justification for not setting up the short-term scheme that we envisage? Does the Minister acknowledge the United Kingdom's historic debt to the Palestinian people, and what, in their most dire hour of need, is he going to do about it?

5.17 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for leading the debate. She has championed the cause of Palestinian people since we served in Young Labour maybe 20 years ago, and I am really pleased to see that she is still championing this cause in the Chamber—maybe I have given away how old we are.

Before I speak about a specific case that I want to draw to the Minister's attention, I pay tribute to the bravery of those who have been living in Gaza throughout the conflict. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) said, everyone has seen the appalling scenes on TV, but whereas we go about our everyday lives, that is the reality for the people who are living there. I hope that, when making policy and speaking in the House, we remember the trauma and conflict that they are going through every day.

Let me turn to a constituent of mine, whose brother's family have been forced to leave their home in southern Gaza after it was destroyed by aerial bombardment due to the fighting in the area. He moved with his wife and his four children—the youngest is primary school age—because he could not live there any more and it was too dangerous. They arrived in Khan Yunis and were forced to flee once again, with the four small children, to the border in the city of Rafah due to the extension of the aerial bombardment to that area. The family are now living without access to water, food or basic hygiene facilities, and my constituent is receiving regular updates from his brother, who describes bombs landing less than 1 km away from where he is sheltering with his wife and young children. We know that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is catastrophic. My constituent is desperately worried about the safety of his brother and the young family, and he has been doing all he can to try to enable them to move to this country and be with their immediate family members.

I wrote to the Home Office about the situation, and am grateful for the speedy response I received, but the reply made how desperate the situation is even clearer. The Government's answer was to inform my constituent that the visa application centre in Gaza is closed, and to pass on the opening hours of the centres in Ramallah and Jerusalem. This seems to have been done without any understanding of the complete impossibility of getting out of Gaza, and it is clear that families like the one I am talking about cannot access these centres, meaning that the Government's advice is completely unrealistic. Although I appreciate the detail of the Government's answer, it is sadly nothing close to a solution for this family. Does the Minister have any practical advice that desperately worried family members in the UK can pass on to immediate family members who are going through this trauma?

[Tulip Siddiq]

That desperation has led other constituents in similar situations to ask me for advice on paying up to \$5,000 per person to a private company in Egypt to get family out of Gaza. The companies have put their prices up fourteenfold since outbreak of the conflict. That is complete exploitation. It is not clear what someone in that position should do. They are ultimately being forced to consider extremely risky and extortionate routes, because there are simply no other options available. There is no way of knowing the legitimacy of such routes, or of guaranteeing that they will get them to safety. Even then, they are an option only for people who can get hold of that extortionate amount of money.

Does the Minister have any information about using such private companies as a route out of Gaza, and can he share the official Foreign Office advice regarding the companies? Can he set out exactly what my constituents—British citizens living in Hampstead and Kilburn who have immediate family in Rafah—should say to their terrified and vulnerable relatives, as well as any Government assessment of what support these immediate family members of British citizens should be entitled to? I am sure that people in the Chamber, which is packed, know that my constituent's family are not alone.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to make the point that her constituent is not alone. Many of us have taken up cases on behalf of Palestinians trapped in Gaza, and have met the inflexibility from the Government that she describes. Does she agree that that inflexibility is completely out of line with the feeling of the British people, who, looking at the appalling situation in Gaza, would want the Government to respond to the petition by saying, “Yes, we do now need to create routes for Palestinians to come to this country” along the lines that she describes?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. My mother came to this country as a political asylum seeker in the 1970s, because this country—our country, of which we are proud—has always been seen as a safe haven for people who are escaping conflict or places that are too dangerous to live in. We now need to show the same compassion to people who are fleeing unimaginable situations and trauma. I hope that the Government will listen—I know that the Minister will—when we say that the advice that we have been given is not realistic on the ground. We need practical advice that we can give to our constituents, who are constantly writing to us, petrified about their immediate family members.

Nearly 75% of Gaza's total population has been displaced by this terrible conflict, and over 33,000 people have been killed. Everyone in this Chamber will agree that the fighting needs to stop. There must be a ceasefire, the immediate release of hostages and a serious political process towards a two-state solution. International law must be upheld, and it is has been deeply shocking to see reports that indicate that it may have been breached. The Government must ensure that Israel is complying with international law, as well as with the provisional measures set out by the International Court of Justice in January. Ministers have a duty to ensure that the UK Government themselves are fully compliant with

international law when it comes to the clear licensing criteria that apply to arm sales to Israel, given the developments in this conflict.

Finally—I know that lots of people want to speak—we know that almost no aid is entering northern Gaza, and it is vital that aid is allowed in as quickly as possible. The bleak picture in Gaza is the situation of my constituent's family right now, and I am desperate to help them. We need the UK Government to take the strongest possible position to ensure that we get an immediate ceasefire. We also need the Minister—I know that he will listen to this debate—to look seriously at the desperate situation that people are in; they have no one to turn to. I look forward to hearing the Minister's advice on what I should say to my constituent, who is desperately worried about his immediate family, who are living in a war zone when they could be joining their brother and his family in Hampstead and Kilburn.

5.24 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I do not need to reiterate how dire conditions are for Gazans; other Members have already set that out ably and movingly. There is nowhere for Gazans to go, there is very little medical assistance and there is almost nothing to eat—and ahead of its latest brutalising assault, Israel has designated the desert strip of al-Mawasi as a “humanitarian zone”, although it degrades that word in the same way that it degrades the hundreds of thousands of people who are trying to exist there.

At other times here and in the main Chamber, we have debated the other things that need to happen now—an immediate ceasefire; the release of all hostages; the restoration of aid; the suspension of the sale of arms; hopefully, in time, the recognition of the state of Palestine, which I am pleased to say Ireland is due to do in the coming days; and meaningful progress towards a two-state solution, which is the only way that the people of the region are going to escape these cycles of hell—but this debate is about the small things that we can do to support the small number of Gazan residents seeking to leave, and with direct and established relatives here.

As all Members know and some have set out, the current arrangements are not working and people are literally dying for want of a solution. Members have set out that, of course, Gazans cannot access biometrics. I wrote on behalf of a constituent of mine and was cheerfully pointed to the other centres working throughout the region. We wrote to the British embassy in Jerusalem, which did not reply, and to other centres, and my constituent Ahmed has been advised by immigration lawyers that his application will cost thousands of pounds per person. Of course, there is also an extremely high rejection rate, and that excludes the approximately \$5,000 payable to a private company, Hala, which manages the border crossing from Gaza into Egypt.

I will not share the last name of my constituent, Ahmed—he is going through the unimaginable at the moment; we do not need to add the invasion of his privacy to that—but I will say that he has lived in Belfast for many years, working in industry and in academia, and contributing to the economic and civic life of our city and the future of our region. Ahmed told me how the last few months have been for his family: his father lost his hearing in a bombing and his mother sustained an

arm injury, which continues to be infected. They were, of course, displaced from their home. They also lost their business—a pharmacy—and Ahmed has just told me about the impossibility of maintaining anything approaching a dignified life.

We can barely comprehend the toll on individual families. Ahmed spoke to me about the loss of his uncle, a blind man, and about his cousin's niece and nephew, aged five and seven; as so many of us have heard, the old and the young are bearing the brunt. Ahmed has also been telling me about his family's daily struggle to meet their most basic needs, notably for food, water and sanitation, and even if—please God—this war, or this phase of this war, ends soon, we know that the infrastructure in that part of the world has been devastated.

Not everybody in Gaza is seeking to leave—of course they are not; they just want to live peacefully in their home place. Small numbers will leave and go elsewhere in the region, but some in Gaza have their closest relatives here, with the means to give them comfort and some sort of a future. Who of us in this room would not do exactly that for our parents or other close relatives if they were living in such circumstances?

The current impossible barriers—biometrics, visa fees, high rejection rates, and border crossing fees—effectively mean that we have no scheme. That is not just, it is not proportionate and it is not moral. I say to the Minister that there is a lot we could do that we are not doing and there is a lot that we are still able to do. The creation of a visa scheme is something practical that we can do, but I look forward to hearing the Minister's reasons why we should not proceed.

5.29 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), for bringing this debate to the House today.

I will not repeat just how severe the situation in Gaza is; we have already heard powerful speeches about that from many Members from across the country, including from my near-neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum). I will just say this: Israel, the only democracy in the middle east, has really now destroyed its moral integrity. Many of us who talk to people in both Palestine and Israel know that if there is not a just solution, recognition for what has gone on and consequences for those who have advocated—in the most extreme terms, in the case of the Israeli Government—for the utter and complete destruction of Gaza, and the human cost of that, with tens of thousands of children slaughtered, then it is the beginning of the end of the international rules-based order.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I could not agree more with what my hon. Friend is saying. The forcible displacement of civilian populations is always immoral, and it is unlawful, but it is what Israel has been doing to the Palestinian people. Does he agree that we need to hear in the Minister's response, in addition to an agreement to the proposed scheme, a clear confirmation from the Government that the forced displacement of millions of Palestinians by Israel cannot be allowed to be permanent?

Sam Tarry: Absolutely. All of us in this House must recognise that our country, more than any other, has a historic duty because of the role that we played in the creation of the problem and the conflict 75 years ago. No one in this House can stand and say they support international rules-based systems if they do not also say the perpetrators on both sides of the conflict must be held to account, and that the Palestinians must one day be able to return to a country that is rebuilt, free and recognised by this country—as the Irish are about to do, and as was done last week in the UN. There is a moral as well as a humanitarian duty on all of us to do that, and I will continue to push those on our side of the House to go as far as possible on that basis.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made reference on a number of occasions to the international rules-based order. Does he agree that the blatant disregard and mockery of that order, which has happened right before our eyes over the last few weeks and months, should cause the international community to hang its head in shame? Does he also agree that, in this debate about the proposed visa scheme, once again, double standards are being exposed?

Sam Tarry: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point. It is no help at all to our international diplomatic and development efforts that many countries in the global south are now able to turn to Russia or China and say, "Look at the double standards of Britain and the west."

It is for that reason, as well as because of the tens of thousands of constituents in Ilford who have written to me, that we need to consider a scheme very similar to the one under which so many Ukrainians have been welcomed into our country. That scheme showed that the people of Britain have a great deal of compassion for their fellow humans, and that they understood and saw the savage butchery going on in Ukraine. In the same way, people in my community would welcome to their homes, even if just temporarily, Palestinians who need the shelter of our nation and our people.

Andrew Western: Like my hon. Friend, I am strongly supportive of such a bespoke scheme for Palestinians. Does he agree that, as well as looking to recent Government policy, we could look to the policies adopted by countries around the world? For example, Canada has given approval in principle to those seeking visas under family reunion schemes and supported them to get to Egypt, so that all people eligible under the scheme can get there, rather than just those who have the money to do so. Does he agree that if that support were in place then all Palestinians, on an even basis, could get out to a place of safety here in the UK, admittedly on a temporary basis?

Sam Tarry: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Canadian scheme has a lot of merit, and I hope that Ministers look into it properly. Let us remind ourselves that it was just two years ago that the Government swiftly introduced the Ukraine family scheme, as part of that which British citizens and permanent residents were able to sponsor a wide range of family members—parents, siblings, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews—for visas. That sponsorship scheme was open to Ukrainians with no family ties to the UK, it was free of charge, and

[Sam Tarry]

the visas last three years. Many of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), have given specific cases of individual Palestinians who have family members, both in the west bank and in Gaza, who are suffering so badly. Surely, those things could be brought forward as an immediate way for them to be given a safe and legal path to refuge.

Nobody should have to pay tens of thousands of pounds to get across the border at Rafah. We should be able to put in place arrangements in our immigration system so that people can provide their digital fingerprints and make applications in a way that is right for our country, but allows them to leave quickly and arrive at a safe haven on our shores as quickly as possible. On top of that, where they are able to, I believe that those people should be permitted to work immediately. Many of them are doctors, academics and so on. The Gazan people are a highly skilled, incredibly intelligent and well-educated workforce, and many of them would love to make their contribution in return for safety and refuge from the barbarity that they are facing.

5.36 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Last Friday, I held a public meeting in Dennistoun in my constituency of Glasgow North East on what more people can do to help the people of Gaza. My constituents, like everybody else, are feeling utterly helpless and it was important to get people together to talk about it. Several of my constituents have family members trapped in Gaza right now. Some came along to that meeting, and they took great comfort in seeing so many people with no particular connection to Palestine turning out on a cold, rainy Friday night in Glasgow to ask what more they could do to help. We heard unique perspectives from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who lived and worked in Gaza for three years, and from Dr Ibrahim Khadra, who is the chair of Palestinian Community Scotland. He told us that he has lost 70 members of his family. I thank them both, and I thank my constituents for turning out to support Palestinians.

I was also honoured to be asked to host a meeting here in Parliament for the Gaza Families Reunited campaign in March. The meeting gave the campaign group a platform to speak directly to MPs and peers about how and why we need a temporary family reunion visa scheme for Palestinians trapped in Gaza. I cannot tell Members how moving and upsetting it was to hear directly from Amira, Roba and Ghassan, who are desperately trying to get their families out of Gaza. Those family members are starving and under continual bombardment, and they just do not know where is safe and where is not.

In the UK Government's response to the petition, they said that there are

"no plans to introduce bespoke arrangements for people arriving from the region"

and that those

"wishing to come to the UK who currently have no visa can apply under one of the existing visa routes."

I have come to this debate directly from a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees. It was the first meeting of our inquiry into the so-called safe

and legal routes to the UK that we hear so much about. I am sure we will hear about them again. If I were to write down the safe and legal routes to the UK, I would not even fill half a sheet of A4 paper. I could do it in really big writing and I still would not fill half a sheet. I find the Government's response to the petition quite insulting. We are used to a lack of humanity in official responses, but this one is particularly cold. The description of people "arriving from the region" does not begin to do justice to the true horror of the situation for the millions of people in Gaza who are desperate to escape to some kind of safety.

If I had one question for the Minister, it would be this: what are the Government so afraid of? As we have heard, we opened our doors to all Ukrainians fleeing that war, and rightly so. Guess how many fleeing Ukrainians came here? Only 3% of the total. So what are they so afraid of? Although we are finding lots of words, no words are adequate to describe the horror of what is happening in Gaza, and it just gets worse and worse. Israeli forces have closed the only way out, meaning there is no way out for people and no way in for essential aid. They have invaded the only supposed safe space in the entire region, after explicitly directing millions of people to go there.

This morning, we have been told that what remains of the healthcare system in Gaza is about to collapse due a lack of fuel and aid. I mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire, who spoke on Friday night of the Scottish-Palestinian health partnership that has been set up via a memorandum of understanding between Glasgow University and the Arab American University of Palestine. I encourage everyone to read up on that really useful work.

The majority of people I speak to are stunned into silence when they discover that we are not helping people to escape Gaza. The assumption is that, like we did with Ukraine, we have some kind of scheme set up to help refugees find safety. Earlier I mentioned the APPG on refugees inquiry into so-called safe and legal routes, which started today; we heard that the public assume that we have a similar scheme for anyone fleeing war anywhere in the world. Well, they are going to be surprised when they discover the truth.

This morning, on my way into this place, I had a conversation with a random person I bumped into in the street about this debate and the petition, and the conversation went from general disbelief to the inevitable question, "Why are the Government letting that happen?" I told him about the rigmarole that people are required to go through, and which we have talked about today: to get out of Gaza, people need to enrol their biometrics at a visa application centre, but that means travelling to such a centre because it cannot be done remotely—but guess where the nearest such centre is from Gaza? Egypt. People cannot travel there because they cannot leave Gaza without a visa, and if they do find the money to get out of Gaza and find themselves in Egypt, they will be at the mercy of a painfully slow decision-making process, or maybe even find that they are ineligible under any of the existing routes to safety. It is a terrible system, where profiteering is put before people, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is letting it happen.

Jess Phillips: Most of my Gazan residents and constituents who got out did so during the initial phase of the war, with British family members. They were allowed to bring their families with them, as they were in Israel, where the British Government laid on flights for British Israelis to be evacuated. I have to leave and go to another debate, but will the hon. Member seek from the Minister an answer on what the costs were for our Gazan Palestinian constituents compared with the scheme for those in the exact same conflict?

Anne McLaughlin: I absolutely will ask the Minister to answer that question. That does not mean that he will, because I quite often ask questions that never get answered, as do we all, but I hope he tries to answer.

Roba from the Gaza Families Reunited campaign lives here in the UK, and she crowdfunded to try to save her family's lives. She travelled to Egypt to pay the ransom. As far as I know, her family are still not here. I recommend that Members look up her story; it is harrowing. The petition is a call for a temporary solution—just to help keep people alive. These people do not want to live here. They want to live in a free, rebuilt Palestine. They deserve the right to do that, and we need to help them to do so.

The Minister has been shaking his head every time someone suggests that he and his Government seem not to care.

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove) *indicated dissent.*

Anne McLaughlin: He's shaking his head at me again. Some things are a political difference of opinion, right? This is a point blank refusal to offer protection to human beings at risk of death. There is no other way to describe it. He should be fighting for these people; he should be using his power and influence as a British Government Minister to save their lives. He can shake his head all he likes, but if he continues to refuse, he and we will all know the truth. As I have asked him on other occasions about other issues, are he and his Government really content in years to come to look back on what they did and what they did not do? If not, do something. Do something!

5.44 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for opening what has proved to be an extremely well attended debate—at least as far as the Opposition parties are concerned.

I want to challenge some of the false premises that the Government have relied on in denying a visa scheme and some of the myths that have been put forward. The first is that, in this aspect of their migration policy, the Government are doing something popular. The number of people who signed the petition in my constituency and the hundreds of people who wrote to me in advance of the debate suggest that that is far from the truth.

I try to work closely with the refugee organisations in my constituency; I visited a couple of them a few days ago. Ukrainian open house is organised every month by two of my constituents, Belinda Mitchel-Innes and Christian Howgill. It provides a raft of services and advice to Ukrainian refugees in the UK. West London Welcome, run by Joanne MacInnes and Leyla Williams,

caters to a wide range of asylum seekers, particularly those living in appalling conditions in hotels. It supports them in every possible way, from providing food to counselling. For reasons we all know about, they are not entertaining Palestinian refugees at the moment, but clearly the same rights should be extended as have been extended to other groups who have sought refuge in this country.

I am pleased to say that the Ukrainian open house was awarded a civic honour last week, as indeed the West London Welcome was in previous years. They are wonderful organisations that have the grassroots support of many of my constituents.

One of my more famous constituents, Lord Dubs, who led a debate on this subject in the House of Lords last month, brings a unique perspective to the issue. There were some very good contributions from noble Lords of very different parties, but I am afraid to say a flippant and dismissive response from the Minister there, which I hope will not be repeated today.

I raised the issue with the deputy Foreign Secretary a few weeks ago on the Floor of the House. As I did not get an answer, I will ask the Minister the same question now. I said:

“Every month in Hammersmith, we hold ‘Ukrainian open house’ to bring together all those supporting Ukrainian families who have fled that war. Every month, I am asked why there are not similar visa schemes to allow Palestinians to join their relatives in the UK, or to be hosted by families who wish to give them refuge here. What is the Government’s answer to that?”

I have a great deal of time for the deputy Foreign Secretary, but his answer was inadequate. He said:

“The Government’s answer is that the two positions are not analogous; they are very, very different. The hon. Member will know that we are doing everything we can to help individual cases in both instances, and we will continue to do so.”—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 817.]

If the two situations are not analogous, I would like to hear an exposition from the Minister on why that is the case. I will challenge him, as others have already in this debate, on whether the Government are doing everything they can, because that is another myth that is being perpetuated.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I know how passionate my hon. Friend is about this issue. Hearing from colleagues today about individual cases has really brought home what it means for the families who are involved and trying to contact people stranded in Gaza. The impression that I get from talking to the community in Bristol is a sense of community injustice. Obviously they care about individuals, but unless the question about why we are not treating them the same as we treat refugees from Ukraine is answered, the suspicion is that they are somehow being blamed for the crisis in Gaza. They are not to blame. They are innocent civilians in the grip of a terrible humanitarian catastrophe. They need our support just as much as people in Ukraine.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will come on to that in a moment.

To return to what the Government said, this is a quote from the Government’s response to the petition today:

“There are currently no plans to introduce bespoke arrangements for people arriving from the region who do not hold permission to come to the UK. That means that immediate family members

[*Andy Slaughter*]

of British citizens, and those settled in the UK, who wish to come and live in the UK and do not have a current UK visa can apply under one of the existing family visa routes. Individuals who meet these criteria should apply for a visa to enable them to enter the UK in the normal way.”

Then it helpfully tells people that the visa application centres in

“Egypt, Jordan and Turkey are open and offering a full service.”

Well, they are probably not too busy because there are not many people from Gaza turning up there. I regard that as a cynical and callous response to what the Government have been asked. Again, I hope we will hear something a little better from the Minister today.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. After years of casework experience, would he agree that it was unusual to hear from another Member in the debate, the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), that the mission in Jerusalem failed to reply to a Member of Parliament? Does he think that is lacking respect and understanding of what we as MPs are faced with daily with our casework?

Andy Slaughter: I do not know whether it was the embassy in Tel Aviv or the consulate in Jerusalem. I have always found the consulate in Jerusalem very helpful; the other, perhaps not so much.

The last point I want to make on these false premises is about the idea that the scheme would be a way for Gazans and Palestinians to come to the UK and live here permanently. That has never been alleged against Ukrainians. We know the passion with which Ukrainians want to return as soon as they can to their homeland. The same is true to a greater extent for Palestinians, as is clear to anyone who, like me, has visited the region; I have visited Gaza several times, and I have visited the west bank and spoken to Palestinians. Above all, they want the right to live in their own country, recognised internationally and governed by the rule of law. The Palestinians have been campaigning for the right to return to their country for nearly 80 years, and it is frankly insulting to say that they are looking at a way to permanently settle elsewhere. There is a Palestinian diaspora around the world; there is a Palestinian diaspora in refugee camps throughout the middle east. Most Palestinians want to live in a free and democratic Palestinian state.

I will bring my remarks to a close. This is a very important debate, but it is on one—perhaps not the most brutal—aspect of what is currently going on in Gaza. I begin to get sickened at the way our Government are dealing with this matter. It is as if they are a passive observer: “Is Israel breaking international law at the moment? Have they, in fact, crossed a red line by what they are doing in Rafah at the moment? As we are not sending very much by way of armaments, perhaps it does not matter or make a big difference to the number of people killed.” These are deeply degenerate and obscene attitudes, when we see every day on television or social media how children are being killed in their thousands.

We have not said the right things. The Government have not even called for a ceasefire, as yet. If they had done all those things, maybe it would not have made a

difference, but at least we should be on the right side of the argument morally. What we are debating today is one thing we can do. We can give relief to those Palestinians who are in such extremis and need to come here, who will be welcomed by people in the UK whether they are their family or people who just generously want to give them aid and succour.

I urge the Minister to both respond fully to this debate, which his colleagues have avoided doing, and to show some sympathy and humanity to those suffering in Palestine.

5.53 pm

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): I am going to leave aside the fact that this is all entirely hypothetical at this point, because Israel has seized the Rafah crossing in absolute breach of the Camp David accords, which have the power of international law, having been adopted by the Security Council. The Philadelphi corridor is completely sealed, and this is the fourth day in a row on which exactly no food or medical aid—none—has entered Gaza. Therefore, even if the British Government move their show to the border, no Palestinian would be able to get biometric tests anyway.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on securing the debate and commiserate with the Minister, who will have to try to answer the literally unanswerable to defend the literally indefensible. Sometimes one detests a Government policy but can understand why they are doing it, but it is impossible to fathom why the Government are resisting the entirely inexpensive demand that this debate and petition ask for. Hundreds of the signatories—391 of them—are my constituents in Rochdale, who are always looking for ways to demonstrate their support for the Palestinian cause, as you will know, Mr Vickers. I declare an interest: one of my parliamentary staff is one of those trying to get their family out of Gaza to no avail.

The attendance at this debate is evidence of the massive support that there is in the country for the plight of the Palestinian people to be at least palliated by our Government, and that could be done so inexpensively that I literally cannot fathom why the Minister is going to rise and resist the demands made by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood. Leaving aside all the historical reasons why they should, there is the fact that it was in this very building that the entire Palestinian tragedy was authored, when on behalf of one people our Government promised to a second people the land that belonged to a third people. You would think that that was a matter of historical guilt for our Government that they might want to mitigate in some way, leaving aside the fact that hundreds of our soldiers, police officers, civil servants and staff of this very House were murdered in the King David hotel. Our soldiers were left hanging by piano wire in the orange groves of Jaffa, booby-trapped. Should the Government not have a scintilla of guilt and responsibility for what has happened to the Palestinian people in the past and in the last seven months?

It is not true that our military aid to Israel is minuscule. If we define it by completed pieces of ordnance, it may be, but our components are in most of Israel’s bombs and rockets that are falling down on the poor people in Gaza, who are defenceless prisoners in what the then Prime Minister, now Foreign Secretary David Cameron

described as the largest open-air prison in the world. He went on to say that it must not be allowed to remain so, and that was in 2010. Now that he is the Foreign Secretary in 2024, he turns his face away from the people in that prison camp that he said must not be allowed to remain so.

[PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

It is not just ordnance: we have flown 200 missions from our sovereign base in Akrotiri in Cyprus. Who knew that we had a sovereign base in independent Cyprus, a European Union and allied country? We have the right to fly whatever we like out of that sovereign base, and 200 times we have flown spying missions over Gaza for the edification of Netanyahu and his gang in power in Tel Aviv.

Our contribution to this massacre is very significant, both historically and contemporaneously. What are people from all sides asking here, some of them actually capital-F friends of Israel? They are all asking for one small thing: that you at least allow people who are citizens here and contributing here to get their old mother out of Gaza, rather than see her, perhaps on their telephone, being torn to shreds by a bomb that would not have been as effective if it were not for the components being given from British factories and targets being assisted by RAF jets flying out of Akrotiri.

For goodness' sake, Minister, have some political nous. Millions of people in Britain want you to do something. This you can do with the stroke of a pen, and it would not cost you anything in your popularity stakes with Netanyahu in Tel Aviv.

6 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate everybody who has been involved in supporting the e-petition and the Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), for her excellent introduction to the debate. I proudly put on the record my full support for a Gaza family scheme.

It is impossible to imagine the fear and terror that every single morning must bring to people who have loved ones living in the midst of the utter carnage in Gaza. In the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, is it really the Home Office's response to do nothing and change nothing? That cannot seriously be an acceptable response. The Minister in his reply will almost certainly point to how the Home Office responded and engaged positively in light of the horrors unfolding in Ukraine or, indeed, Hong Kong. However, as others have pointed out, those welcome measures simply prompt the question: why on earth not Gaza as well? It is really not a big ask; in fact, it is the very least we could do.

The existing rules are simply not working and are not sufficient. Whether a person can join family members here depends first on the category of leave or visa that the family member has—whether that is as a refugee or with humanitarian protection, whether it is as a UK citizen or with settled status, or whether it is with some form of temporary leave such as for study or work. Given the hellish circumstances in Gaza, the right to be joined by family fleeing catastrophe should not depend on the type of leave that a person has. We must be much more generous about the category of family members

who can apply to join so that it is not just immediate family members, but parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, and so on. We in this room would all want—indeed, we would all demand—precisely the same if it was our relatives in the same situation.

Similarly, the fees and charges that generally apply to many applications, often amounting to several thousands of pounds when the immigration health surcharge is included, should be waived. In the face of such untold horrors, we cannot make family unity dependent on a person's wealth.

Regardless of what changes the Home Office makes, or even if it refuses to make any changes at all, the practical processes for dealing with the applications must be fixed and improved. Even for those fortunate enough to qualify for family reunion or another visa that enables them to get here, the applications take far too long, with many being left in destitution and in limbo, usually in Egypt, where resident rights are often quick to expire, along with any access to education for kids or to healthcare or housing. That is of course if people are lucky enough to get as far as Egypt—as we have already heard, the closure of the Rafah crossing makes that almost impossible.

Even while the crossing was open, while the UK Government would provide lists of British citizens who were thereby entitled to cross at Rafah into Egypt, no such facility was granted to many Palestinians, even if they were, or could have been, able to join family here in the United Kingdom. Instead, they were left to be subject to essentially extortion by an Egyptian company called Hala and forced to pay \$5,000 per adult or \$2,500 per child in cash to cross, and only first-degree relatives of people physically present in Egypt could even do that.

The cost meant that people were having to make absolutely impossible choices. They were having to start their journeys with a crowdfunder, and then ask themselves, "Well, we've got enough to bring a parent, but perhaps we should take a niece instead." What a choice to leave folk to make. The ability to reunite with family in safety should not be open to such extortion, and people should not be left to face such choices. We call on the Government to work with counterparts to secure an evacuation from Gaza of individuals with UK family members, without them being subject to that additional worry, just like the Canadians have managed, as we have heard.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Like others, I have been trying to get people out of Gaza and here to a place of safety with their relatives in the UK. Like others, I have been advised by the Home Office that schemes are available that people should apply to. Like others, I have found that the barriers to those schemes, the level of evidence required and the costs involved mean that they are simply not appropriate or effective. Is it not really the case that, by design, the existing schemes cannot work in an emergency situation in which there is ongoing conflict? That is why we need a new scheme.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The existing visa schemes were not designed to help people out of a war-torn hellhole. They were designed to allow folk to come here as family members, as spouses, to study or to work. We need a bespoke arrangement that is designed for the catastrophe that is unfolding before our very eyes.

Imran Hussain: Surely it is actually worse than that. The rules are so outrageous that even a person who was unfamiliar with them would see instantly that they are not going to work, because people simply cannot get to the place they need to reach to they get the required documents. Does the hon. Member agree that the tragedy is that we first saw this with 1 million Rohingya people in Cox's Bazar, where similar restrictions were put in place, and we are now seeing the same restrictions on 1.4 million people in Rafah, further exposing the double standard?

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the hon. Member for the intervention. I simply repeat the point: the system is not designed for the circumstances that are unfolding, and it is imperative that the Government get their finger out and design a suitable bespoke scheme.

I join other hon. Members in calling on the Minister to rethink his Department's utterly wrong-headed approach to biometrics in war-torn countries. A few months back, I had an Adjournment debate similar to this one on Sudan, with the Minister's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). In Gaza, as in Sudan, there is no possibility that in-country biometrics can be provided alongside a visa application, so surely the common-sense approach is to consider applications and to defer biometric enrolment, as we are all arguing. If, subject to those biometrics, an application is to be allowed, the applicant can then commence their journey and provide the biometric information either on arrival here or, if the Home Office is not willing to go that far, in a third country such as Egypt.

However, rather than making things easier, the Minister seems to have made the position tougher through new guidance about when exceptions to biometric enrolment would apply. That is why not a single application to defer biometrics has been granted by the Home Office since Israel began its offensive in Gaza, as we have heard. In the circumstances, that is utterly incomprehensible. Given that the general country situation makes it impossible to have biometric enrolment there, people are left with a choice: either they have to take an almighty gamble and make dangerous and often illegal journeys to neighbouring countries to enrol their biometrics, without even knowing whether they will then be allowed onwards to the United Kingdom, or they give up. Making people take that decision is astonishingly cruel.

The Minister subsequently wrote to me to set out reasons justifying that approach in relation to Sudan, and I suspect that we will hear the same today in relation to Gaza. The letter repeatedly made the point that biometric information is vital for security. But nobody is disputing that point. We are just asking for a reasonable approach as to when biometric information needs to be provided; we are not asking for it to be waived altogether. We understand the importance of the checks, but the Minister cannot be oblivious to the horrible problems that his Department's approach is causing people who want to leave Gaza. Frankly, the absence of any other good reason creates the impression that the Home Office is more bothered about suppressing the number of applications than it is about any real point of principle. That is a depressing thought.

Reuniting people from hellish warzones with family here in the UK is something that we should celebrate. We call on the Government to facilitate that, rather

than to obstruct it. A family scheme for Gaza has my full support. It is not a big ask; it is the very least the Government should be doing.

6.9 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for the diligent way in which she started the debate and highlighted many of the issues. I point the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which shows that I received help in this area from the Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy project. I am also the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on migration.

That thousands of people have signed the petition that triggered this debate should be a sign to everyone here that there is significant support and compassion for those who are fleeing the violence and destruction of war, and for welcoming refugees into our communities. We saw the same with Ukraine, with people opening their homes and the reunification of families meaning so much to people. I have raised questions about schemes for other conflicts, such as Sudan. The Home Office's approach is seemingly case by case, but the underlying policy is simply not fit for purpose for those who are fleeing from war and persecution.

With Ukraine, the Government rightly responded by waiving all fees, salary thresholds and language tests under the Ukraine family scheme. That programme opened applications to all civilians in need, and it significantly reduced the visa paperwork. Those who could not reach a visa application centre were swiftly issued with permission-to-travel letters on the basis that applicants could finish the process in the UK. The Government also extended the use of the "UK Immigration: ID Check" app to Ukrainian nationals, which allowed applicants to enrol digitally with their biometrics using a mobile phone. Those measures demonstrate what can be done when the public support for those trapped in conflict meets the political will that something can be done in Westminster, showing that there are solutions to the challenges that we will no doubt hear about from the Minister shortly.

However, despite the mass support for the family scheme for Palestinians, we have seen no action from Ministers on Gaza. In fact, not only have the Government refused to implement a similar scheme, they will not even waive the fees or relax the biometric requirements for making a standard immigration application. I would like to use this opportunity to ask the Minister: whose crisis counts? What is the difference between a Palestinian fleeing the bombs overhead in Gaza and a Ukrainian doing the same in Kyiv? In his response about whether the Government would consider introducing a similar family scheme for those in Gaza, the Minister stated:

"In any humanitarian situation, the UK must consider its resettlement approach in the round, rather than on a crisis-by-crisis basis."—[*Official Report*, 15 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 14.]

The inaction of Ministers suggests that they have not considered their approach at all, let alone "in the round".

People in Gaza with family members in the UK remain trapped, with no safe or viable routes to reunite with their families. Without a specific family route, they can rely only on existing routes, such as family visas or skilled worker dependent visas, but to make those applications is nearly impossible. The closest and most

viable visa application centre is in Egypt, on the other side of the Rafah crossing, which we have heard is currently under assault and for some days now has been completely closed. I understand that it is possible to apply for deferral to biometric enrolment requirements, which I am sure the Minister will say, but could he please tell us how many of those deferrals have actually been granted? Is the number still standing at zero? Given the unparalleled threat to civilian life in Gaza and the UK's historic involvement in Palestine, it is hard to understand why the British Government have not simply adopted the approach they took in Ukraine. To the people out there, it looks completely wrong.

It would also be wrong of me not to stress that, rather than ad-hoc schemes for individual crises and countries, a solution would be to lift the Government's in-practice ban on asylum applications. We need more safe routes and more safe passage to the UK for people facing war and conflict, the majority of whom are children, have injuries or have family here. In the absence of either safe routes or safe passage visas, it is time that the Government did the bare minimum and introduced an emergency family reunion scheme for those seeking shelter from the bombing and the crisis in Gaza.

6.13 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on securing this important debate. As the Israel Defence Forces ramp up operations in Rafah, there are no remaining safe zones left in Gaza. Nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been killed, over 75,000 have been injured, and more than 1.5 million have been displaced. I know that Members have heard those figures before, but I think it is important that we repeat them as often as possible.

People who have already been forced out of their homes are having to flee once again. According to an interim damage assessment conducted by the World Bank and the UN, \$18.5 billion-worth of damage to critical infrastructure has been done, and 74% of that is housing. Eighty-four percent of health facilities in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, and those that are left are barely functioning. Doctors are having to perform amputations on children and perform C-sections without anaesthetic. It is worth restating that under the Geneva conventions, the forcible transfer of a civilian population is a war crime, as is the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure. Yet, even after the ICJ ruling, our Government's decision to keep supplying military hardware to Israel and their failure to push for a lasting ceasefire mean that the UK is wholly complicit in creating the conditions for the humanitarian crisis we are now witnessing. We have a responsibility to help those who are suffering.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. A number of Members have highlighted the fact that the Ukrainian scheme was dependent on our local councils helping families and welcoming them into our boroughs. My hon. Friend and I share the borough of Lambeth, which was awarded borough of sanctuary status in 2022 in recognition of the fact that our constituents want to help, aided by the council. Does she agree that in response to the issues she is highlighting the Government

need to do a full, proper assessment of why they do not have a scheme in place, as mentioned by many Members this afternoon?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the Government should do a full assessment.

Unfortunately, the Government's response to the plight of Palestinian refugees has been typical of their punitive approach to people seeking safety. I found this out for myself when a constituent of mine attempted to apply for his family members to join him in February. They were rejected because they could not provide biometric data. I was appalled to find out that the Home Office actually put down in writing that this was because the Government expect Palestinian refugees from Gaza to apply in Ramallah, Jerusalem or a nearby country. They are effectively telling people to travel through an active war zone to submit information.

Besides the current conflict, Gaza has been under blockade for years. People from Gaza do not casually leave and travel to different parts of the country. They simply do not. His Majesty's Home Office should be embarrassed to send such a ridiculous and ignorant response—if not, I am thoroughly embarrassed for the Home Office. Those seeking to leave Gaza are trapped in a Catch-22 because of this situation. They cannot enrol their biometrics because they cannot leave Gaza, and they cannot leave Gaza because they cannot enrol their biometrics.

According to the Gaza Families Reunited campaign, at least two Palestinians are now known to have died while waiting for the Home Office to decide on their applications. My constituent said:

"I do not think I'm being treated fairly at all. I came to the UK on a work permit and never applied for assistance from the UK Government."

He just wants the UK Government to help his family. It is hard to argue with what he says, because when millions were displaced by Russia's appalling invasion of Ukraine in 2021, the Government had the Homes for Ukraine scheme live in a matter of weeks. It is right that that happened, and I believe the Government have not done enough for Ukrainian refugees, but when the conflict began in Gaza and thousands of Palestinians were displaced, and then more than a million, where was the homes for Palestine scheme?

All options are closed to my constituent's family. It is worth repeating that the Home Office has rejected every single request for biometric deferral and predetermination since 7 October. When I wrote to the Home Office again, the response to my constituent was:

"I have considered whether there are compelling, compassionate circumstances in your case which would warrant a grant of leave outside of the Immigration Rules; however, based on the information you have provided, I have decided there is no such circumstances in your case."

We have 35,000 people killed, over 75,000 injured, people starving and 1.5 million people displaced, but our Home Office can see no circumstances for a grant of leave outside the current immigration rules. That is an absolute disgrace.

In comparison, between 15 March 2022 and 7 December 2023 Ukrainian nationals could apply online without the need to enrol their biometrics until after they reached safety in the UK. Again, this was absolutely the right thing to do, but why are Palestinians being denied the

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

same conditions and compassion? When the Minister responds, I want to understand the Government's justification for these double standards, and I want the Minister to understand why there are so many people right across the country who believe that those reasons revolve around racism and geopolitics.

There is nothing that Palestinians want more than a safe return to their home. However, the inordinate civilian death toll in this conflict sadly means that many Palestinians simply will not be alive to exercise that right. From the Sykes-Picot agreement to the Balfour declaration, the betrayals of McMahon to the invasion of Allenby's forces, we have to acknowledge that it was long-standing British policy to displace Palestinians from their homes.

Our shared colonial history means that we have a unique responsibility towards Palestinian refugees and a particular responsibility to push for peace in the region, but it is a responsibility that this Government have completely shirked so far. I urge the Minister to listen to the thousands who signed the petition, including hundreds of my constituents, and create a Palestinian family reunion scheme. As well as supporting people displaced by the war in Gaza, we need the Government to do something about the root causes of that displacement, which means suspending arms sales and pushing for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

6.20 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Look at the number of people who have been here for this debate, remembering that a lot have had to go because another important debate is about to start in the main Chamber, and consider the fact that almost two hours into it not a single word has been spoken in defence of the Government's position on Gaza family reunification visas. A lot of Members are trying to understand their position. I struggle to understand.

I do not want this to be the answer, but I think it is because the Government have become so obsessed with the view that any immigration is a bad thing that has to be stopped if at all possible, and so obsessed with the way they calculate net immigration. They have worked out that if we allow a small handful of desperate Gazan citizens to come here, that will increase net inward migration, and that is a bad thing. Is that where we have come to? Has the toxic, poisonous debate over immigration in this place over the past seven or eight years taken us to a place where we have a Government who would quite literally—I make no apology for saying this—see innocent, defenceless and desperate people die rather than allow them safe passage and sanctuary among families in these islands who would look after them for as long as they have to.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned an elderly lady who has two daughters in the UK, one living in Edinburgh. My constituent Dr Lubna Hadoura has given 30 years of service as a consultant in our NHS and has never asked for anything. She has saved the lives of my constituents and others, and now she needs our help. The response that came most recently from this Minister was the same as those that have come from other

Ministers—I suspect it is word for word the same as the response that every MP present has had, and it is almost identical to the response, or non-response, to this petition.

The Minister was very upset when my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) said some quite unpleasant home truths about the Government's attitude. I will say to the Minister that if he wants to take the last response he sent to me, as Dr Hadoura's MP, and sit down with her and read to her the reasons why her mum is not allowed to come here to be looked after, then let him do it. I have not given that letter to my constituent yet; I cannot bear to inflict on her the absolute horror that she will feel when she sees how unfeeling this Government—the Government to whom she has paid taxes for decades—are to the plight of her elderly mother and, by clear implication, to the plight of well over a million of our fellow human beings. I cannot understand it. I cannot even begin to explain to my constituent why it is that her mum and so many others are just being abandoned.

In this case, this lady has managed to escape from Gaza. I have not asked questions about how they got her out; it is maybe better that I do not know. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West said, this 79-year-old lady has had more home addresses in the last seven months than I have had in the 63 and a half years that I have been alive. She is 79 years old. Most of the time she has been displaced, it was under fire—very often literally running the gauntlet of Israeli snipers who would take it on themselves to shoot random civilians just to make the point that they could. Yet that is not sufficient grounds to say that these people have to be got out of Gaza while there is still a chance.

I know it is not comfortable for my constituent to hear her mum talked about in this way, but I need to go through some of what she has experienced. She has spent six months without any privacy—and I mean literally no privacy at all for a 79-year-old woman. There are no toilets and no sanitation. She has gone six months without a bath or a shower; six months without the medicines she needs to maintain any kind of standard of living; and six months without being able to sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time. In those six months, every single time she went to sleep she said, as well as the prayer she says every night, the prayer of submission before death, because for six months when she closed her eyes she never knew whether she would ever open them again.

This lady is desperately traumatised. She is so confused that when my constituent managed to go over to Cairo to spend some time with her, she found her sitting in the dark because she had forgotten that there were electric lights and that just pressing a switch on the wall would make the light come on. For so long in Gaza there had been no electric lights, just as there had been no power, no heating, no water, no sanitation, no shelter, no food, no medicines—no anything.

One of the previous speakers said this is maybe not the most brutal aspect of the horrors of Gaza, but I think it is, because the fact that these people are not able to get out of Gaza is something that this Government have the power to change on their own. We do not need the permission of anyone else, we do not need intense diplomatic efforts and we do not need the threat of

sanctions or embargos or anything like that. All we need to do is to say to people: “It’s difficult to get your families out of Gaza, but you get them out of Gaza and we will get them here.” It is not international law, or treaties, or anything else that is preventing the Government from saying that. They are not saying it because they have decided that their political priority is not to bring these people to these islands. I have to say to the Minister that if that is the Government’s genuine view, it is clear from this debate that it is not the view shared by the majority in the House. I do not think that view is shared by the Government’s own Back Benchers; where are they to speak on behalf of this policy? Nobody wants to defend it publicly.

If my constituents are anything to go by—and I do not believe they are any more decent, caring or humanitarian than the constituents of the other 649 MPs—there is a massive majority of the people of these islands who are saying to us, “Yes, we know it will cause difficulties, and yes we know it is an exceptionally unusual step to take, but it is what we have to do. We can’t go on watching more and more innocents being killed on our television screens, knowing that we have it within the power of our Government to get some of them out yet they are doing nothing about it.”

The elderly lady I spoke about is now in Egypt, so she is not going to be killed tonight, but she still has no entitlement to food or healthcare. Her family had to spend a lot of money on the healthcare that she desperately needed when she escaped from Gaza. Egypt does not owe her anything. Why is it up to Egypt? It is simply because of an accident of geography that Egypt is where she landed up. She has no ties to Egypt whatsoever; she does have ties to Fife, to Edinburgh and to the United Kingdom. She has family in those places who will look after her for as long as it takes and who will do whatever they have to do for her, until the one day in her life that she now longs for arrives and she can go back to a Palestinian homeland that is once again fit for human beings to live in. Right now, thanks to this country’s great ally Israel, Gaza is not fit to sustain human life on any scale and it is certainly not fit to sustain human life on the scale of the numbers who are trapped in Gaza just now.

Why cannot the Government, in among all their rhetoric, just own up to the fact that there is no safe legal route out of Gaza? There is none. There is absolutely no safe legal route for people to get out of Gaza. The Government do not want to admit that—why not? As I have said, they are clearly out of touch with the people of Britain, they are very clearly out of touch with the will of Parliament, and I think they are out of touch with the will of their own Back Benchers. They are becoming increasingly out of touch with any kind of humanity or any kind of care for our fellow human beings, wherever they might be on this planet.

The Government give excuses for not acting. They suggest that the law says that they do not have to, and that international diplomacy says this and treaties say that. I am not asking the Minister to agree to a visa scheme because the law says that we have to. I am pleading with him—begging him—to do it because the collective conscience of this House and, I am convinced, the collective conscience of the people of these islands is saying, “Get these people out of Gaza, not because we have to, but because we can.”

6.29 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for securing this debate today.

We have heard from many colleagues who have stated what is happening in Gaza; indeed, we see what is happening in Gaza on our screens every day. It is not that what is happening is being done in secrecy; it is being done very openly and the whole world is watching it happen. Indeed, the whole world has been watching it happen for months and months and months.

The whole world has heard the comments of the various leaders of the Israeli Government, such as saying that the Palestinians or Gazans are the Amalekites, or the fact that leaders, defence Ministers and generals are saying, “They are not human beings; they should be in the Sinai desert.” They heard the Minister who looked at the complete devastation of Gaza and said, “This is such a beautiful site. We are looking forward to building our homes there.”

We have seen the relentless bombing—bombing and bombing and bombing. We are seeing children with their limbs blown off, and women and other adults damaged. We have heard of people’s skin peeling off. We have seen real crimes being committed in front of our eyes, yet all we have are platitudes from world leaders. They say, “Well, Israel is going to abide by international law,” or, “The IDF is the most moral army in the world.” I do not know whether it is a moral army or not; all I am saying to people is that people should see what is actually happening in Gaza and draw their own conclusions.

We now have a situation where water, food, clothes, medicine and generators are available and we can help the people in Gaza, who are now stuck in a tiny space—1.5 million of them are displaced. However, it is not a natural famine or disaster; it is purely and simply because the Israeli Government will not let aid in, with the illegal Israeli settlers playing their part to stop aid getting in. What are our moral international Governments doing about that? We can see it, so why is it that no one seems to be taking real steps to help the Palestinian people and to get food in? We have had some food aid drops, but they are nothing compared with what is needed.

I will come on to the topic of this debate. It is only a small number of people who are able to leave Gaza and join their families in the United Kingdom; why is that not happening? We see the destruction, and as many colleagues have said, those people are not going to be a burden on the taxpayer or the state, because their family and friends will look after and pay for them. I know that those people will go back to their homeland. One of the reasons why so many Palestinians are stuck where they are in Rafah is that they know that if they left Palestine the chances of them being able to return are virtually negligible.

We saw what happened in the 1940s with the Nakba, where 700,000 people were expelled forcibly and not any have been able to come back. Now their families and children are languishing in tents in Lebanon, Jordan and the rest of the surrounding countries. There are now approaching 4 million or 5 million of those displaced people. For 75 years, everybody in the international community has talked about how the Palestinians would be able to come back, or about a homeland for the Palestinians.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Nothing has happened. That is how I know that of those people who will leave Gaza, virtually all of them will want to go back—although, as someone has said, the level of devastation in Gaza is absolutely horrendous.

I am sorry to say that the Home Office's attitude to Palestinian refugees—or even Palestinian visitors—over the years has been incredibly harsh. I thank Julia Simpkins, who is a teacher in Bolton. Every year, she gets young Palestinian students to come over from the West Bank, Gaza and other places, to Bolton and Manchester and they are taken around for about a week. Last time she tried to do that, a few years back, visas were declined without any reason whatever given. These are children, but no explanation was given—that is the complete high-and-mightiness of the Home Office.

With Ukraine and other places, we rightly intervened to help people, yet we do not seem to be able to offer the same degree of courtesy or help to the Palestinian people. What is it about the Palestinians that is so different from the Ukrainians? I can assure the House, their perils and suffering are as great, if not greater—not that one should be comparing the sufferings of any one group of victims with those of another.

I say to the Government, this will not cost money. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood and other colleagues have said, the scheme already exists. It is literally copy and paste to apply it to the circumstances in Gaza and to make the rules easy as well, so that people can get out.

I have a final thing to ask of the Government while they are looking at this whole issue of Gaza, which we know is a big issue. In Ukraine, many children were severely injured and had amputations, and about 150 of them were accepted in British hospitals by the British Government, who paid for them to have limb reconstruction and other surgeries, or chemotherapy to treat cancer patients, yet not a single Palestinian child has been accepted. Not a single Palestinian child has been offered that service, despite the fact that in hospitals, such as Great Ormond Street Hospital management, are happy to take the children. None, however, has been taken. I ask the Government to examine their conscience—why? What is the difference between a Palestinian child and a Ukrainian child?

6.36 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I will follow up what my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) said with regard to the evacuation of children, but I first echo what others have said: there has been absolute unanimity in this Chamber, across all political parties as well, with representatives present from each of the parties. I have not seen that in this Chamber, possibly ever. The Government need to recognise that, and that it is born of—to be honest—accumulating concern, anger and distress about what we have experienced.

Some months ago, when the initial proposal came up, many were conflicted about whether it should be supported. They were conflicted in the Palestinian community as well, because people did not want to be seen to be complicit with what was—exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East said—a second Nakba.

At that stage, many Palestinians remained within Gaza, because they thought that it would be a limited action. They thought—all of us thought, naively—that the world would not stand by and watch this take place on that scale; a Nakba. I do not think that anyone calculated the level of killings that were to take place, and no one had any understanding of the scale of the deaths among children in particular.

That is why I think there was that sort of conflation, or a real contradiction in people's minds about whether to go forward. Interestingly, as time has moved on and as the situation has got so desperate—we have heard the stories today—people are desperate to do anything to help and to save life. The obvious solution to this is peace, a ceasefire. The obvious solution is that this Government, along with others, tell the mass murderer—at the moment, that is the Prime Minister of Israel—to halt the attack on Gaza. That is not forthcoming, so the least that the Government can do is to allow people to gain access to security.

Some Palestinians have gained access to security, some in hotels in our constituencies, but they have not gone through the route allowed by the Government; they have come on the boats across the channel. Here is the irony: they are now part of the categories that will be targeted for Rwanda. There is an inhumanity about the way the Palestinians have been treated—not just by the Israelis, but by the Government as well. There is an opportunity now for the Government to do something that is effective in providing relief, comfort, succour and security to those desperate people.

Some months ago I raised the question of the evacuation of injured children with the Deputy Foreign Secretary. Voluntary organisations here and in Europe were willing to work together to secure access to health facilities for the most injured—not just in Egypt, but in Europe and Britain. We were assured that a group was being formed, co-ordinated by the FCDO, to enable the evacuation to happen. My understanding is that that has not happened on any scale yet, and today we discovered that the health service in Rafah has virtually collapsed because of the lack of fuel.

There were two hospitals operating yesterday; I believe there is only one today. The bombs are still dropping. The children are still being killed and mutilated, yet we provide no assistance to allow those children access to health facilities beyond Gaza itself. The least the Government could do is ensure that there is an effective evacuation scheme for injured children, and have a scheme, as has been set out today, to enable people to gain at least some access to security.

I do not know how much more we can take from the Government. Our constituents feel stressed and angry about the inaction of the Government and by their complicity in supplying arms to the butchers who maim the children. I ask the Minister to listen to what has been said today on a cross-party basis, listen to the individual cases, recognise the suffering that is going on and, for God's sake, in the name of humanity, introduce a scheme that gives some comfort, succour and safety to those desperate people.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench contributions. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for His Majesty's

Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Then Cat Smith will have three minutes at the end to sum up the debate.

6.42 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Somebody asked me earlier what a Westminster Hall debate is. I told them that, quite often in Westminster Hall, it is when everybody comes together to agree and disagree with the Minister, and so it has proven today.

We have come together in this place, cross-party, to agree that there must be a Gaza families reunion scheme, allowing people to come out of the hellish, unimaginable war zone of Gaza to get to safety with those they love here in the UK. I think every street in my constituency has written to me on this. More than 3,000 people have written to me on the ongoing situation in Gaza to call for a ceasefire, the return of hostages, for aid to get in and for a lasting peace and a two-state solution. The Government have not done anything practical to respond to the concerns raised by our constituents.

A constituent, Sama, came to see me in November. She has been studying and working in Glasgow and is desperately afraid for her family, who were living in the north of Gaza. They have been moved and displaced multiple times—she does not know how many times because she cannot contact them. She cannot hear from them and does not know at any given time where they are or whether they are safe. The last time I heard from her they were in Rafah, which does not bode well for their ongoing safety, given what is going on. She wants her mother, father and teenaged brother to come to Scotland to be safe with her. That should not be too much to ask.

I wrote to the Foreign Secretary and got the boilerplate reply, as many others have done. It was not even from the Foreign Secretary, but from the Minister of State, Lord Ahmad, and it did nothing to help my constituent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, it is difficult even to give these constituents replies from this Government, because they do nothing to offer them any comfort whatsoever. I appealed to the aid agencies on the ground in desperation to ask whether there was anything that they could have done to help, but they regretted that they could not; they did not have those powers.

Sama's father has a severe heart condition. He has high blood pressure and diabetes and cannot get the medication he needs. As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said so eloquently, there are no hospitals there either to help him get the treatment that he needs. The home that this family had built for 30 years lies in rubble and ruin. Sama showed me with pride pictures of what that house looked like the last time that they were all together in it.

Why is it that I have no answer that I can give to Sama to bring her family to safety? She knows that there is no safe and legal route, and other Palestinian constituents who were in touch also have no certainty. One applied for asylum back in December 2022 and is still waiting for a response. They are not going to send him back there: grant him the security that he needs. Another gentleman has been in the UK for 18 years and as yet has no certainty about his status. As Sama put it

to me after one of my surgeries, "There is no money, there is no food, there is no ceasefire. There is no hope for those living in Gaza."

More than 35,000 are dead and 80,000 are injured. The Gaza Families Reunited campaign has brought a very reasonable request before the Minister, and I commend it for all the work that it has done on this. I will say something about the practicalities of what it proposes. Hon. Members across this Chamber have said that existing routes do not cut it and are not working. Family reunion visas, visitor visas and student visas are not working at all.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): As the hon. Lady knows, the Home Office allows applications for family visas only for immediate relatives, defined as partners, children or parents of children under 18. That excludes other close relatives such as siblings or parents of adult children, for example. As a result, perhaps the only surviving relatives of people with families in the UK might be stuck in Gaza with no way of joining them. Does she agree that it is beyond time that the UK Government introduced a Palestinian family scheme, just as they did with the Ukrainian family scheme, and that in fact they have a historical colonial responsibility to do so?

Alison Thewliss: I entirely agree with what the hon. Member presented. The Gaza Families Reunited campaign has set out the eligibility, saying that it would include an immediate family member, an extended family member or the immediate family of an extended family member. That is so important, because we know that there are people who now have nobody left. There are children who have been orphaned and have not a soul in the world that they can rely on, but they may have somebody they know is here, and they should be allowed to come to safety. It is cruelty beyond measure not to permit that to happen.

A recognised Palestinian refugee won a recent court case on this issue, challenging the Home Office's refusal to decide the family entrance clearance applications of his wife and children under refugee family reunion rules on account of their inability to enrol their biometrics in Gaza. That was described as being "irrational and unreasonable" by the courts, and it is entirely irrational and unreasonable. People are stuck, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, in a Catch-22 where they need their biometrics to be able to leave, but they cannot get their biometrics because they cannot leave. It is impossible and illogical that that is the position, and it is in the Government's hands to waive that requirement. It is in nobody else's hands; it is in the hands of this Government and this Minister to make the decision to waive the requirement for biometrics. He could do it at the stroke of a pen this afternoon if he so wished, and I would like him to explain why he will not. As yet, we have not had an explanation of why, if it was good enough for people in Ukraine to get that biometric requirement waived, it is not good enough for the people of Gaza, whose circumstances are absolutely grim.

The people in Gaza are having to bribe their way across the border and are being smuggled out. This Government are supposed to be against people smuggling, but people have no choice. It costs \$5,000 per adult and

[Alison Thewliss]

\$2,500 per child, if anybody can even scrape that money together. People are crowdfunding on the internet to pay themselves across the border. What kind of system is that? None whatsoever. And as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned, they then get stuck somewhere else. They get stuck in Cairo waiting for something else to happen because this Government will not move with the paperwork. It is absolutely ridiculous and cruel. People could be here, safe and looked after, but they are not.

Turning back to the court case, disclosures were made that every single entry clearance visa application from Gaza made from 7 October has been refused by the Home Office. If this is about safe and legal routes, why are they automatically being refused? We know from experience that even visitor visas—a third of those last year—were refused because the Government do not believe that people are going to go back to Gaza, and in the circumstances, why would they? But even if someone could get a visitor visa, the Government are quite likely to refuse it.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington mentioned people coming over in small boats, but given the difficulty of even getting out of Gaza, that is not a prospect for most. The House of Commons Library briefing for this debate spoke about the rarity of that. Palestinians accounted for 0.14% of the people on boats, or 53 out of 36,704. They may well be sent to Rwanda after fleeing a war zone, getting across continents, getting in a small boat and getting to safety here. Can the Minister say whether anybody who came in such a way will be removed to Rwanda? Will he at least rule that out for some kindness to the Gazans who have managed to make it to our shores to safety? Again, it is just cruelty.

Hon. Members also raised the issue of people accessing medical treatment here. The Children Not Numbers campaign has done a huge amount of work to evacuate people in the past, including children whose medical needs are absolutely dire. We have all seen on our television screens, at a remove, the horror of children having amputations without anaesthetic, and children whose lives have been devastated at such a young age. They cannot even get those children out for the medical treatment that they so desperately require for their futures.

I am sure that the Minister will come out, as he always does, with how Britain is a welcoming country, how we have done so much to resettle people and how we should look at all these other things we have done in the past. What we are asking is for something now. It has been six months. He has had quite long enough to come to a conclusion. He has had quite long enough to design a scheme.

The Gaza Families Reunited campaign has given the Minister the work on this. It will not be difficult for him to create such a scheme. It was done for the people of Ukraine much more swiftly than this. He is out of excuses. He needs to give the Gazan people some kind of certainty that they can come to safety. Otherwise, we will all know that this Government do not care and are prepared to ignore the people of Gaza. It is despicable.

6.53 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) for bringing forward this extremely important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and the 103,000 constituents across the country who signed the petition. I also thank all hon. Members present for what has been an incredibly powerful and moving debate. We have all been struck by how heavily subscribed it has been and the high degree of unanimity in the views that have been expressed across the House.

The terrorist atrocities conducted by Hamas on 7 October 2023 killed over 1,100 innocent civilians. They included cases of rape and sexual violence, and the kidnapping of 250 people, the majority of whom have still not been released. It is almost impossible to comprehend the fear and anguish felt within those families who have been torn apart, and the unimaginable pain of the relatives of the hostages.

As has been stated so clearly today, the Israeli Government's response and the subsequent war in Gaza has ended the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people, many of them women and children. It continues to cause untold misery and heartache to hundreds of thousands more who have lost loved ones or had to flee for their lives, and now over 1 million people in Gaza face famine.

We should never forget that at the heart of this conflict are human beings who simply seek to live their lives free of violence, fear and intimidation, who want nothing more than to protect their families and loved ones, and build a successful future for them and their children. The urgent imperative is therefore to bring an end to this war, and we urge the Government to use every ounce of their diplomatic leverage to create the conditions needed for an immediate ceasefire observed by both sides, with the immediate release of hostages and immediate, unimpeded aid to Gaza.

We have also been absolutely clear that the forced displacement of the Palestinian people is unacceptable. The priority following an immediate ceasefire must be for Gazans to be able to return to their homes and their land, to begin to rebuild all that they have lost during this devastating war, and to ensure that their displacement does not become permanent. This will be made exponentially harder by an Israeli offensive in Rafah, which risks catastrophic consequences, and therefore, the Labour party passionately opposes any intervention by the Israeli forces in Rafah. Indeed, the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), said in the main Chamber on Tuesday of last week:

“The United States has said”

that an offensive in Rafah

“would be a disaster, the European Union has said that the world must prevent it, and the United Nations Security Council has called for an immediate ceasefire. Benjamin Netanyahu is ignoring the warnings of Israel's allies and partners, the United Kingdom included.” —[*Official Report*, 7 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 444.]

The Rafah crossing is, of course, essential for moving humanitarian assistance into Gaza, and therefore the safety of those operating aid deliveries and of those receiving the aid must not be compromised.

In tandem with that essential diplomatic work, and as the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza continues to worsen, the UK must consider the impact on British residents and citizens who have family in Gaza and are desperately seeking to ensure their safety. We have heard the indescribable anguish of British Palestinians regarding the fate of family members, including orphaned children who are trapped in Gaza, and their struggle to bring their relatives to safety.

For instance, we know of one father who is here in the UK, desperately trying to reunite with his wife and three young children who are currently trapped in Gaza and sheltering in a house with more than 200 other people. His twin babies are suffering with health issues, and his wife fears that she will run out of milk to feed them. We have heard of the plight of an unaccompanied 14-year-old boy who is alone in Gaza, having lost both his parents and been separated from wider family, who seeks to join his brothers in the UK, who are British citizens. His brothers are settled and working in the UK, and are desperate to have him join them. These are harrowing and horrific tales.

At the moment, these families and others like them have been unable to leave Gaza. Even where they should qualify for family reunion under UK immigration rules, they are facing insurmountable barriers. For example, we have heard reports of long delays in getting decisions or visas issued, and families are also being told that they will not be given their visas—even though they are eligible—until they have submitted biometrics data. However, there is no infrastructure left in Gaza at all, and it is completely impossible to get biometric data submitted from within Gaza itself. Although biometrics could be submitted from Egypt, the vast majority of these individuals and families are not able to travel to Egypt without some kind of visa or assistance from the UK. As a result, they are trapped.

This is a desperate and deeply distressing scenario, and I therefore urge the Minister to look rapidly at the following issues. Will the Home Office now defer the biometrics requirements for those who are eligible for family reunion, but cannot physically get out of Gaza, until they can get to a visa application centre in Egypt or another country? Similar arrangements were rightly made for Ukrainians, and could be replicated for Gaza now, as other countries such as Canada are already doing. Will the Government now urgently operate a scheme whereby individuals in Gaza can have their family reunion visas assessed either online or by telephone, as is the case with the Canadian Government, and approved in principle before being assisted to leave Gaza, with biometrics data then being submitted in Egypt prior to travel to the UK?

Secondly, will the FCDO work urgently to ensure that all those who hold UK visas or are eligible for family reunion, but must leave Gaza in order to submit biometrics, are assisted to leave? What co-operation has there been with Egypt on that issue, and how will it be managed if the Rafah crossing closes altogether? Will the Home Office and FCDO look urgently at wider obstacles to family reunion for the family members of British citizens and residents who are trapped in Gaza? What more could be done to help British Palestinians get their relatives to safety? British Palestinians have made it clear that their families who come here will want to return home to Gaza as soon as it is safe to do so, so right of return must be built into the process.

Anne McLaughlin: Given that the Prime Minister only has to give a month's notice before a general election, and we are expecting that the Labour party will be in power, I am waiting to hear the hon. Member's answers to those questions. I am assuming that, if the Labour party gets into power, the answer would be yes, but I want to hear him say that: give us some reassurance.

Stephen Kinock: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We are saying that there is a family visa scheme that exists but that is not operational, so we have to make it operational. We are proposing the method of in-principle assessment, followed by assistance, so that we can then have the biometric tests in a visa application centre.

The UK Government must continue to push for an immediate ceasefire, the immediate release of all hostages, and immediate and unimpeded aid to Gaza, and to work towards a two-state solution, with a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

7.1 pm

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

It is fair to say that all of us in this House are deeply concerned and moved by events in the middle east. The barbaric attack perpetrated on 7 October by Hamas was an affront to humanity. At the same time as we condemn Hamas, lament the loss of life they inflicted and demand the release of the hostages, we are also united in our horror at the civilian casualties and the scale of the suffering in Gaza. Israel has a right—indeed, a responsibility—to defend itself against the threat from terrorists. As we have made clear repeatedly, it is important that it does so in accordance with international humanitarian law. I reiterate that point today.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Government have mounted, and continue to mount, a large-scale effort to facilitate the flow of aid that is so desperately needed. As the Deputy Foreign Secretary said in the House less than a week ago,

“We want to see an end to the fighting as soon as possible... the fastest way to end the conflict is to secure a deal that gets the hostages out and allows for a pause in the fighting in Gaza. We must then turn that pause into a sustainable, permanent ceasefire.

Regarding the situation in Rafah, our position has been consistent. We are deeply concerned about the prospect of a military incursion, given the number of civilians who are sheltering there and the importance of that entry point for aid. Entry points for humanitarian aid, including Kerem Shalom, must be reopened quickly to allow aid in. Israel must facilitate immediate, uninterrupted humanitarian access in the south, especially the entry of fuel, and ensure the protection of civilians and safe passage for those who wish to leave Rafah. As yet, we have not seen a credible plan to protect civilians...

In parallel, we continue to push as hard as we can to get much-needed aid into Gaza via vital land routes, alongside sea and air, to alleviate the suffering. Israel has now committed to significant steps to increase the amount of aid getting into Gaza.”—[*Official Report*, 7 May 2024; Vol. 749, c. 443.]

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Minister has outlined the many threats and dangers that innocent civilians in Rafah are facing. Does he not accept that he is actually making the case for the Government to introduce a Gaza family visa scheme?

Tom Pursglove: I will come on to address various points that have been made during the course of the debate today, and I will answer the various questions that have been asked about the Government's position on this issue. It is of course the case that we continue to keep under close review the arrangements that we have in place, as Members would expect. I will also ensure that the various wider points that are pertinent to colleagues in the Foreign Office are raised directly with them following this debate. It is important that the points made by the House that are directly relevant to Foreign Office colleagues and their diplomatic engagement with leaders overseas, as well as the Israeli Government and others, are properly heard.

Catherine West: The Minister is being very generous in giving way for a third time. Would he accept that, given the estimates from charities that there are 17,000 orphans, we are dealing with an extreme situation, and that there should therefore be a special scheme in this regard, especially given our historic link with the region and with this particular conflict?

Tom Pursglove: One of the points that I was particularly struck by in various remarks during the course of the debate was the issue of admitting children to UK hospitals to access treatment and support. Presently we have not received any specific applications, but we understand that NGOs—such as the International Committee of the Red Cross—are able to support those requiring urgent medical treatment out of Gaza. Likewise, Children Not Numbers supports children in Gaza to secure evacuation and delivers aid to families. If applications come forward, they will be treated with the utmost seriousness, in the way that I think the House would want to see; I undertake to give very careful consideration to any applications that come forward in that regard.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly give way to the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In one of the Government responses to the petition, they said that applications could be made through "Egypt, Jordan and Turkey". Are we to understand from the Minister that there might be a way of making applications without having to go from Gaza to Egypt, Jordan or Turkey?

Tom Pursglove: If I may, I want to come to that point in full later in my remarks, because there are various related aspects that I think are important to address fully. The arrangements are important and I know that they are of real interest to colleagues.

To finish my wider point that is important contextually, we now need to see all the various points that I raised in my introductory remarks turned into action to ensure that aid gets over the border and is safely and properly distributed. We look to Israel to meet its commitments to flood Gaza with aid. Turning now to the real substance of the debate—

Olivia Blake: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly give way, but I am conscious that there is quite a lot to get through.

Olivia Blake: Does the Minister accept that food on the border is of no aid to those who are starving, and medicine on the border cannot heal those who need it, and that not being able to guarantee the safety of civilians is essentially the reason that we need this scheme urgently?

Tom Pursglove: I would argue that the principal, most important thing is to have a durable ceasefire that brings an end to the hostilities, and one that is durable in the long term. That is the best outcome for everybody in the region, but the House will recognise why that is impossible with Hamas in charge in Gaza. We continue, as a Government, to make these arguments, and we will continue to make the argument that it is imperative that that aid is able to flow in order to properly support people.

Let me turn to the substance of this debate. It is the case that we are assisting British nationals and other eligible people to leave Gaza, liaising closely with the Israeli and Egyptian authorities. However, we do not control the Rafah border crossing, and it is the Israeli and Egyptian authorities that make the final decisions on who can exit Gaza. We are aware of the unique circumstances affecting those who would like to exit Gaza, and the unusual role of foreign Governments in seeking permission to leave on behalf of individuals. The FCDO has, therefore, been able to facilitate the departure from Gaza to Egypt of Palestinians who have both strong links to the UK, by having either a spouse or children under 18 currently living in the UK, and currently hold valid permission to enter or remain for longer than six months.

Nadia Whittome: Will the Minister give way?

Tom Pursglove: I will gladly take another intervention, but then I must make some progress.

Nadia Whittome: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I am listening carefully to what he is saying. The fact is there is no safe and legal route for Palestinians to come to the UK. Not only does he refuse to set up a Palestinian family scheme—as every Member in the debate has called on him to do, and as the Government did with Ukraine—but, because of his Government's Rwanda law, any Palestinians who come here by small boat, because they have no other means of getting here, will be criminalised and deported. Does he not regret—even a little bit—voting for that law?

Tom Pursglove: I would argue that no hon. or right hon. Member should in any way give credence to the business model of evil people-smuggling gangs, who are frankly taking people's money and sending them to sea in unseaworthy vessels, with no regard whatsoever for the lives of those individuals. Terrible criminality is responsible for those crossings, and all those crossings—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady has had her intervention, and the Minister is responding to it. She might not like the answer, but we cannot have shouting across the Chamber, or the debate will become disorderly.

Tom Pursglove: It is a fact that all those individuals leaving French shores in small boats are leaving what are fundamentally safe countries. There is no justifiable reason for anybody to be making that perilous crossing and putting their life at risk in the way that we have seen. There have been catastrophic consequences yet again: only within the past fortnight, that young girl lost her life in the most appalling of circumstances. Evil criminality is responsible for that, and we must be very careful in everything that we say and do to ensure that the evil individuals responsible for that criminality are not able to encourage people to make those crossings. That is a very important point.

Let me return to the point I was making. Decisions as to who can leave Gaza and enter Egypt remain with the Israeli and Egyptian authorities. We will obviously keep the position under review, as I have said. There are a couple of challenges that we have to be mindful of: first, the practical challenges that are apparent in getting people out; and secondly, the need to maintain biometric checks to protect people here in the United Kingdom.

I think that the House will recognise that the security relationship with, for example, the Ukrainian authorities is very different from the one we have with the authorities in Gaza, who are a terrorist organisation. I have referred to that previously in various other debates in the House. There is an important distinction, which has to be made, regarding the security co-operation we had in the context of the immediate evacuation from Ukraine of vulnerable people via that safe and legal route; we have subsequently reintroduced the biometric checks required, but in the immediate circumstances with which we were presented, that security relationship and dynamic helped us make those changes in response to that very specific crisis.

I will say a little more about those challenges because they are materially important. First, on enrolling biometrics, setting up a route would not address the wider challenges facing people unable to exit Gaza to complete the application process by submitting biometrics. Any change to the biometric requirements would cause critical identity and security checks to not be completed, which could expose the UK public to heightened levels of harm. Regardless of that, it would not address the fact that it is the Israeli and Egyptian Governments who make decisions on who can exit Gaza and enter Egypt.

There is a strong basis for why biometric checks are vital. As I say, they are critical to identity assurance and suitability checks on foreign nationals subject to immigration control. Checks are made against immigration and criminality records. We have a duty to uphold national security as a Government and to guard against public safety risks. There have been various references to ongoing litigation. The House will understand why it is not appropriate for me to comment on ongoing litigation.

Stuart C. McDonald: As I said in my speech, nobody is arguing that there should not be biometric checks, but they can be done in an intermediate country, such as Egypt. The Canadians operate like that, and the Canadians are also much more successful in getting people out of the country because they are on a specific list. Why cannot the UK Government just do what the Canadians are doing?

Tom Pursglove: There would have to be agreement around that. The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of deferral in his speech. What I can say on that is that we

have agreed to predetermine a small number of cases in line with published guidance. We will predetermine an application where a person confirms that they are able to travel to a visa application centre, they can satisfy us about their identity and there are compelling reasons for doing so in the way I have described.

There was also reference to fee waiver applications during the course of the debate. People need to apply for a visa by filling in the form and contacting UK Visas and Immigration; then the compassionate element to predetermine or waive fees will be considered.

The point about wider relatives was mentioned in a number of contributions. Under the adult dependent relative rules, an applicant must show that, as a result of age, illness or disability, they require long-term personal care to perform everyday tasks and that this can solely be provided in the UK by their relative here. If this is not met, however, a decision maker will consider whether there are compelling, compassionate and exceptional circumstances to grant leave outside the rules.

On visa application centres, although UKVI has a visa application centre in Gaza, I recognise that it has been closed since 7 October due to the conflict. Therefore, those who exit Gaza into Egypt can access UK visa application centres in either Cairo or Alexandria. Both locations have good appointment availability, with Cairo having 43% of capacity remaining for the week commencing 12 May and 76% in the week commencing 19 May and Alexandria having 74% and 93% respectively.

Peter Grant: Statistics are very interesting, but we are here to talk about people. Will the Minister accept my invitation to meet my constituent and the constituent of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), so that he can explain to them directly why he will not allow them to look after their mum?

Tom Pursglove: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the point that I made earlier. It may well be that he wishes to encourage his constituent to make an application, reflecting on that point that I was able to set out in response very directly to the points that he made in his remarks. I think it is relevant in cases such as the one he described. He knows, and his colleagues know—

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned that we have constituents who are sisters and who have an elderly mother. We have both spoken about this, and asked whether the Minister would be prepared to meet our constituents. Would the Minister be prepared to meet them and, if so, will he be prepared to give them an estimate of the likelihood of the kind of application he is talking about being successful?

Tom Pursglove: I did not have the opportunity to finish the point I was making, but the hon. and learned Lady will appreciate why I am not in a position to be able to give authoritative immigration advice on individual cases. What I can refer colleagues to are the points that I have made and the various routings that people may wish to explore in order to take their cases forward. I think she knows from previous dealings that we have had, and her colleagues likewise, that I am always very happy to engage with colleagues in the House about

[Tom Pursglove]

issues and concerns relevant to their constituents. That is absolutely no different in this particular circumstance. I will very gladly meet both hon. Members to talk about this matter.

John McDonnell: Can I take the Minister back to the issue of children? In January, I tabled an early-day motion asking the Government to meet and support the organisation, Save Gaza's Children. I was assured by the Deputy Foreign Secretary at the time, on the Floor of the House, that that organisation would be linked to the FCDO's group that was working to facilitate the evacuation of children on medical grounds. This Minister has said today that there have been no applications whatever, so clearly the system established by the Foreign Office is not working. The information that we have at the moment is that the European Hospital, which was functioning, has now run out of fuel and is in blackout. The Kuwaiti Hospital in Rafah received orders from the Israeli military to evacuate this morning. The Al-Helal Al-Emirati Hospital has stopped admitting patients over the last few days. The health service is in crisis. Children are being maimed; children are being injured. Yet the Minister has said today that the system that we were promised some months ago is not operational.

Tom Pursglove: I will want to go and pick up that point with colleagues in the Foreign Office and understand the specifics around it, but I will refer the right hon. Gentleman to the point that I made at the outset of my remarks, in relation to those very vulnerable children. I am more than happy to engage with him on this particular point; I would equally be very willing to engage with the charity that he references in relation to this specific point, so that we can fully understand the circumstances and fully understand the needs. The position as I understand it, as I am advised currently by officials, is as per that which I set out earlier, but we will most definitely pick up that engagement with the right hon. Gentleman and with the charity.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the Minister's comments earlier about visa application centres, he may recall that I have been writing to him about the parents of a constituent of mine, Maysara. He is a British citizen and his parents had visas to visit the UK last autumn. Those visas have now expired, and when I asked the Minister what my constituent's parents should do, he said that they should reapply by visiting the

"nearest accessible visa application centre"

to submit their biometrics, but as many Members here today and indeed the Minister himself have acknowledged, there are no functioning visa application centres in Gaza, so can the Minister explain to my constituent what exactly his parents should do?

Tom Pursglove: What I am not going to do is, again, casework on specific, individual cases in the Chamber this evening. The point that I was able to make about deferral may be something that the hon. Gentleman wishes to explore with his constituents.

Stephen Kinnoch: The Minister will be aware that there was recently a court challenge and it was ruled that the Government's policy on biometric deferrals

was unlawful. The Home Office has been forced to issue new, interim unsafe journey guidance for cases in which someone is unable to travel safely to a visa application centre, so I am just wondering when the Government are planning to publish that new, revised unsafe journey guidance.

Tom Pursglove: I am afraid that I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that, as he will appreciate, given the position that he holds as a shadow Minister, I am not in a position, with regard to ongoing litigation, to be able to do that today.

Various points were raised about processing times. If they are part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office cohort, people are prioritised, and compassionate cases are expedited. FCDO cases are currently processed within five working days from VACs, and we continue to work intensively with FCDO colleagues to support individuals to leave.

A number of points were raised about the wider safe and legal routes landscape. I am very proud that as a country we have provided over half a million people with sanctuary in the UK since 2015. The point was specifically raised by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) about the commitments that we made in relation to the cap as part of the Illegal Migration Act. What I can say to her—I can be very specific about this—is that the work is on track to take that forward, that I expect to be able to publish the figure and that I expect to be able to lay the statutory instrument to deliver that cap for 2025 ahead of the summer recess. My message would be—

Joanna Cherry: Just on that—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is perfectly entitled to take the intervention, but I gently remind him that he must resume his seat for Cat Smith to sum up the debate no later than 7.27 pm. I call Joanna Cherry to continue.

Joanna Cherry: My question was not about the cap. It was about when the Government are going to introduce the safe and legal routes that they promised during the passage of the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

Tom Pursglove: The commitment, and what the law requires, is for the Government to come forward with the figure around the cap, and that is precisely what we will do. It will set out the places we are able to provide for people to be able to come, working particularly in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, through a safe and legal route to the United Kingdom in 2025. I think that is very welcome. If any areas have not provided a figure for this year, I would encourage them to come forward with offers of support in future years, because we want to see generosity grow year on year to respond to international crises around the world.

Ultimately, we need a long-term solution to this crisis. That means the release of all hostages, Hamas's rule dismantled, their ability to attack Israel removed, a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza and a political horizon towards a two-state solution. Israelis and Palestinians should be able to live together, side by side, in peace and security. That is our ultimate goal, and we will continue working tirelessly to achieve it.

7.26 pm

Cat Smith: When members of the public go on the website to start a petition, it can be quite an intimidating experience, because the thresholds are so high, at 10,000 to get a Government response and 100,000 to secure a debate in Parliament. These petitioners have met that relatively easily. That shows the strength of feeling within all our constituencies about the situation.

To be very direct to the Minister, I think the petitioners will be incredibly disappointed with his response. They were asking how it can be that Palestinians have no safe routes to the UK when they have family here. The Minister has said a lot of words, but frankly I think members of the public watching will be thinking that they made very little sense. In particular, his comments about good availability of appointments in Cairo will have left people shouting at the TV screens they are watching this on. People cannot get to Cairo from Gaza. They are trapped. That is why people have started a petition for a Palestinian Gaza-specific scheme, similar to the one for Ukraine.

I would like to thank all colleagues for taking part in this debate. It has been really comforting to witness cross-party consensus and how we all spoke with one voice in support of this scheme. I think it is incredibly disappointing that the Government Minister did not follow the mood in the room. The comments about orphaned children in particular will stay with me for a

very, very long time. Those children have absolutely nobody in this world. They might have a distant relative—an aunt or an uncle—here in the UK, but they do not qualify for any UK visa scheme.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for the points he made about the children who have been injured very severely, and I urge the Minister to keep his word and follow up with him on that issue. Although it does not relate specifically to the visa scheme, it is something the UK could do to try to foster more positive relations with the Palestinians, who will be looking right now at what this Government Minister has said and feeling incredibly let down and disappointed.

I thank everyone for taking part in this debate, which has been possibly the best-attended petitions debate I have had the privilege of introducing. I know that three hours is a lot of time to commit as a Member of Parliament, but I am sure that those who have taken part did so because of the passion that we all feel, as do the more than 100,000 people who signed this petition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 648577 relating to a visa scheme for Palestinians.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 13 May 2024

TREASURY

HMRC

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): His Majesty's Revenue and Customs plays a crucial role in collecting revenue to fund our vital public services. The Department's strategy is to become a 'digital first' tax administration. This involves helping customers move to online services, with the aim of making services easier for customers, and of allowing HMRC to operate more efficiently.

Last year HMRC received over 3 million calls on just three things that can easily be done: resetting an online password, getting a tax code, and getting a national insurance number. Shifting customer contact such as this to online interactions is helping to, and will continue to help, reduce demand on phone lines and allow HMRC to prioritise calls for those who really need to speak to an adviser. This is a fine example of a tangible way to improve public sector productivity.

This digital first strategy is the correct long-term vision for tax administration. In support of this, the Chancellor invested over £136 million in the 2021 spending review to enable HMRC to enhance its digital services. HMRC received a £900 million cash increase over this Parliament, from £4.3 billion in 2019-20 to £5.2 billion in 2024-25.

However, the Government are clear that while HMRC continues to make this digital transition, customers deserve a reliable and responsive service on traditional contact methods, such as the phone lines. Therefore today the Government are providing HMRC with £51 million in new funding to bring HMRC's phonenumber service back up to the published target of 85% of calls to HMRC advisers being answered.

Today's additional funding enables HMRC to meet the performance standards on its phone lines that its customers expect, while continuing the transition to a digital first model of tax administration. The Government are fully committed to providing HMRC with the resources it needs to meet the needs of all its customers, and will continue to do so.

[HCWS456]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bathing Water

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): Designated bathing waters are coastal or inland waters that are used by large numbers of bathers and have facilities to promote and support bathing as set out in the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. They are an important public amenity and can be valuable assets for local communities.

Following an application round and a period of public consultation, we are today announcing the designation of 27 new bathing waters—12 rivers, six estuarine sites, five coastal sites and four lakes—taking the total number in England to 451, the highest ever. Despite new stricter standards for bathing water classifications being introduced in 2015, last year 90% of bathing waters were classified as 'good' or 'excellent'—up from 76% in 2010.

Designating a site as a bathing water means the site will benefit from a new programme of bathing water quality monitoring by the Environment Agency, with a focus on working with partners collaboratively to identify any pollution sources and to put in place actions to address these issues. This can bring social, economic, leisure and health benefits.

We are continually working to improve and modernise the bathing waters system. That is why I am also today announcing that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs plans to consult on a series of potential reforms for England to the Bathing Water Regulations 2013. The proposed changes will drive work to improve bathing water quality, enhance monitoring, and enable more flexibility around the dates of the bathing water monitoring season—the current bathing water monitoring offer will be maintained as a minimum. These changes will allow us to increase monitoring outside of the bathing water season in the future, to better embed water quality improvements within processes and to prevent automatic de-designation of existing bathing water sites.

DEFRA will also seek public and stakeholder views on extending the definition of 'bathers' to include a wider range of water users in addition to swimmers, such as rowers, kayakers and paddle boarders, and on allowing multiple monitoring points, instead of a single monitoring point, at each bathing water site.

Full details of the proposed reforms will be available for consideration in due course, as part of the consultation process. The consultation will be open to submissions over the summer, with the Government response to follow later in the year.

Alongside these reforms, the Government remain committed to improving water quality through the Plan for Water, our comprehensive strategy which sets out how we will deliver clean and plentiful water for people, businesses and nature through more investment, tighter regulation and more effective enforcement. As part of this, we have set stringent targets for water companies to reduce the use of storm overflows through the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, which is driving the largest infrastructure programme in water company history—£60 billion over 25 years. This includes front-loading action in particularly important and sensitive sites, including bathing waters; by 2035, water companies will have improved all storm overflows discharging near every designated bathing water.

We will consider all responses to the consultation and use them to inform our ambitions to reform and improve the framework for managing bathing waters in England. The next bathing water application round in England will commence in spring 2025.

[HCWS455]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Public Health

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): I wish to update the House on an increase in whooping cough—Pertussis—cases across England and the actions that the Government and health system are taking to control spread of the disease.

Data published by UK Health Security Agency on 9 May 2024 shows, provisionally, that whooping cough cases are continuing to rise with 2,793 cases in England between January and March 2024. Cases are spread across all regions in the country and across all age ranges, with around half in those 15 years and older. Very sadly, there have also been five infant deaths in England in this period. Losing a child is the greatest sorrow any parent can experience, and our deepest sympathies are with the families of the children in these tragic cases.

As a Government, we are, alongside the NHS and partners in the health system, redoubling our efforts and reiterating the key message that vaccination offers a safe and highly effective defence against whooping cough. It is vitally important that pregnant women and young infants receive their vaccines at the correct time, to protect young infants from severe disease.

Whooping Cough

Whooping cough is an acute bacterial infection caused by *Bordetella Pertussis* and is spread through coughing and sneezing. Whooping cough can affect people of all ages but can be a very serious illness in young babies who are not fully vaccinated against it, in some cases leading to pneumonia, brain damage, and as we have sadly seen in a very small number of cases recently, death. Prompt treatment with antibiotics is important in preventing spread of the disease and individuals with whooping cough are no longer considered infectious 48 hours after starting the appropriate course of antibiotics.

In common with other diseases, cases of whooping cough fell to very low numbers during the pandemic due to restrictions and public behaviours. This is likely to have reduced immunity to whooping cough in the population. Since summer 2023 cases have been increasing and, in the last quarter of 2023, the first infant death since 2019 was confirmed. An increase in whooping cough cases is also being reported across several countries in Europe and globally.

Our principal means of protecting against whooping cough is vaccination, and vaccines against whooping cough are given to pregnant women—to protect babies in the first few weeks of life and before they can be directly protected by the infant vaccine programme—and to infants at eight, 12 and 16 weeks of age as part of the routine immunisation programme, with a booster also offered at pre-school. Uptake levels in pregnant women, babies and young children have fallen in recent years across England.

To address this decline and increase the uptake of the whooping cough vaccines, with a particular focus on uptake in the maternal vaccination programme, my Department is working hard with NHS England, the

UK Health Security Agency, GPs and other health professionals around the country so that we can prevent severe disease in young babies and those most at risk.

Actions include:

working to ensure that advice on vaccination in pregnancy is being offered antenatally and that information materials are available across antenatal and primary care settings;

the NHS will implement best practice, vaccinating pregnant women opportunistically during maternity appointments wherever possible;

updating case management guidance and collaborating with the health system to cascade these to clinicians and settings;

the recent launch of a national marketing campaign reminding parents to check their children's vaccination status and stressing the importance for pregnant women of getting vaccinated;

raising awareness of whooping cough and the maternal vaccine uptake with clinicians and key Royal Colleges through targeted epidemiological updates and supportive communications;

working to ensure that we capitalise on monthly data publications to highlight the importance of vaccination for the public;

engaging local communities to highlight the importance of vaccination and make sure people know how to access the jabs as quickly as possible;

implementation of the NHS vaccination strategy which builds on the success of the NHS's world-leading covid-19 vaccine programme when local teams found innovative ways to reach people during the pandemic; and

implementing the new national NHS objective to increase vaccination uptake for children and young people year on year towards World Health Organization (WHO) recommended levels, as set out in NHS England's 2024-25 priorities and operational planning guidance.

Getting your whooping cough vaccination

While vaccination does not prevent transmission it is a critical public health control measure for preventing severe illness and it is vitally important that everyone who is eligible for a whooping cough vaccine—pregnant women and young infants—receive their vaccines.

This Government's message to all pregnant women is: you can help protect your baby by getting vaccinated. The immunity you get from the vaccine passes to your baby through the placenta and protects them until they are old enough to be vaccinated at eight weeks old. The whooping cough vaccine is safe and highly effective at preventing deaths in young infants from whooping cough. It is the best way to protect your baby. You can access a whooping cough vaccine from your GP and through some antenatal clinics and for further advice on getting your whooping cough vaccinations in your area, speak with your local maternity service.

Parliamentarians can help spread this message to their constituents and local communities. Please feel free to share this WMS to spread the message. Information for people who are concerned a baby, or a child may have whooping cough can find information on what to do at www.nhs.uk/conditions/whooping-cough/. Further information about the whooping cough vaccination programme in pregnancy can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/resources-to-support-whooping-cough-vaccination

JUSTICE

HMP Wandsworth

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): This statement concerns the decision by HM chief inspector of prisons to invoke an urgent notification at HMP Wandsworth.

In accordance with the protocol between HM chief inspector of prisons and the Ministry of Justice, the chief inspector, Charlie Taylor, wrote to the Lord Chancellor to alert him to the significant concerns he has about HMP Wandsworth.

In his letter and report, Charlie Taylor raises specific concerns about HMP Wandsworth, and the inspection is assessed against the following healthy prison tests: safety, respect, purposeful activity and preparation for release. Charlie Taylor reports on failings in security; severe overcrowding; vermin; drugs; violence and rising self-harm; and the high level of self-inflicted deaths, with seven prisoners tragically having taken their own lives in the past year.

I am clear that these findings are completely unacceptable, and we are taking—and will continue to take—urgent action to deliver sustained improvement at the prison. This statement sets out how we will respond to the chief inspector's findings.

Following the usual process for urgent notifications, we will publish no later than 6 June an action plan that will outline the urgent steps we are taking to address the chief inspector's concerns and improve the prison. Senior officials from the Department will provide enhanced supervision and increased support to the prison for as long as necessary until we are confident that sustainable improvements have been made.

We have already deployed extra staff at all grades to strengthen safety and security, and we have provided additional training to the leadership. We are investing in an £84 million programme of improvements to living conditions, healthcare facilities, physical security and fire safety measures to improve safety and security at the prison, and we will continue to do whatever is necessary to ensure that the necessary improvements are made.

We have also improved starting salaries for officers at HMP Wandsworth—they have risen from just over £26,500 to more than £36,000 since 2019—and in 2023 the number of frontline prison officers at HMP Wandsworth increased by around 14%.

We are also training around 50 staff members in advanced body search procedures, and around a further 70 staff members are receiving additional training in advanced vehicle search procedures. This is in addition to investment in gate and perimeter security, which includes new enhanced gate security processes. These now match or exceed the good practice seen at other London prisons.

This inspection report comes after the alleged escape of Daniel Khalife from HMP Wandsworth last September. As the Lord Chancellor set out in the House on 8 January, we launched an independent investigation into this incident. That investigation has concluded. However, we cannot go into any further detail at this stage, given that the alleged escape remains the subject of ongoing criminal proceedings.

I would like to take the opportunity while making this statement to confirm that Katie Price, the governor of HMP Wandsworth, has recently resigned after a 33-year career in the Prison Service. I am grateful for her dedicated public service to HM Prison and Probation Service, and am grateful to all staff at HMP Wandsworth for their dedication and hard work. HMPPS has appointed an experienced interim governor to oversee the prison while it fills this vital position on a permanent basis as swiftly as possible. This will ensure that we have continuity in leadership at the prison and can start implementing the action plan immediately.

This Government are committed to supporting improvements at HMP Wandsworth and to putting in place the building blocks needed to do this.

[HCWS458]

Post Office Casework Team Contingency Fund Application

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): I hereby give notice of the Ministry of Justice's intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund totalling £1.15 million.

As the House knows, the Post Office Horizon IT scandal that began in the late 1990s has had severe impacts on the lives of the postmasters affected. On 10 January 2024 the Prime Minister made an announcement to introduce legislation to overturn the convictions of postmasters prosecuted by the Post Office and the Crown Prosecution Service due to the faulty Horizon IT system. The Post Office (Horizon System) Offences Bill was introduced on 13 March 2024. The Bill was introduced to the House of Lords on 30 April 2024 and we anticipate that it will receive Royal Assent before summer recess.

Accessing the Contingency Fund allows the Department to manage the expenditure associated with establishing the casework team to carry out preparatory work to enable the Government to identify convictions that are in scope of the Bill, notify these individuals as soon as possible after Royal Assent is achieved, and co-ordinate work to ensure relevant records are amended promptly.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £1,150,000 for this new service will be sought in a Main Estimate for the Ministry of Justice. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £1,150,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS454]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Welfare Fraud

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Public support for our welfare system relies on there being confidence that taxpayers' money goes to those who need it, rather than into the hands of criminals. That is why we cannot allow fraudsters to take advantage of the system or the compassion of the British people.

The Department for Work and Pensions stopped an estimated £18 billion going into the wrong hands in 2022-23. Despite this, the rising tide of fraud across the economy since the pandemic has meant that over £8 billion

a year has been overpaid in the welfare system due to fraud and error. This is money that could have been used for vital public services such as schools or hospitals.

In the continued fight against fraud, today the Government will publish a new paper setting out the progress we have made in tackling fraud and error in the welfare system: “Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System: Going Further”. The paper sets out the progress we have made in delivering the commitments in the Government’s 2022 Command Paper, “Fighting Fraud in the Welfare System”, and it demonstrates where we are going further to protect taxpayers’ money from fraudsters.

As part of this publication, I am pleased to update the House that we have exceeded our savings target for 2023-24 by saving over £1.3 billion through our counter-fraud activities.

Since 2022, the Government have delivered on the commitments made in the fraud plan to:

Invest in our front line, hiring over 4,400 people across our counter-fraud and targeted case review programmes combined;

bring forward new powers to improve our access to vital third-party data and save £600 million over the next five years, mirroring existing powers in His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs;

and harness the power of both public and private sectors to share expertise and help shape our thinking on how we respond to evolving fraud risks.

We will go further, and today’s publication sets out how we are scaling up our fight against fraudsters by:

Bringing forward a new Fraud Bill in the next Parliament to treat benefit fraud like tax fraud;

tripling the size of our targeted case review programme from that outlined in our fraud plan to reach almost 6,000 staff, with the aim of saving £6.6 billion from this alone by 2027-28; and preventing welfare fraud at its source using advanced data analytics and machine learning.

The Government have invested £900 million into their fraud plan to combat fraud and protect taxpayers’ money. With continued investment, our fraud plan will save the taxpayer £9 billion by 2027-28.

With the action we have already taken, and our plan to go further still, we are clamping down on fraud and putting fairness at the heart of our welfare system.

[HCWS457]

Petitions

Monday 13 May 2024

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

The petition of residents of the constituency of Kingston upon Hull North

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.—[Presented by Dame Diana Johnson, *Official Report*, 12 March 2024; Vol. 747, c. 273.]

[P00294623]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Lyn Brown) [P002928]; the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) [P002927]; the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) [P002930]; the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) [P002938]; the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) [P002935]; the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) [P002932]; the hon. Member for Northampton South (Lillian Greenwood) [P002922]; the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) [P002943]; the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) [P002940]; the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) [P002941]; the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) [P002946]; the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) [P002934]; the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) [P002949]; the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) [P002952]; the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Sharon Hodgson) [P002955]; the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) [P002951]; the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) [P002953]; the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks) [P002957]; the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) [P002954]; the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck) [P002963]; the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) [P002962]; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) [P002960]; the hon. Member for Worcester (Robin Walker) [P002967]; the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) [P002971]; the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) [P002970]; the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) [P002968]; the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) [P002939]; the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) [P002973]; the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) [P002950]; the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) [P002975]; and the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) [P002975].

Observation from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): The Government are grateful to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon

Hull North; the hon. Members for West Ham, for Lancaster and Fleetwood, for Linlithgow and East Falkirk, for York Central, for Denton and Reddish, for Glasgow South West, for Nottingham South, for Batley and Spen, for Newport West, for Weaver Vale, for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, for Eltham, for Luton South, for Glasgow Central, for Washington and Sunderland West, for Wansbeck, for West Lancashire, and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West; my right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South; the hon. Members for South Shields, for Glasgow North, and for Strangford; my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester; and the hon. Members for Worsley and Eccles South, for Pontypridd, for North East Fife, for Neath, for Caerphilly, for Blaydon, for Halifax, and for Gower for submitting petitions on behalf of their constituents concerning the Government's response to the infected blood inquiry, and particularly the issue of final compensation recommendations made by Sir Brian Langstaff.

The Government acknowledge that victims of infected blood have been waiting far too long to see justice and we are progressing this work with urgency.

The Government have accepted the moral case for compensation and, starting in October 2022, made interim payments of £100,000 available to chronic infected beneficiaries and bereaved partners registered with existing support schemes. These payments continue to be made to eligible beneficiaries upon being accepted on to the schemes.

However, we recognise there is more still to be done. On 30 April, Government amendments were added to the Victims and Prisoners Bill. The Government amendments impose a duty on the Government to establish an infected blood compensation scheme. It also establishes a new arm's length body, named the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, to deliver the compensation scheme. The authority will operate on a UK-wide basis to ensure parity and consistency. The Government also agreed to deliver the regulations establishing an infected blood compensation scheme within three months of Royal Assent. This demonstrates our absolute commitment to paying compensation to those infected and affected by infected blood.

Additionally, in order to progress this work as swiftly as possible, a shadow body will be established by 20 May, led by an interim chief executive. This will be critical to getting the practical work in place to ensure the Infected Blood Compensation Authority can be fully operational as soon as possible. The shadow body will be able to begin work, such as implementing IT systems and appointing staff, which is needed for assessing and delivering compensation payments as quickly as possible.

The Government amendment also includes a statutory duty to make interim payments of £100,000 to estates of deceased infected people who were registered with existing or former support schemes, where previous interim payments have not already been made to infected individuals or their bereaved partners. This is an important step forward to get substantial compensation into the hands of families of victims of infected blood.

The Government will make a substantive update to Parliament responding to the infected blood inquiry's recommendations on compensation as soon as possible following 20 May. It is important that the Government await the findings of the inquiry's final report, but Ministers are clear that the inquiry's recommendations should form the basis of any response.

Written Correction

Monday 13 May 2024

Ministerial Correction

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Cass Review

The following extract is from the statement on the Cass Review on 15 April 2024.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The Cass review highlights the deterioration of mental health in young people. It particularly highlights the impact of social media, which puts awful pressures on young people. The mental health crisis obviously affects both boys and girls, but as the Secretary of State highlighted earlier, it particularly affects girls and young women. Will she continue to turbocharge child and adolescent mental health services' crisis teams, and give them the resources that they desperately need to support our young people?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We want to not just help with crisis support, but prevent our young people from getting into a position of crisis in the first place, so we are rolling out mental health support teams, ahead of our schedule, across schools. That is a really important piece of work that will help 44% of the student population, but we want to go even further. In the 12-month period ending in March 2021, we increased the number of children and young people aged under 18 who received NHS-funded mental health services to some 758,000.

[*Official Report*, 15 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 65-66.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins):

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We want to not just help with crisis support, but prevent our young people from getting into a position of crisis in the first place, so we are rolling out mental health support teams, ahead of our schedule, across schools. That is a really important piece of work that will help 44% of the student population, but we want to go even further. In the 12-month period ending in **January 2024**, we increased the number of children and young people aged under 18 who received NHS-funded mental health services to some 758,000.

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