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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 20 May 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the King has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Automated Vehicles Act 2024

Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Defence Sector Competitiveness

1. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the competitiveness of the UK's defence sector. [902893]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): Last month, the Prime Minister confirmed that this Government are committed to increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, with a fully funded plan. Obviously, the public want to know that we will deliver value for money. That is why, in parallel, we are delivering a fundamental reform of acquisition through our new integrated procurement model.

Jerome Mayhew: Last week, we heard an announcement about the development of a radio wave drone killer. How is the integrated procurement model encouraging and accelerating the development of that novel technology?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend highlights the fantastic news, confirmed last week, that we are developing a new radio frequency directed energy weapon. It is an extraordinary capability that with one strike can inflict hard kill on multiple drones, at a cost of about 10p a shot. As for how that exemplifies the new approach, it is about the close relationship between industry, our scientists, and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. It is through the strength of the industry that we drive innovation and get the best kit into the hands of our armed forces.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): We are pleased that there was an announcement from the Prime Minister, and that the Department has plans, but what we actually

need is industrial capacity. When the Department is handing out orders for fleet solid support ships to Spain; when it has taken 18 months to order munitions; when *The Times* today shows a significant drop in the number of apprenticeships; and when the Department admits that it still will not take past performance into account when awarding future contracts, what confidence can we have that there will be the industrial capacity, and the real orders, to enable our defence industry to be competitive and supply our forces?

James Cartlidge: We are massively ramping up defence capacity. The right hon. Gentleman spoke about 155 mm shells; that issue is precisely why we have reached a contractual agreement with BAE Systems, and it will be ramping up production in Wales and north-east England. We are doing the same with ships, complex weapons and, as I said earlier, novel weapons and our science base. This is all about giving our armed forces the capability that will give them the cutting edge.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Defence Committee, Jeremy Quin.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The global combat air programme will be a terrific boost to our defence and aerospace industries. To maximise success, we must keep the Typhoon production lines going until it comes on board, so what are Ministers doing to ensure that we maintain exports?

James Cartlidge: The Chair of the Select Committee asks an excellent question, and I assure him that there is an effort across Government to promote key defence exports, not least the Typhoon. A key factor in our new integrated procurement model is the need to drive exportability. That will not only ensure industrial resilience, but give us protection against overly exquisite requirements from the domestic side, which can result in delayed procurement. It is a good question, and we are focused on delivering greater defence exports.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Somerset is home to several organisations in the defence sector, such as Thales and Leonardo. However, companies in defence are concerned about the shortage in science, technology, engineering and maths skills in the UK; 48% of defence employers report a shortage of workers with engineering skills. What steps is the Minister taking, alongside Cabinet colleagues, to remedy those shortages and ensure that the UK defence sector remains competitive?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady asks a good question. There was a previous question about defence capacity; a key part of that is not just industrial capacity and buildings, but people. She is absolutely right. I visited Yeovil in Somerset, where I met apprentices who are involved in the programme for our helicopters. We saw a demo of artificial intelligence that is helping us to improve the availability of our helicopters. Work is happening across defence and across Government, but we want to do more to ensure that we have the necessary apprentices and key skills in our defence sector.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, John Healey.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Since the new shipbuilding strategy was launched two years ago, Ministers have given new build defence contracts to the Netherlands, Spain and, last week, France—just two days after the Defence Secretary declared that he was “determined” that new Navy vessels would be built “here in the UK.” He is the Government’s shipbuilding tsar; why will he not back UK shipbuilding?

James Cartlidge: I point out that a shipbuilding strategy costs money, and that is why we are committed to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, unlike the right hon. Gentleman. On his key point about the shipbuilding strategy, I have been to Scotland and seen the amazing yards where we are building the Type 26 and the Type 31. I have been to Appledore, which is contributing to fleet solid support. We are committed to a UK shipbuilding sector. As the Secretary of State confirmed in his speech last week, by value of the future order book, this country is now No. 1 for naval exports.

Defence Drone Strategy

2. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery of the UK defence drone strategy. [902894]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): We are making excellent progress on implementing the defence drone strategy, which I launched back in February. Our priority was to learn the lessons from Ukraine in order to build a sovereign industrial ecosystem that would enable uncrewed procurement at scale for the British armed forces. As for platform production, our immediate priority remains delivering drones to Ukraine, and I confirm that we have delivered 4,000 drones, with many more on their way in the coming months.

Mr Hollobone: Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to the drone threat, a key priority has to be counter-drone technology, to defend our forces? Does he agree that directed energy weapons will have a key role in that regard?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend raises two excellent points. First, he is absolutely right: our drone strategy must include a focus on how we defend our armed forces against the threats that are out there. He is also right that a key part of the solution is directed energy weapons. In my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), I spoke about radio frequency directed energy weapons, but we have also announced our procurement of the laser weapon DragonFire. Using our new procurement system, we want to get that into the hands of our armed forces as fast as possible. That means having it on naval ships by 2027, using our new minimum deployable capability approach.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The skills of Northern Ireland’s workforce are renowned across the world. Northern Ireland would very much like to be part of the UK defence drone strategy, so I ask the Minister this simple question: what is being done to ensure that the skills of Northern Ireland’s workforce are used for the benefit of the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

James Cartlidge: What a fantastic question. I can answer the hon. Gentleman simply. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Belfast at the Thales factory, which is manufacturing some of the best weapons available. It will be a key part of defence exports, and fundamentally a key part of future orders for the British Army. Northern Ireland is very much part of our defence industry.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Stephens. He is not here. Can the Front Bencher answer the question as though it had been asked?

Armed Forces: Harassment and Bullying

3. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of harassment and bullying cases in the armed forces. [902895]

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Mr Speaker, I will by all means answer the question. In 2023, 262 service complaints relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination were ruled admissible, compared with 227 in 2022. I am pleased to say that changes to the service complaints system in June 2022 have been encouraging people to come forward with their complaints. The “My Complaint” app, which launched in October, will make the system easier and more accessible.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The defence anti-bullying hotline is a great step forward in ensuring that members of the armed forces have the support that they need, any time of day or night. Can the Minister tell me what training advisers have had, not only on how to help our armed forces, but on ensuring that everything is completely anonymised, so that people can go forward with their life and get the support and help that they need?

Dr Murrison: Obviously a hotline is no good if the individuals at the other end of it are not trained. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance he seeks. The most important thing is to ensure that people have confidence that if they come forward with complaints, they will be listened to and taken seriously.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): First, I thank the Minister for Defence People and Families for inviting me to visit the defence serious crime unit, which I did last Thursday. The people there are obviously doing good work focused on tackling serious sexual and violent crimes in the armed forces. Given the doubling of reports of bullying, discrimination and harassment in the Ministry of Defence since 2019, and some cases remaining unresolved for up to three years, what is the Minister doing to address the toxic culture in his Department? Why is it that such things seem to be worsening on this Government’s watch?

Dr Murrison: I think the right hon. Lady would have to admit that a lot has been done over the past two or three years, including the setting up of the defence serious crime unit and the defence victim witness care unit. They are important. The general message has been

that we have a zero-tolerance approach. It has been, “Come forward. You will be listened to and taken seriously.” It is reasonable to assume that some of the figures are the result of people now having the confidence to come forward, because their complaints will be investigated independently. Previously, that was not the case.

Biosecurity Threats

4. **Matt Hancock** (West Suffolk) (Ind): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help detect biosecurity threats. [902896]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): Defence remains committed to detecting biological threats. We continue to work closely with the Cabinet Office on this matter and are the lead Department for the “detect” pillar of the biological security strategy. We have prioritised funding to create the UK Microbial Forensics Consortium, which will strengthen our ability to detect biosecurity threats, now and into the future.

Matt Hancock: Over the past few years, the cost and impact of security failures relating to biosecurity has been much greater than that of those relating to physical security. As the funding for the defence of this country rises to 2.5% of GDP, will the Minister ensure that he works with the Cabinet Office, the UK Health Security Agency, the Department of Health and Social Care and others to ensure that biosecurity, including protection from synthetic new threats, is at the top of the agenda?

Leo Docherty: We certainly will. Through the biological security strategy and the associated governance structure, we are working closely with the UK Health Security Agency to co-ordinate our response to the biodefence risk, and we are investing £5 million a year in our international biosecurity programme, so we are on the same page.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that there are real concerns in the light of recent reports about the increasing recklessness with which Russian operatives may interfere in our economy, directly and indirectly, and every other aspect of British lives? Are we prepared for that kind of mischievousness?

Leo Docherty: Yes, we are.

UK-Israel Military Co-operation Agreement

5. **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): Whether he plans to review the UK and Israel military co-operation agreement 2020. [902897]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): An agreement for UK-Israel military co-operation was signed in December 2020. There are no current plans for the agreement to be updated, but we continually review it to ensure that it remains relevant.

Kenny MacAskill: The rector of Glasgow University, who is an eminent Palestinian surgeon, has been narrating the horrors of the requirement to operate, and even perform amputations, on children—often without morphine—in Gaza. He has also detailed the horrors of the use of

white phosphorus munitions. White phosphorus ignites during surgery when exposed to the atmosphere and requires dousing, including during complicated operations. Why are we in a military pact with military forces that carry out such actions? If the Minister will not repudiate the pact entirely, will he ensure that the use of white phosphorus munitions in our name is not acceptable?

Leo Docherty: Of course it is not. We have no role in that, and we see no evidence of the prospect of that being used. We should focus on our confidence that Israel is an important ally, which means that we can make the point that the protection of civilians is of the utmost importance. We should also remember that at the heart of this conflict is the fact that if peace is to be achieved, Hamas need to lay down their arms and release the hostages.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): If a person calls for an intifada and chants genocidal chants, they are a supporter of Hamas. People can also be inadvertent supporters of Hamas, and can aid and abet them. One way in which that could happen is through having an arms embargo on Israel while Iran continues to arm Hamas, so that they can repeat the 7 October attacks, as they have said they wish to. Will the Minister confirm that the UK Government have no interest in changing their policy on defence agreements with Israel?

Leo Docherty: Indeed. We are assured that the strength of our relationship with Israel allows us to make representations about the protection of civilians, and about the increase in the flow of humanitarian aid. We do that in the context of it being an extremely important ally, while being cognisant of the broader threat from the terrorist group Hamas and Iran, which my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The F-35 programme has not only given world-leading capability to our Air Force and Navy, but provided jobs and technological advancement in the UK defence industry. Could the Minister give an assurance that any review of our relationship with Israel will not jeopardise that programme?

Leo Docherty: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that absolute assurance. We are immensely proud of the F-35 project, which delivers devastatingly effective fighting power for us and our allies, and 20,000 UK jobs.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Following on from the 2020 agreement, in November 2021, Britain and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding, elevating the UK-Israel bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership. The partnership is underpinned by extensive security and defence co-operation, but it also states that we will co-operate to improve Palestinian livelihoods and economic development. What future does my hon. Friend see for the memorandum, in the light of the war in Gaza?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend asks a relevant question. Our commitment to a two-state solution in which Palestinians achieve statehood is at the heart of our diplomacy and defence posture throughout the region, and it is unchanged.

Service Accommodation

6. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What the budget is for the maintenance of service accommodation for financial year 2024-25. [902899]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): The Defence Infrastructure Organisation's accommodation budget has not yet been finalised for the financial year 2024-25. The Government continue to invest significant sums to improve the quality of UK service family accommodation. The spend for 2023-24 on SFA maintenance and improvement was £384 million. An additional £400 million of funding over financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25 was announced as part of the defence Command Paper refresh last July.

Helen Morgan: The new head of infrastructure at the DIO, Commodore Leah Griffin, has written in her monthly newsletter to military families that the financial situation is "more challenging than ever", and only urgent repairs will be considered. We can see that on the ground in my constituency. A service person's partner who has had abdominal surgery has been unable to climb in and out of their bath to have a shower, and has been refused any kind of modification to assist them. That kind of financial challenge has a real impact on servicemen and women's lives. Could the Minister look at the problem, and commit to ensuring a decent standard of accommodation for those people who put their life on the line for us?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady is consistent in raising accommodation issues. As ever, if she has a specific case, she is more than welcome to write to me about it, if she has not already done so. On funding, I gently remind her that we committed an additional £400 million, and because of our commitment to 2.5%, we can confirm that we are able to put another £4 billion into SFA over the next 10 years—a significant investment.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend will agree that it is important that our service accommodation be of high quality, but we should also support members of our armed forces in buying a home for themselves and their families. What support is there in the modernised accommodation offer to help soldiers, sailors and pilots get on the housing ladder?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which speaks to my previous career, running a small business that helped first-time buyers. Forces Help to Buy has been a great success, but we also recently confirmed support with conveyancing costs, because the cost of getting on the property ladder includes not just the purchase but all the ancillary costs. We are committed to supporting our armed forces personnel, whether that means investing in the accommodation of those in SFA or single living accommodation, or helping those who want to get on to the property ladder.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Everyone who serves our country should live in a decent home, but last month, the independent Kerslake commission's report on armed forces housing

found that the majority of service personnel are dissatisfied with housing conditions, and very dissatisfied with the maintenance and repair service. One in three service personnel still lives in the lowest-grade service accommodation. The Government's words simply do not match their action. Can the Minister honestly look service families in the eye and say that military housing under this Government is good enough?

James Cartlidge: The debate we have been having is about investment. We put in an additional £400 million, which means that we have been able to overhaul thousands of properties, performing upgrades to deal with damp and mould and putting in new heating systems. That costs money. Our commitment to 2.5% means that we will get an extra £4 billion over the next decade. Armed forces personnel know that Labour cannot possibly deliver that, because it will not match our commitment to 2.5%.

Defence: North Sea

7. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the UK's defensive capacity in the North sea. [902900]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): Protecting the United Kingdom and responding to threats in our territorial waters is core business. In conjunction with our allies and partners, we constantly monitor activity in UK waters and deter threats. Our warships patrol the North sea frequently to achieve that deterrence.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the north Atlantic, Russian submarine activity has approached the most significant level since the cold war. Operations such as Dynamic Mongoose are a welcome commitment to both NATO and North sea security. How much of the new tranche of defence spending will be directed at the North sea and Arctic security?

Leo Docherty: Of course, we do not comment on our magnificent continuous at-sea deterrence. What I can say is that it is a matter of public record that we are committed to a magnificent new generation of Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates, which will achieve the competitive edge that keeps us all safe.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that the seismic array situated at Eskdalemuir in my constituency plays an important part in our defences not just in the North sea but elsewhere? Does he agree it is essential that its capability is not in any way diminished by excessive wind farm development in the immediate vicinity of the facility?

Leo Docherty: I agree with my right hon. Friend; he is absolutely right in his analysis. The broader point is that this is another example of why, undoubtedly, England and Scotland, through the Union, are safer and better together.

Israel: UK Military Support

8. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the UK's military support for Israel. [902901]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): The UK and Israel have a long-standing defence relationship, as we have discussed already this morning. Israel is a partner in the region, and a UK-Israel defence co-operation agreement was signed in December 2020.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Minister for that answer. The problem of unconditional UK military support for Israel is that while the majority of this House and of the British public rightly support our intervention to help protect Israel from missile attacks from third countries, it is a different story when it comes to its intervention and aggression in Gaza. How will His Majesty's Government's policy aim to sort out that conundrum?

Leo Docherty: Nothing is unconditional. The point I have made this morning is that we are supporting our ally overcome a devastating terrorist attack. We do that because it is the honourable thing to do. Simultaneously, we make the point to our ally that the protection of civilian lives must be at the top of the operational agenda. Furthermore, we use our military capability to ensure that humanitarian aid can flow into Gaza as quickly as possible.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): In the light of the damning International Criminal Court statement today, how concerned is the Minister about the potential impact on the UK's military relationship with Israel?

Leo Docherty: It has no bearing. We will make our judgments about the legality of our actions on our own terms, and we are confident in that legality.

Operation Shader

9. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** Whether he has made an assessment of the adequacy of military resources allocated by the UK to Operation Shader to help deter Iranian attacks. [902902]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): Our armed forces, through Operation Shader, which is focused really on the Daesh threat in Iraq, continue to support the development of the Iraqi Government in terms of their security. We commend and thank the men and women involved in Operation Shader throughout the region. We do that in the knowledge that Iran is indeed a threat that is undermining regional stability.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, the brave resistance fighters in Iran will be celebrating the demise of the Butcher of Tehran today. Iran controls Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist organisations. Given the attack by Iran on Israel, what further assessment has my hon. Friend made of the potential for Iran to launch another attack?

Leo Docherty: We take the threat Iran poses very seriously. We note that it uses its malign influence to continue to destabilise the middle east through its pernicious use of proxies. Our judgment is that that capability and intent remains. Our role in deterrence regionally is hugely important. I was very pleased recently to visit the magnificent sailors of the Royal Navy stationed in Bahrain. I reiterated that point about the fantastic deterrent effect they were having when I had a highly

productive interview with the British Forces Broadcasting Service. You will know, Mr Speaker, if you listen to BFBS as I do, that that point cannot be over-made. We are grateful for the magnificent activities of our Royal Navy in the Gulf, which are keeping us all safe.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): As the Minister has said, Operation Shader was originally put together in 2014 to defeat the Sunni Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The Liberal Democrats are very supportive of the way in which the Royal Air Force was used last month to help to intercept the Iranian bombardment of Israel, but the last parliamentary vote on Operation Shader was held in 2014, when Members were approving resources and deployments of UK armed forces to defeat ISIL. Will the Minister subject any operation that is designed to deter Iranian attacks to a debate and a vote?

Leo Docherty: It seems to me to be the settled view that Operation Shader is a good thing, and I do not sense any appetite for a parliamentary debate among colleagues across the Benches in this House. I should put it on record that I was very pleased to meet the men and women of the Expeditionary Air Wing in Romania, who have contributed so bravely over recent months to magnificent military effect through that operation.

Middle East: Aid Delivery

10. **Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help support the delivery of aid to the middle east. [902903]

22. **Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to help support the delivery of aid to the middle east. [902916]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): As we have discussed today, there is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support for Gaza. We—especially in the MOD—are working alongside partners and international organisations to enable the Cypriot maritime aid corridor initiative.

Gill Furniss: Over the past few months, we have seen shocking levels of suffering in Gaza. The only sustainable way in which to end this humanitarian disaster is an immediate ceasefire and the return of all hostages, but in the meantime aid must be provided to save the lives of innocent civilians. Can the Minister explain why there has been only one shipment of UK aid in more than six months, and none so far this year?

Leo Docherty: On the contrary, we have been hugely active. We have had 11 airdrops delivering more than 110 tonnes of humanitarian aid to Gaza, and that is in concert with our friends in Jordan. We commend the magnificent men and women of the Royal Air Force, who have been instrumental in delivering that much-needed aid.

Andrew Gwynne: I echo the commendation that the Minister has just given our air service personnel. However, no one can be unmoved by the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with scenes of children dying of hunger—it is utterly intolerable. I welcome the Government's efforts

to deploy UK aid flights and airdrops into Gaza, but the mounting scale of this disaster is showing that that is simply not enough. Can the Minister explain what the Government are doing to increase the number of UK aid shipments and access to Ashdod port?

Leo Docherty: We are seeking to ensure an increased flow not just through the air but by road and sea, which is why we have been instrumental in the setting up of the humanitarian pier. We commend and thank the captain and crew of the RFA Cardigan Bay, which is providing life support for those involved in the pier's delivery. We hope that this is the first of a sequence of increased deliveries via all three routes.

NATO: UK Obligations

11. **Mrs Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK meets its NATO obligations. [902904]

19. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK meets its NATO obligations. [902913]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): Our commitment to NATO is unwavering. In response to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, we have committed almost all our forces to NATO. We contribute to every single NATO mission and declare our nuclear deterrent to NATO. We show our commitment not least through our increase in defence spending to 2.5%.

Mrs Hamilton: The Public Accounts Committee has warned that "deterrence can only be effective if our Armed Forces are credible." However, that has been "undermined" by recruitment issues, with more people leaving the forces than being recruited. What message does the Secretary of State think that sends to our NATO allies?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased to inform the hon. Lady and the House that we are now seeing a very high level of applications. Last week, the First Sea Lord told me that HMS Raleigh, where the training takes place, is the fullest it has been for more than eight years. We have seen a big increase in applications to all three services, and long may it continue.

Mr Sharma: I am sure the Secretary of State recognises that the UK plays an outsize role in NATO as a crucial bridge between the United States and Europe. Does he agree that the UK should be contributing its huge industrial expertise to EU defence and security programmes, offering NATO additional resilience and choice while securing sovereign capability through home-grown intellectual property?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: our missions do indeed play an outsized role in NATO. We are the second biggest spender in NATO and the largest spender in Europe by a country mile, as Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General, said to me the other week. As I said in my original answer, we are contributors to every single NATO mission, plus we declare our nuclear deterrent to NATO—other than France, we are

the only country in Europe to do that. We will always look at ways to do more with NATO. Committing to 2.5% of GDP sends a very clear signal that we are on the side of doing that.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Maintaining freedom of passage through the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap is an essential task for NATO, particularly for the resupply of Europe in times of war. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is an equally big threat from half the Russian fleet being in the Arctic? Will he join us on Thursday 8 July at a symposium that we and NATO are holding jointly in Portcullis House to discuss defence in the Arctic?

Grant Shapps: That is a very important point, and questions have already been raised today about the size of the Russian fleet, what it is doing and where it is active. I will have to check the date, rather than answer my hon. Friend from the Dispatch Box, but I am much predisposed to attend the symposium.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): We are warned by the Secretary of State that we are in a "pre-war world", yet we do not have sufficient training and resources to undertake high-intensity warfighting, and we do not have the equipment and stockpiles for our forces to survive a prolonged campaign. It has been 14 years; when will this be put right?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that we have just provided the largest number of personnel to the largest NATO exercise in Europe since the cold war—Steadfast Defender, which is the largest exercise for 40 years. The United Kingdom can be very proud of the number of people we supplied on land, in the air and at sea. I have to make a fundamental point to those on the Opposition Front Bench: we cannot just wish ourselves to security; we have to spend 2.5% of GDP, and we have to set out the trajectory to get there. That is exactly what the Government have done.

Trident: Renewal Cost

12. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent estimate he has made of the cost to the public purse of Trident renewal. [902905]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): The right hon. Gentleman asks about the Trident programme, but I am unclear about whether he means the Dreadnought submarine part of that. Of course, different parts of a programme often combine together, but the Dreadnoughts themselves will enter service in the early 2030s.

Owen Thompson: That was an interesting answer from the Secretary of State. The Government and the loyal Opposition have both pledged to commit to Trident renewal, investing obscene amounts of money that would be better used to improve our NHS, to help households with the cost of living and to support personnel or, indeed, veterans. According to the House of Commons Library briefing, Trident renewal is expected to cost £21 billion in 2022-23 prices, while one in three children

is currently living in poverty. When will the Secretary of State agree that Trident renewal is an obscene waste of money, which could be put to much better uses?

Grant Shapps: I was recently at Faslane in Scotland, and I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that that is not what the people employed in the defence sector think about Trident. I can tell him something else: having stood at the Dispatch Box and been Defence Secretary, I know that the defence of this country is vastly supported by having our nuclear deterrent. In my view, every other issue that we face comes after the defence of this realm.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Although the right hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) is a valued member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, I think the Secretary of State would agree that the SNP is very much on its own on the idea of scrapping the nuclear deterrent. I am put in mind of a quotation from the late Denis Healey, who said that

“once we cut defence expenditure to the extent where our security is imperilled, we have no houses, we have no hospitals, we have no schools. We have a heap of cinders.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 1969; Vol. 779, c. 551.]

Is that endorsement of deterrence not as true today as it was when he gave it 55 years ago?

Grant Shapps: Absolutely right.

Service Accommodation

13. **Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con):** What steps he is taking to improve service family accommodation. [902907]

20. **Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of service accommodation for armed forces personnel. [902914]

23. **Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of service accommodation for armed forces personnel. [902917]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): Currently, around 96% of service family accommodation meets or exceeds the Government’s decent homes standard. Only these properties should be allocated to our families.

Selaine Saxby: As a base primarily for our Royal Marines, Chivenor in North Devon sees personnel stationed there for shorter periods of time than many other military bases. Will my hon. Friend consider additional support for high turnaround bases, perhaps including access to dental services for forces families where there are problems registering with local providers?

James Cartlidge: I very much enjoyed visiting RM Chivenor last summer and I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a consistent champion of the armed forces in her constituency. MOD dental healthcare provides dentistry for our armed forces personnel, ensuring that they are dentally fit and ready to deploy in the UK and overseas. The NHS provides dental care for civilians, which includes the families of armed forces personnel. I would be more than happy to arrange a meeting between my hon. Friend and MOD dental healthcare if she so wishes.

Sarah Edwards: As the Department continues to sell off service accommodation for armed forces personnel, including at Whittington in my constituency, and has abandoned plans to allocate based on family size, does the Minister accept that this can contribute to lower recruitment and retention levels for the armed forces?

James Cartlidge: That is entirely why we are investing in our estate. I have mentioned the importance of the additional £400 million, and that is not abstract. It has enabled us to make a real difference to the accommodation of our armed forces by putting in thousands of treatments for damp and mould, and lots of homes are getting new doors, new boilers and so on. That is the difference the funding makes, and that is why our commitment to 2.5% is so important. It is not just about capability; it is about the homes of our armed forces personnel.

Rachel Hopkins: Last month, the landmark report into armed forces housing found that poor quality military accommodation had become

“a tax on the goodwill of service personnel and their families”.

Does the Minister agree?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady is welcome to send me a copy of that report, although I am not sure it is entirely impartial. I look forward to reading the conclusions—[*Interruption.*] Presumably it recognises that if we want better accommodation, we need to put the funding in, so I assume that its conclusions recommend that Labour commit to 2.5%.

Armed Forces: Security Threats

14. **Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that the armed forces are adequately equipped to tackle security threats. [902908]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): We have considerably strengthened the UK’s defence in recent years and the Prime Minister’s announcement to increase defence spending to 2.5% signals our intent to invest further to ensure that our armed forces are equipped to deal with the threats we face. We are embracing innovation, investing in warfighting capability and bolstering the UK’s industrial base by reforming procurement.

Theresa Villiers: The war in Ukraine shows that drones will play a crucial part in future conflicts, so what are the Government learning from what is happening on the battlefield to ensure that our armed forces have the equipment they need to defend us from drone attacks?

James Cartlidge: That is an excellent question from my right hon. Friend, and I am pleased that so many colleagues on this side of the House are asking about drones. At the heart of our defence drone strategy is the commitment to learn from Ukraine and from the frontline, and we are well placed to do that because we have joint leadership of both the drone capability coalition in respect of Ukraine with Latvia, and the maritime coalition—where uncrewed systems have been so important—jointly with Norway. There are two key steps we are taking. One is to improve governance, to cohere that learning across defence and into our armed forces. The other is to have a strong relationship with industry, and I can confirm that next month we will be holding an industry day in the MOD with drone companies from across the country.

Cyber-attacks

15. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the level of risk posed by hostile cyber-activity to the UK's security. [902909]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): We take the risk of hostile cyber-activity very seriously. Our Department contributes to the national security risk assessment and the national risk register, and of course plays a key role in delivering the national cyber strategy to respond to hostile cyber-activity against the UK.

Chi Onwurah: British cyber-security is among the best in the world, as the sector has innovative companies employing 58,000 people and revenues of £10 billion or more. Under this Government, though, the Ministry of Defence's record on cyber-security only gets worse, with breaches tripling over the last five years. What steps is the Minister taking to work with British cyber-security innovators to overcome his Government's lax record on cyber-security, to support British innovation and, crucially, to keep our armed forces safe?

Leo Docherty: We are doing all those things at pace and, of course, the scale of the challenge is very significant. We are injecting a huge amount of money and institutional energy into ensuring that our cyber-defences are up to scratch. We are at the point of the spear when it comes to defensive cyber, as illustrated by the brilliant men and women who are part of our National Cyber Force, and we commend them.

Middle East: UK Military Security

16. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security of the UK's military bases and service personnel in the middle east. [902910]

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): Of course, the force protection of UK service personnel and our bases across the middle east is kept under constant review. Having been in Bahrain and Qatar in recent days, I can report that the morale and conditions of those posted to the middle east tend to be very high—they are a very purposeful set of people—but, for operational security reasons, I would not make any comment on the security readiness action plan.

Henry Smith: I pay tribute to the dedication and professionalism of the British armed forces personnel in the middle east who have kept us safe from terrorism and other hostile threats over many decades. Will my hon. Friend consider relooking at recognising all people who served historically in Aden for a service medal?

Leo Docherty: That was a very important campaign, and I am very happy to engage with my hon. Friend. I imagine that he might be asking about a specific constituency case, and I am very happy to sit down together to consider that.

Defence Funding: Efficient Spending

17. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps he plans to take to ensure efficient use of increased defence funding. [902911]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I am committed to ensuring that the defence uplift to 2.5% means that we spend the money as efficiently as possible. The tremendous work by my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement on the integrated procurement model is very important to the outcome of that spending.

James Daly: I am very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend commit to the efficient use of defence spending, which we may not have seen in the past. Will he comment on the excellent example of his recent announcement on saving Royal Marine warships and the fact that this Government have committed to building up to six more for the commandos?

Grant Shapps: That is absolutely right. It is very important that our Royal Marines are able to continue their activities, so not only will we keep the existing ships running but we have announced that we will build up to six new multi-role ships, which is all part of our programme to build 28 ships. That is why our shipyards are so very busy.

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Because of Government plans to mothball HMS Albion, key artefacts from the ship, including the sword of peace, were given to Chester town hall for safekeeping, and then, on 14 May, the Secretary of State announced that HMS Albion will not be mothballed. When would he like the artefacts back? Exactly when is HMS Albion going to be put to sea again?

Grant Shapps: We never announced that she was being mothballed, so I am very interested to hear about these artefacts. I was on HMS Albion the other week, so I will be very interested to engage on what has been removed.

Once again, I can clarify that both those ships—both used by our Royal Marines—will remain in active service. It is the case that more modern ships are being procured, which is possible only because we are prepared to put a date to spending 2.5% on defence.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Increased defence spending is obviously only a means to an end. It is not an end in itself. The Treasury rightly takes a jaundiced view of the MOD's ability to spend money wisely so, to that end, can the Secretary of State advise the House on how much taxpayers' money and defence budget was spent refitting HMS Argyll, only for her to be paid off immediately after she came out of refit?

Grant Shapps: There is no way that the Treasury, given its very tight hold on the fiscal regime, would approve spending 2.5% of GDP on defence if it did not have confidence in how we will spend it. Again, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the excellent work of the integrated procurement model, which will make all the difference. I am very happy to engage with him on individual defence decisions, but the fact of the matter is that if we do not commit to spending the money, we cannot put the pipeline in place to build things like the new ships and submarines we need.

Dave Doogan: I am unsurprised that I got no answer to my question because I never got an answer to that question on 8 January or to my point of order on 24 March. I was only informed by the Minister for Defence Procurement, who is whispering a response, I hope, into the Secretary of State's ear, of the fate of HMS Argyll after I read about it in the media. Will the Secretary of State tell me a different answer, then: did BAE Systems approach the MOD to buy HMS Argyll, or did the MOD approach BAE Systems?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman recognises that my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement has written to him on the subject, and I have no doubt that he will wish to engage with the hon. Gentleman further.

Topical Questions

T1. [902918] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): We are very mindful of the situation in Ukraine, particularly in Kharkiv where Russia is making, or trying to make, inroads. This is an existential battle for all civilised countries that believe in democracy and freedom, and it is the case that we must ensure that the world continues to keep up the efforts. It is not right for there to be pauses in our support and, when there are, the sort of losses we have seen on—I hope and believe—a temporary basis in Kharkiv around the villages to the north are an inevitable consequence of inaction.

Mr Hollobone: Lieutenant General Pavliuk, Ukraine's commander of ground forces, recently confirmed that medium and short-range strike drones now kill more soldiers on both sides of the conflict than any other weapon. Is that not both a grim milestone in the history of warfare and the strongest possible signal that His Majesty's armed forces must master that developing technology if they are to preserve and enhance their combat effectiveness?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is one reason why this country has been at the forefront of providing drones. Indeed, we have made an enormous £325 million contribution to the drones coalition and provided 4,000 drones in the latest package, and there is a lot more to come for Ukraine. This bloody war is now killing, or causing casualties to, up to 1,000 Russians a day, and it needs to come to a stop.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The Government's increase in military aid to Ukraine for this year and the years ahead has Labour's fullest support. Weekend newspapers reported that D-day celebrations are at risk from RAF cuts, and the latest MOD figures confirm that nearly 50,000 full-time forces personnel have been cut since 2010. The Defence Secretary's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), admitted that this Government have "hollowed out and underfunded" the forces. He is right, isn't he?

Grant Shapps: I very much appreciate the hon. Gentleman's support for the ongoing support to Ukraine of £3 billion a year. I gently say to him that it is not possible to provide that support without a route to getting there, with the 2.5%; otherwise, it will come out of the rest of the budget. I, too, read the story over the weekend, and it is simply not the case. We will have, in fact, 181 parachuters—exactly the same number as those who jumped in that location on D-day.

John Healey: We will also raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP to meet increasing threats, but this is not the magic wand that will fix 14 years of Tory failure: the Army, cut; the Navy, cut; the RAF, cut. Even defence spending—at 2.5% under Labour in 2010—has been cut by £80 billion since. Is it not clear that the armed forces cannot afford another five years of Conservative Government?

Grant Shapps: The armed forces cannot afford a Labour Government if Labour cannot answer one simple question: when?

T3. [902920] **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): I and other colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), would like to follow up on the Minister's comments to the House in March regarding the tragic sinking of RFA Sir Galahad in the Falklands war? Does the Minister have any update on the release of further files regarding that case?

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): Following meetings with colleagues and veterans, having personally reviewed the files at the National Archives, and in the interests of transparency, I am placing copies of two recently reviewed extracts from the 1982 board of inquiry report on the loss of RFA Sir Galahad in the Library of the House. Those extracts are drawn from different sections of the inquiry and have been returned to the National Archives within the main report, which will be publicly available.

T4. [902921] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Yesterday, hundreds of RMT members at the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service took industrial action over their pay, which has fallen behind by 36% in real terms, allowing for inflation, since 2010. Earlier, the Minister for Armed Forces commended RFA crews for the work they are doing, particularly off the coast of Gaza. Will the Minister for Defence People and Families agree to meet RMT officials to ensure that RFA seafarers are paid fairly for the vital work they do supporting the Royal Navy?

Dr Murrison: As the grandson of an RFA officer, I defer to nobody in my admiration for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. I commend the RFA for maintaining its operational commitments, in particular in relation to Gaza. Clearly, we listen to what Nautilus has to say with a great deal of interest and I hope the dispute will be ended as soon as possible.

T5. [902922] **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): RAF Valley is the largest employer of skilled workers on Ynys Môn. The UK Government have cemented their commitment to RAF Valley with £175 million for a new

flying school, £600 million for Hawk engineering support and £44 million to improve the second runway. What assurance can the Minister give to engineers and those who work on the Hawk T2 maintenance contract that there will be well paid, local jobs for them post-2040?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (James Cartlidge): I very much enjoyed my visit to RAF Valley in February. I can confirm that the RAF has already started its standard capability investigation process into the future of combat aircrew training. The comprehensive review will include the procurement of the replacement of the current advanced jet trainer capability. The investigation will consider options for aircraft, simulators and associated combined live and virtual training, such that we can continue to deliver world-class training capability for UK armed forces. It will provide evidence on likely cost and timing of the replacement training solution to the Hawk T2.

Mr Speaker: I call Barry Sheerman. *[Interruption.]* Barry Sheerman?

T9. [902926] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry, Mr Speaker, I was thinking of an even better question—

Mr Speaker: Stick to the main one.

Mr Sheerman: Indeed.

As you know, Mr Speaker, my family comes from a military background, although I am not a military expert. Time and again, my constituents say they have heard about a shortage of shells, ammunition and others things that we cannot supply to the Ukrainians. What is the hold-up? Why are we not working 24/7 to produce the tools that our Ukrainian allies want?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman asks about the supply of shells. I am delighted to tell to him that we previously confirmed the provision of 300,000 artillery shells to Ukraine. The latest figure is that this country has procured 400,000 artillery shells directly into Ukraine.

T6. [902923] **Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): That is a smart tie you are wearing, Mr Speaker.

How can it be that despite spending billions of pounds on 22 A400M aircraft, we have only one available for D-Day 80? If there are more, let us hear about it. Why did we retire a highly reliable aircraft in the Hercules, for a highly unreliable one in the A400M? Have we sold the Hercules aircraft? If we have not, can we put them back in service?

James Cartlidge: As the Secretary of State confirmed, we will have two A400M aircraft available for D-Day 80 on 5 June. The number of people who will be dropped will be 181, for the very good reason that that is the number of paratroopers who, at sixteen minutes past midnight on D-Day itself, landed and took the bridge that we named Pegasus.

T10. [902927] **Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): In my Westminster Hall debate last year, the Minister for Defence Procurement announced plans to close the Chicksands base in my constituency, and pledged to

write with further detail. I am yet to hear more from the Minister, but my constituents are, understandably, becoming deeply concerned. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the issue further and what more we can do in the meantime to address the shocking state of accommodation on the base?

James Cartlidge: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

T7. [902924] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence spending, but after we have won the next general election, growth will come to the economy and there will be much more money to be spent on defence? How would my right hon. Friends spend that money in the defence of the realm?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to point that out, because some assumptions have been a little misplaced in this House until now. We will ensure that we can do a whole range of things that will help to make this country stronger and more secure. On that, he has my word.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for Defence People and Families on behalf of Falklands veterans and their families, including Mike Hermanis, who brought the issue to me, for releasing the documents relating to the bombing of the Sir Galahad in 1982, which exonerate the Welsh Guards. I know that the campaign, which includes my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), will continue to seek the full truth, but does the Minister agree that instead of being blamed the Welsh Guards are owed our thanks for their service?

Dr Murrison: I agree with the hon. Lady. As the Government have made clear consistently throughout, no blame is attached in particular to the Welsh Guards. They committed themselves heroically on that day, and I join her in saluting them, in particular those who died.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): It is of huge strategic interest to Britain and the west that Israel prevails against Hamas and their funders in Iran. The Foreign Secretary was right to state last week that ending military exports to Israel would embolden Hamas and Iran. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a move would both harm UK defence interests and disadvantage our own armed forces, who rely on Israeli-made battlefield equipment?

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): My hon. Friend is correct in her analysis. We are particularly focused on ensuring that our assets in the region contribute to the release of the hostages.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What is the policy of His Majesty's Government on defence deals and arms sales to countries whose head of armed forces is under arrest warrant for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity?

Grant Shapps: As the Minister for Armed Forces pointed out, the licensing regime is entirely independent of that. We support the country. We support the only

democracy in that part of the world. We do not support the individuals in that Government; we support the country itself.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): In Fareham, we are rightly proud of our world-class aircraft carriers docked in nearby Portsmouth, providing thousands of jobs and being a huge credit to our Royal Navy. However, we all know that neither the Queen Elizabeth nor the Prince of Wales has as many jets, small warships or submarines as originally planned. Will the Minister please tell me how further defence spending will be used to bring online the full complement of F-35 jets, for example, so that our carrier strike group has the full capability to meet the modern threats of today?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. and learned Friend asks an excellent question. She is right about the importance of the carrier strike group. On the key point about the F-35s, we have confirmed 48 aircraft by 2025 and a further 27 by 2033, but in addition to that it is about working with our allies so that our carriers are at the heart of NATO operations, and ensuring that we have the maintenance and crews in place. As we saw recently, when we needed to get the second ship active, she was ready in eight days. That was a phenomenal achievement. It shows how effective we are at getting our carriers in place when we need them.

T2. [902919] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Minister for Veterans' Affairs promised last year to end veterans homelessness by the end of that year. Instead, veterans homelessness rose by 14%. Are Ministers proud that their Government are failing to deliver on their promise to their veterans?

Dr Murrison: I say to the hon. Lady, who has been consistent in that line of questioning, that one person homeless is one person too many. It is important to emphasise that most people leave the armed forces in a very good position, with skills that will advance their careers in civilian life. I do not want her giving the impression that people are damaged as a result of the service that they have given; the very reverse of that is the case. We will of course continue to support veterans, charities and initiatives to ensure that, particularly in places such as naval base port areas and garrison towns, we house everybody who needs accommodation.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Britain's world-leading motor sports industry is worth at least £10 billion annually to the UK economy. The sport's governing body, Motorsport UK, has proudly sponsored access to military venues for many years, but despite recently signing the armed forces covenant, that access appears to be diminishing. Will the Minister please agree to meet me, and perhaps the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, to discuss better third-party revenue-generating opportunities for the MOD estate?

James Cartlidge: I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. On the subject of motorsport, I stress to him and the House that the MOD has a brilliant partnership with McLaren, jointly innovating to look at, for example, technology relating to electronic vehicles. I am more than happy to meet him and look into the matter further.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): A constituent of mine who rents his home from the Ministry of Defence has recently been given notice to quit within two months, without any reason. He has never missed any rent payments and he has been unable to contact his landlord with a query on the instruction. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the situation?

Dr Murrison: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that; I have seen several cases of people having to leave their service accommodation. In general, the DIO and the Ministry of Defence will ensure that people have more than the minimum allowed by legislation, and we bend over backwards to ensure that people leaving service accommodation have somewhere to go to.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): My hon. Friend will appreciate the huge importance of what the UK defence industry is doing to help Ukraine get the equipment it needs. Can he update the House on what his Department is doing to increase the amount of ammunition getting to the front line in Ukraine?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend, who has Defence Equipment & Support in his constituency, has been a consistent champion of supporting Ukraine and he comes to every questions session to make that point. We are working hard to get more munitions in there; I mentioned 400,000 artillery shells, but I could list an enormous amount of ordnance. I can tell him and the House that we are not just doing everything possible ourselves, but cohering our allies and learning the lessons for our own armed forces. We have to be in this for the long haul, and the fight for Ukraine's freedom is the right one.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, I think my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement may have—inadvertently, I am sure—just misled the House of Commons. Pegasus bridge was captured in a glider-borne assault by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, not a parachute assault. I know that because I was at the D-day 70 with the then Prime Minister David Cameron at 12.16 am to commemorate the assault. I am sure it was an error by my hon. Friend; no one will want to believe that an MOD Minister tried to change the history of D-day because the aircraft did not work.

Mr Speaker: The good news is that that is a point of clarification, which have been resolved.

South West Water: Brixham Contamination

Mr Speaker: We now come to the urgent question. I will run this short: the question for the water company is about those who are affected, not other parts of the UK—so just for clarification, it is a tight UQ.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make a statement on South West Water and Brixham's contamination.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): On Monday 13 May, South West Water was notified by the UK Health Security Agency of cryptosporidium cases in the Brixham area. South West Water undertook monitoring from Monday evening into Tuesday, with the results on Wednesday morning identifying crypto in the Hillhead distribution area. A boil notice was issued for customers on Wednesday 15 May to cover both the Hillhead area and the Alston area. I know that has caused considerable concern and disruption to the local community.

To date, UKHSA has identified at least 46 confirmed cases of cryptosporidium but, given that symptoms may take up to 10 days to emerge, obviously that number may continue to rise. Two people have been hospitalised. Two bottled water stations were initially opened on Thursday 16 May, and in my call with the chief executive on Friday, I requested that a third be opened and the hours extended, both of which then happened effective from Saturday.

I also raised concerns with the chief executive, including those shared with me by my hon. Friends the Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about inadequate compensation. That was raised to £150 for residents in the Alston supply area and has now gone up to £215 for those continuing to be affected in the Alston area. A helpline has been established for businesses and I requested that it work with local MPs to streamline the process. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries visited the community on Friday.

Some 16,000 properties were initially subject to the boil notice, but 85% of them—32,000 residents in 14,500 properties that receive their water from the Alston reservoir—have now had the boil notice lifted. Not only have all the tests on the Alston reservoir been clear, but South West Water says that the positive test of the valve supports its contention that the most likely cause is downstream of that reservoir. If that is the case, those 85% of residents were never subject to any water issues and the boil notice was applied on a precautionary basis. Notwithstanding that, I am sure that there will be ongoing concern, so daily testing of that water will continue for the foreseeable future.

The Hillhead reservoir has now been drained, cleaned and refilled. A flush of the network, which aims to remove traces of cryptosporidium detected in the system, was started this morning. We are working with South West Water and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, recognising the ongoing disruption to the remaining 15% of residents. I know that South West Water will want to comply fully and in a timely fashion with the investigation of the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

Anthony Mangnall: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister with responsibility for rivers, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), for their extraordinary co-operation over the past week. I have wanted for nothing from them, and they have done an extraordinary job. I thank them and their team for being on hand at a moment's notice to liaise with me and with the local organisations in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

In Brixham the anger is palpable, the frustration is apparent and the sheer inconvenience that has been put on residents by South West Water is absolutely abhorrent. I have spent the past week and weekend delivering leaflets that South West Water should have been delivering—it has failed to update residents on the situation before them. I have spoken with residents and businesses about compensation and the reputational damage suffered by Brixham, one of this country's finest coastal communities.

Last week, South West Water was accused of making people ill, not by an organisation, but by Tanya Matthews in a Facebook post. That post received 1,200 responses in which people identified common symptoms, yet South West Water did nothing. For 24 hours, people were still able to drink the water and South West Water continued to say that there was no problem. The reason 46 people are ill—and that is most certainly an underestimation—is the time period in which they were able to go on drinking the water.

Of course, it is welcome news that the Alstom reservoir has been cleared and independent monitoring and verification has been undertaken by the UK Health Security Agency and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, but it is still wholly unacceptable that the 8,000 residents in the Hillhead reservoir area are still dependent on bottled water and cannot trust their water systems. In the 21st century, that is a totally unacceptable position for us to be in. South West Water and its management carry the responsibility for it.

I welcome the fact that we have three drinking water stations in Churston, Broadsands and Freshwater Quarry, and that 500,000 bottles have distributed—the teams on the ground have done an extraordinary job, and we should applaud them—but I have four questions for the Secretary of State. Can UKHSA and the DWI continue to provide independent monitoring over the coming weeks and months to ensure that there is confidence in the drinking water supply? Will there be an investigation into South West Water's handling of this matter? Why, when the compensation is being upgraded, are people still paying their water bills? Finally, the damaged reputation suffered by businesses and the community of Brixham needs to be addressed, so will the Secretary of State hold South West Water to account?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is quite right to express the huge local concerns. He and I have spoken multiple times a day since this issue arose, and he has been extremely effective in raising the concerns of those he represents.

There is recognition that the initial comms, the mishap with some of the leaflets and the comms about compensation are all areas that South West Water will

address moving forward, having sought to take his feedback. He is right about the urgency in addressing the Hillhead reservoir for the remaining 15% of the population. That is certainly uppermost in my conversations with the relevant stakeholders.

With regard to an investigation, issues with drinking water are treated with the utmost seriousness within Government, so I can assure my hon. Friend that these issues will be looked at extremely closely. I spoke with the chief executive of the Drinking Water Inspectorate at the weekend, and I had a meeting with one of its senior leaders just before this UQ. I can assure my hon. Friend that there will be a thorough investigation, as there always is with these kinds of issues, and I urge all parties, including South West Water, to co-operate fully and in a timely fashion.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Another day, another example of the depths of failure to which this Government have taken us. I cannot believe that I am about to say this, but after 14 long years of Conservative rule, in 21st-century Britain, our water is no longer safe to drink. Of course, the Government will be flailing around, desperate to clasp on to somebody else to blame, but this crisis is theirs, and it is this Government who must show some leadership and take responsibility for it. They were the ones who weakened regulation, leaving our Victorian-era sewerage system starved of investment. They turned a blind eye and left water companies to illegally pump a tidal wave of raw sewage into our rivers, lakes and seas. Only last month, the Labour party warned that our nation's health is at risk because hospital admissions for waterborne diseases have skyrocketed by two thirds since 2020. Is this an example of the Government's plan working? Is this what they think success looks like?

And now this, as the icing on the cake of failure: a parasite outbreak in Brixham with South West Water. Some 16,000 homes and businesses have been advised to boil water before drinking it; over 46 cases of cryptosporidiosis have been reported; more than 100 people have reported symptoms; and a 13-year-old boy has been admitted to hospital. That is appalling.

Enough is enough, so today we are calling on the Government to urgently adopt Labour's plan to put the water companies into special measures in order to clean up their water. As a matter of utmost urgency, the Government must strengthen regulations so that law-breaking bosses face criminal charges, and go further by giving the regulator new powers to block the payment of bonuses until water bosses have cleaned up their filth. With Labour, the polluter will pay, not the public.

I have one question for the Secretary of State. With contaminated water hospitalising children and record levels of toxic filth in our water systems, how much worse does the situation have to get before the Government adopt Labour's plan to put the water industry into special measures?

Steve Barclay: Members on the Labour Front Bench like to claim that their party wants to be taken seriously as a potential party of Government, yet once again we see shadow Ministers pre-empting the investigation and trying to shift the issue to that of raw sewage. Obviously, it is for the Drinking Water Inspectorate to fully investigate

this incident and the water company, but the initial information shared with me suggests that the concern is about farm contamination, not raw sewage. Of course, we need to wait for the results of that investigation, but the Labour party is just jumping to a conclusion that fits a narrative; it is not interested in what the facts suggest.

If the hon. Lady had actually listened to my statement, as opposed to pre-empting it with a question that she did not then change, she would have heard that 85% of those who were subject to the boil notice were upstream of this incident. From the information I currently have, they were not subject to any issue with their water. Because of the seriousness with which we take these issues, a precautionary notice was quite rightly issued to those residents, but the evidence presented so far suggests that there was no issue for those residents because the contamination happened downstream.

As for the wider point-scoring and political narrative, in this House there is usually a distinction between serious issues such as this one and the usual party knockabout. What the community want to hear is reassurance that all the investigations have been done, that we are getting the compensation right, and that we are getting the remaining 15% onstream—all of which, incidentally, the hon. Lady did not even ask about. She did not seem interested in those things, as opposed to the natural knockabout that she was trying to do.

However, let me divert to the topic she wanted to talk about. We have a fourfold increase in the number of investigators, so the water companies cannot mark their own homework. In this instance, the Drinking Water Inspectorate is conducting a full investigation; phase 1 has been completed, and it is now on phase 2. I have quite a list, Mr Speaker, but since you are signalling to me, I will close with the fact that the largest criminal investigation launched by the Environment Agency and Ofwat is currently ongoing.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): First, I commend my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for the very effective action he has taken on this issue over the past few days. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in an incident of this kind, speed is of the essence in diagnosing the problem, taking steps to remedy it, communicating with and reassuring customers and, if appropriate, compensating them? Does he believe that South West Water has shown the necessary urgency in dealing with this problem, and if not, what remedies do local people have?

Steve Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend that speed is absolutely critical, first for the detection of the issue itself and the remediation of any health risk, and then in speed of communication so that there is no vacuum in which misleading information can arise. On the wider point about the speed of comms, I think this is an ongoing issue, because one of the concerns that my hon. Friends the Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) have raised with me is the impact that negative publicity might have on tourism in the area. That is exactly the sort of area I have been pushing South West Water to think about proactively, so that it can get ahead with support for comms and advertising. It should be working with the business groups on which there has been a significant impact, so

[*Steve Barclay*]

that it can demonstrate that it gets it, support the business community and create processes that are simplified, streamlined and easy to access.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The belated and pitiful offer of compensation by South West Water is somehow symbolic of the complete disconnect that the very wealthy people who run our privatised water industry seem to be suffering from, and I am afraid the Secretary of State is suffering from the same disconnect. He has given the impression that he is not responsible for the water industry and its failings over recent years. He is responsible, so please can he answer the perfectly reasonable questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy): why will he not make the bosses of the water industry criminally liable, why will he not put the industry into special measures, and why will he not stop these outrageous bonuses being paid to their CEOs?

Steve Barclay: The right hon. Member seems to have missed what we have done. First, as I touched on in my response to the urgent question, I personally have been chairing calls with the chief executive and key stakeholders—for example, on Friday and Saturday. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, who has responsibility for agriculture, visited the community on Friday morning and has had daily contact with the chief executive. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and I have been speaking multiple times a day on these issues, so the right hon. Member's suggestion that we have not been involved just does not cut the mustard.

On bonuses, we have already taken action. We have a consultation with Ofwat on restricting bonuses, because I actually agree with the right hon. Member that, where there is serious criminal wrongdoing by a water company, bonuses should not be paid to executives. We actually agree on that point, and we are taking action.

On the right hon. Member's third point, about prosecution, as I touched on in my answer to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), we currently have the largest criminal prosecution by the Environment Agency of water firms. Much to my frustration, I am restricted in some of the things I am allowed to know about that investigation, because it is a matter for an independent body—the Environment Agency. However, that investigation is ongoing and it is the largest in the EA's history. It shows that we are prepared to get tough with the water companies.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this urgent question, and I applaud all his efforts over the past week. South West Water's response to this crisis has left a lot to be desired. Many people in Brixham have fallen seriously ill, while hospitality and tourism businesses across Devon have seen their takings slashed and bookings cancelled. They all deserve compensation. Can my right hon. Friend outline the timescales for the ongoing investigation and when the results of this investigation will become public?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend makes extremely pertinent points both on compensation and on speed, which was the point made previously by my hon. Friend the Member

for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), and I think both apply. The point about compensation applies particularly to businesses because different businesses are impacted in different ways. The point about speed also applies to the investigation itself, which is why I said earlier that it is really important that South West Water—this is the signal that he and the House are sending it—co-operates fully with the investigation and in a timely manner. I know that local Members of Parliament want to be able to explain to their constituents exactly what the cause was, what the monitoring was and what action was taken, and I am sure that South West Water will have heard my hon. Friend's points.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): In 2022, the Liberal Democrats called for a ban on bonuses for water company bosses if a company has committed criminal breaches. Last year, 10 water bosses received bonuses totalling £2.5 million, and the CEO of South West Water forwent her £450,000 bonus. The Secretary of State said that Ofwat should carry out a consultation to define criteria for a ban on bonuses, but what size bonus does he think the CEO of South West Water ought to receive later this month?

Steve Barclay: As a Minister, one has to follow the correct legal process, and the legal process for an independent arm's-length body requires it to have a consultation. As I have said, we are already moving on that; we have already said that we want to ensure that bonuses are not paid where there is serious criminal wrongdoing. What would be more refreshing from the Liberal Democrats is an explanation for why their MPs opposed Thames Tideway, the £4.5 billion scheme that will make such a difference to cleaning up the Thames and has been in place for the past eight years. Not once has the hon. Gentleman come to this Chamber to explain why, having asked so many questions on water, his MPs opposed Thames Tideway and that £4.5 billion of investment, which will do so much to clean up the Thames.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Although I am in the north of the county, I have been contacted this past weekend by concerned constituents. What more can be done to reassure them that this issue cannot be repeated in the north of the county, which is very proud of its farming and cattle? If this is found to be the result of a safety valve in a field, what more will be done to reassure other customers who fortunately were not affected this time but might be in future?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is not just those residents directly affected who are concerned; so too will be those in the surrounding areas. Indeed, some of the initial media reports referred to “south Devon”, which led many residents in the wider catchment to think that they might be directly affected. That is why the speed of the investigation and the work that the Drinking Water Inspectorate is doing is so critical, so that the facts can be quickly established. As I said, I spoke to the chief executive at the weekend. It has completed phase 1 of its investigation, and that work is ongoing.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There is a crisis of confidence in South West Water. Its response has been hopeless, frankly. It has

had poor communications, poor initial compensation, as every extra pound seems to be dragged out of it, and it has a record of failure on sewage. What will the Government do to help restore confidence that South West Water is not only competent and able to manage our water supply, but that the water that comes through our taps is safe for everyone to drink? How can we encourage people to have faith in the outstanding and brilliant tourist offer that we have in the south-west, which has been battered yet again by bad news because of South West Water?

Steve Barclay: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the brilliant tourist offer, and there is work to do to support businesses, particularly in the hospitality trade, which will have been impacted by the reputational damage that the area has had as a consequence. I assure him that I made those points to South West Water. As I said in my statement, I have also spoken to it about compensation, which has moved, although there is further work to do, particularly with the business community. That is also why the investigation is so important, so that we get to the bottom of exactly what happened. That is important for residents who have had the disruption of the boil water notice, and for residents further afield.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): This has been a devastating event. Although constituents in Newton Abbot were not directly affected, this is an issue of trust, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) said. It is about trust in South West Water as an organisation—there is a long way to go before that trust is restored—but also about trust in the quality of our water, and in our regulators to hold organisations such as South West Water to account. What do Ofwat and the Drinking Water Inspectorate do to challenge the water plans that these water companies put out to test what could go wrong? What risk analysis and assessment is there? What contingency plans are put in place? Trust can be rebuilt not just through the inquiry, but by making absolutely sure that the regulators—in all their guises—have in place the appropriate testing to ensure that this sort of thing cannot happen again.

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend talks about the huge importance of the quality of drinking water. That is why we have the Drinking Water Inspectorate there, and it will be fully investigating, and it is why a precautionary approach was taken with Alston. As I have said, on the information that I have, the tests suggest it was upstream of any problem, but a precautionary approach was taken. That indicates how seriously we take these issues.

It is important we get to the bottom of exactly what has happened and what has caused this incident, and the DWI is working actively to do that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): In 2022, the Drinking Water Inspectorate found South West Water guilty, saying that the company “did not follow best practice”

to avoid and shorten events where customers report problems about the taste and quality of their drinking water. It was fined a quarter of a million pounds. It was found guilty the year after for a six-year period of illegal discharges of sewage. The CEO awarded themselves almost £2 million in bonuses and awarded £112 million in dividends. Is it not time that all bonuses, all dividends and all bill rises are suspended until our water companies sort themselves out? If they do not, they need special administration.

Mr Speaker: May I remind Members that when they are asking a question or speaking, they are meant to look at the Chair, not at somebody down at the bottom of the Chamber, because we might be unable to hear what is being said?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is because of the good work of the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) that I was able to ask that question.

Mr Speaker: In the end, the good work of the hon. Member for Totnes was only allowed by the Chair—think that way first!

Steve Barclay: I will take that steer, Mr Speaker, and direct my remarks your way. First, there is agreement on bonuses that where there is criminal wrongdoing, they should not be paid. On dividends, there is a debate with Treasury colleagues on the balance between attracting investment into the sector and taking further measures. I have also touched on the largest ever criminal prosecution currently under way with the Environment Agency. It is important that we do not pre-empt the investigation. We need to get to the bottom of exactly what has happened and who is at fault, where there is fault. I am sure that as part of that, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and Members of the House will look at what monitoring was in place, what different parties did and whether any lessons from previous incidents were sufficiently learned. Those are issues that should rightly be explored through the investigation, and that is what the DWI is doing.

Israel and Gaza

4.3 pm

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With permission, I would like to make a statement on Israel and Gaza.

Over seven months since the horrors of 7 October, there is no end to the current conflict in sight. This Government want to bring the conflict to a sustainable end as soon as possible, but as so often with conflicts of this nature, the question is not about our desire for peace, but rather about the best means of achieving it. We continue to believe that 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 would then have to work with our international partners to turn that pause into a sustainable permanent ceasefire.

Building momentum towards a lasting peace will require a number of elements, including removing Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel. It was a deal of that kind that secured a pause in the fighting before Christmas—the only such pause since Hamas's horrific attack. It was that approach that the United Nations Security Council endorsed just last month, following some effective British diplomacy.

A deal with Hamas for a pause in the fighting would involve exchanging hundreds of Palestinian prisoners charged with serious acts of terrorism in return for the hostages' release. I do not underestimate how difficult that must be for the Israeli Government, but it is the best way forward that we see right now.

We continue to work closely with the United States and partners in the region to support such a deal. We do not believe that the International Criminal Court prosecutor seeking warrants will help in that regard. As we have said from the outset, we do not think that the ICC has jurisdiction in this case.

A deal as I have described offers the best prospects of reuniting more hostages with their families; the anguish for them is unbearable. I am sure that the whole House joins me in holding the family of Nadav Popplewell in our thoughts at this deeply distressing time. We are still working intensively to establish the facts after the awful video that his Hamas kidnappers released last week. The Foreign Secretary met the family last week to hear more about their ordeal at first hand. Likewise, we send our condolences to those families whose loved ones the Israeli authorities stated last week had died.

At the same time, the toll on civilians in Gaza continues to rise. Images from the strip give us some sense of what they endure: civilians piling belongings on to a cart led by a donkey, or seeking to scrape together a meal in a makeshift shelter. We have seen appalling attacks on aid convoys and UN offices by Israeli extremists, and the tragic deaths of UN and other humanitarian personnel in Gaza.

We keep in close contact with Sigrid Kaag, the UN humanitarian co-ordinator, and we condemn all attacks on aid workers and support the United Nations' call for an independent investigation. The Government of Israel have previously set out publicly their commitment to increase the flow of aid into Gaza significantly, but we need to see far more. The Prime Minister impressed the urgency of that on 30 April. In the past 10 days, the Foreign Secretary has spoken to Israeli Ministers Ron Dermer and Israel Katz. He has called on them to implement in

full Israel's aid commitments. We want to see: humanitarian aid allowed to enter through all relevant crossing points, including in Rafah; critically needed goods flowing in, particularly fuel and medical supplies; effective deconfliction processes to ensure that aid can be distributed safely and effectively; critical infrastructure restored and protected; evacuations for all those eligible; concrete action to protect civilians and minimise casualties; and, as Israeli Minister Benny Gantz said over the weekend, more planning for reconstruction and a return to Palestinian civilian governance of Gaza once the fighting has ceased.

We remain absolutely committed to getting aid into Gaza to alleviate the suffering, and we are working with a wide variety of other Governments and aid agencies to deliver aid by land, sea and air. I am delighted to confirm to the House that we have now successfully delivered British aid on to Gaza's shore using the Cyprus maritime corridor, which we and our partners—notably, the United States, the United Arab Emirates and Cyprus—made operational just last week. We have committed almost £10 million in funding. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary Cardigan Bay is acting as a logistics hub for the operation.

We have now delivered more than 8,000 shelter coverage kits alongside aid from the US and UAE, with more aid to follow in the coming weeks including hygiene kits and forklift trucks. Work to develop other effective partnerships for the delivery of aid continues. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon is in Qatar today, discussing a health partnership for Palestinians so that a British medical training agency can support doctors and health practitioners treating Palestinian patients.

We know that much, much more aid is required, but that delivery by land remains the quickest and most effective option, so we continue to work closely with Oman to maximise the aid delivered via the Jordan land corridor. I pay tribute to all those aid workers, military personnel, diplomats and medical professionals who are involved in Britain's efforts to save lives and alleviate the suffering of civilians in Gaza. I confirm to the House that, last week, intense efforts by the Foreign Office led to the departure from Gaza of three British aid workers who were at risk from an outbreak of fighting.

As the fighting continues, we estimate that around 800,000 Palestinian civilians have fled from where they were seeking shelter in Rafah to other parts of the southern strip. The extent of this displacement is why we have been clear that we would not support a major Israeli military operation in Rafah, unless there was a very clear plan for how to protect people and save lives. We have not seen that plan. We and 13 of our partners, including France, Germany, Italy and Australia, set out our concerns in a detailed letter to the Israeli Government.

After more than seven months of fighting, it is becoming difficult to imagine the realisation of a lasting peace, but Britain continues to try to build momentum towards that goal. That will require not only the release of all the hostages and an end to the current fighting, but the removal of Hamas's capacity to launch attacks against Israel; Hamas no longer being in charge in Gaza; the formation of a new Palestinian Government for the west bank and Gaza; and a political horizon for the Palestinians, providing a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution. That is what we continue to strive towards: peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.11 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The conflict has now gone on for 226 days. That is 226 days of destruction; 226 days of Israeli hostages still in chains; 226 days that have led to 35,000 Palestinian deaths; and 226 days where the risk of further regional escalation worsens every day. We will keep repeating our call until it happens: there must be an immediate ceasefire, as this House supported through Labour's motion and as demanded by the United Nations Security Council resolution. Diplomatic pressure must now go into overdrive to bring the fighting to an end.

Labour has been opposed to an Israeli offensive in Rafah for months. The UK Government should now work with the United States to try to prevent a full-scale Rafah offensive, by being clear that they will assess UK exports and, if it goes ahead, join our American allies in suspending weapons or components that could be used in that offensive.

When we last met on this subject, I asked the Deputy Foreign Secretary to confirm whether he or the Foreign Secretary had received from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials any assessment or policy advice—not legal advice—that the threshold had already been met. He dodged the question, and did not answer. I repeat that question to him today. The whole House will be interested in his response.

Last November in this House, the Deputy Foreign Secretary appeared to row back on Boris Johnson's shameful abandonment of the International Criminal Court when he said:

"It is not for Ministers to seek to state where the ICC has jurisdiction".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2023; Vol. 740, c. 513.]

The Prime Minister followed up in December when he said:

"we are a strong and long-standing supporter of the International Criminal Court."—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 336.]

But in today's statement, the Government have backtracked, U-turning on one of the Britain's most fundamental principles: respect for the rule of law. Labour has been clear throughout this conflict that international law must be upheld, the independence of international courts must be respected, and all sides must be accountable for their actions. I ask the Minister very simply: does he agree?

Arrest warrants are not a conviction or a determination of guilt, but they do reflect the evidence, and the judgment of the prosecutor about the grounds for individual criminal responsibility. Labour's position is that the ICC chief prosecutor's decision to apply for arrest warrants is an independent matter for the Court and the prosecutor. Does the Minister agree? Labour believes that the ICC's independence must be upheld and respected, and that it is right that the conduct of all parties is addressed by the Court. Does the Minister agree? Labour believes that the focus of politicians should be on achieving an immediate ceasefire, in order to end the war in Gaza, free the hostages, alleviate the humanitarian crisis and create a pathway towards a lasting political solution. Does the Minister agree? Labour believes the UK and all parties to the Rome statute have a legal obligation to comply with orders and warrants issued by the ICC. Democracies that believe in the rule of law must submit themselves to it. Does the Minister agree?

Labour supports the ICC as a cornerstone of the international legal system. That support applies regardless of the Court's focus, whether it is in Ukraine, Sudan, Syria or Gaza. Does the Minister agree? This gets to the heart of a simple question. Does the Conservative party—the party of Churchill, who was one of the founders of our international legal framework—believe in the international rule of law or not?

Mr Mitchell: I start by assuring the shadow Foreign Secretary that the Government's answer to his final question is, as he would expect, yes. It is worth stating that if one looks carefully at his high-flown oratory this afternoon, we do not see very much distinction between the positions of His Majesty's Opposition and the Government, as I will set out.

The right hon. Gentleman starts off by saying that this is day 226 of the incarceration of the hostages, of the destruction that has taken place, and of the risks of escalation. I completely agree with what he says. He says that the diplomatic pressure must rise. I can tell him that the diplomatic pressure is intense on all counts and in all places. He says that we must work closely with the United States of America. Let me assure him that we are working intensively and closely with the United States.

The right hon. Gentleman asks me about the advice we receive, and suggests that I dodged the question on the earlier occasion. I certainly had no intention of doing so. I can tell him that we receive all sorts of advice from all sorts of places, but we do not—as is the custom and practice, as he knows well—disclose our legal advice. We are always careful to follow it meticulously; that is my answer to his question.

The right hon. Gentleman asks: is this a matter on which the International Criminal Court should act independently? My answer is that of course it is, but we do not necessarily have to stay silent on what the court is doing, and we certainly are not doing so. On his question about the letter from a former Prime Minister, as we have said from the outset, we do not think that the ICC has jurisdiction in this case. The UK has not recognised Palestine as a state, and Israel is not a state party to the Rome statute.

As I say, if we split away some of what the right hon. Gentleman said today from the oratory that he customarily displays in this place, we see that the positions of the Opposition Front Bench and the Government remain very closely aligned.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): My condolences go to all the families who, over the last few days, have received the most devastating news—news that their loved ones have been murdered—and also to the Popplewell family, who have received heinous treatment from Hamas, including the publication of that outrageous video. Last week the Select Committee pushed the Minister for the middle east to do more to secure proof of life of those who are being held hostage, and that remains our call.

I welcome the effort on the maritime port—it is good that that is now in place—but it will be unable to function come September owing to the changes in the tide, so this is a short-term solution. Since 6 May, when the

[Alicia Kearns]

Rafah offensive started, only 40 trucks have gone through the Kerem Shalom crossing. In Rafah no fuel has gone in, no medical evacuations have taken place and aid agencies have started to suspend the sending in of their own people, which is extremely concerning. When will the Rafah crossing reopen, and will the Erez West crossing finally accept aid, not just through Jordan but also through Ramallah, because otherwise the amount of aid that is needed will simply not get in?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her questions. She has made the point about proof of life before, and as she knows, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad has been pursuing that issue—in direct response, I think, to her Committee. She made the very good point that the maritime option will continue only as long as the sea conditions are satisfactory, and that emphasises the importance of getting aid in by road; the ability to do that is one of Britain's specific demands of the Israeli Government. She also pointed out that Rafah has effectively been closed for the last few weeks, and drew attention to the great difficulties that that causes. We hope very much that there will soon be a deal between Egypt and Israel to put that right.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We are on a very dangerous road if we believe that the rule of law is something from which a Government can pick and choose. Unlike the Government, we very much welcome the decision of the International Criminal Court to issue warrants for the arrest of the Hamas leaders Sinwar, al-Masri and Haniyeh for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed on, and subsequent to, 7 October. We have always unreservedly condemned the appalling Hamas attacks, the murders and the hostage-taking, and we repeat our call for the immediate release of the hostages.

Given the ferociously disproportionate Israeli response, which has seen 35,000 dead, 100,000 injured, tens of thousands of children orphaned, civilian infrastructure in ruins and the cutting off of food, water, electricity and medical supplies, we also welcome the ICC's filing of applications for warrants for the arrest of both the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The ICC says that it has evidence, including interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses, that shows that Israel has intentionally and systematically deprived the civilian population of Gaza of what they need to survive. It has referred specifically to Israel using starvation as a weapon of war, and intentionally directing attacks against a civilian population. All these are acts that constitute a crime against humanity. The ICC has also confirmed everything that we have said about the crimes of 7 October, and Israel's use of collective punishment and ethnic cleansing in response to those crimes.

For eight months, this Government have told us that they cannot make an assessment of breaches of international humanitarian law, but they have today—because it suits them—made an immediate assessment of the decision of the International Criminal Court, whose panel of

experts consists predominantly of UK lawyers, simply because they do not agree with it. It is shameful and unforgivable that for eight months this Government have chosen to deny the evidence of their own eyes, and have given political cover and munitions to Israel. We have to assume, sadly, that if today does not put an end to the UK licensing of arms exports to Israel, absolutely nothing will.

Mr Mitchell: The position in respect of the ICC is simply not as the hon. Gentleman set out. The ICC has not done what he suggested; it has done nothing of the sort. He suggested that it had already found the answer to these allegations, but the truth is that the pre-trial chamber needs to consider the evidence, and to then reach a judgment. Let us not jump through all these hoops at once when they are simply not there to be jumped through.

Like the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Gentleman asks whether we are playing fast and loose with the rule of law. We are certainly not, and I hope that he will attend the main debate today, when he will see exactly what the Government think about the rule of law in all cases. Just because someone supports the role of the ICC, it does not mean that they have to be devoid of a view on what it is saying, and the Government are giving their view. As I said, we do not believe that seeking warrants will get the hostages out, get aid in or deliver a sustainable ceasefire, which remains the UK's priority.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I ask this question in my personal capacity, not as Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. In general, I am a strong supporter of the work of the ICC. The terrorist attack was undoubtedly designed to provoke an overreaction by the Israelis and to polarise societies, and it has succeeded in both those aims. May I ask the Minister to encourage the House to read the ICC's statement in full? Helpfully, it is available online. May I urge people with a partisan view on either side of this atrocious issue to seriously take on board what the ICC is saying about the activities of the side they support, as well as those of the side they oppose?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes a good point about ensuring that the debate is informed by facts, not rhetoric.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I am a little bit confused. The Government have previously said that they will not endorse any military operation in Rafah because it would be against international law. The Minister has said today that that would be the case unless there was a very clear plan on how to protect people and save lives. What has changed?

Mr Mitchell: Nothing has changed at all. We have repeatedly made it clear that we cannot support an attack on Rafah without seeing a detailed plan. Clearly, that means a constructive plan that abides by IHL on all counts.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a grotesque overreach by the ICC? Courts, too, must act within the rule of law, and the jurisdiction of a court is not for itself to judge. The statute of Rome, which set up the

International Criminal Court, clearly delineated the powers of the Court. The US and the UK have both previously said that the ICC does not have jurisdiction. Under its founding charter, it can only act against a sovereign state that is a signatory. The US, Israel and dozens of other countries are not signatories, and Gaza is not a sovereign state. Putting aside any purported evidence for a moment, the Court does not have jurisdiction, and like any other court, such as a traffic court or a magistrates court, it has to act within its powers—the powers set up for it by the international community. Is it not true that the ICC is acting outwith its powers and, sadly, setting itself up as a political court?

Mr Mitchell: I have made clear our position on the ICC. On what my right hon. and learned Friend says, many people will agree with what Benny Gantz said this morning:

“Placing the leaders of a country that went into battle to protect its civilians in the same line with bloodthirsty terrorists is moral blindness”.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Many of us, from all parts of this House, have supported the right of Israel to exist and, consequently, its right to defend itself over many years, and we have also condemned as appalling the atrocities that were carried out by Hamas on 7 October, but as the Minister said in his statement, after seven months of fighting, it is becoming difficult to imagine the realisation of a lasting peace; I agree with him on that. Does he not agree that until Israel realises that it has to listen to its friends, in this House and around the world, and take responsibility for its own actions, our support for it will decline rapidly?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman accepts that Israel has the right to self-defence, but says that it must exercise it within international humanitarian law. He makes the important point that we have to lift people’s eyes to what a future settlement based on a two-state solution will look like when this appalling catastrophe is over. A great deal of work is going on behind the scenes with regional partners, with great powers and through the United Nations to ensure that we can lift people’s eyes and that there is a deal to be done that will, at long last, draw the poison from this terrible situation.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Facts are important, and the facts have not changed since 7 October. It is Hamas who embed themselves in civilian areas, use civilian institutions and put their own people at risk in this conflict. It is Hamas who have committed rapes as a weapon of war. It is Hamas who are still holding innocent civilians hostage. And it is Hamas who went into Israeli communities on 7 October and butchered 1,200 people, including slicing the breasts off women and the limbs off children. On the other side, we have the democratic, liberal state of Israel with an independent judicial process and a Supreme Court that is respected internationally and that the ICC is supposed to respect. Yet there are people in here who, from day one, have done very little to call out some of the other behaviour and everything to hold Israel to a standard they do not hold others to. That is why the Czech Prime Minister and the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please can everybody focus on a question? I am not quite sure that I heard a question there—*[Interruption.]* I think the Minister has heard enough to respond.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend speaks with great passion and feeling on this subject, and I think he might be one of those who agree with what Benny Gantz said this morning. I have read into the record exactly what he said, and I think there will be large numbers of people, both in this place and outside, who will think that what Benny Gantz said made a lot of sense.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Cyprus maritime corridor is welcome, but it risks acting as a fig leaf for the fact that there is not enough aid getting into Gaza. The Colonna report found that the Israeli authorities had yet to provide proof of their claims that UN staff in Gaza were involved in terrorist organisations. The UN Relief and Works Agency is the only serious organisation capable of supplying aid to those Palestinians in Gaza who are innocent. Why will the British Government not follow the lead of our Australian, Canadian and European allies and reinstate funding to UNRWA?

Mr Mitchell: As far as maritime access is concerned, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the best solution has always, from the beginning of this, been access by road. That is by far the easiest, quickest and least expensive way of getting aid to desperate people. He is entirely correct about that.

In respect of the Colonna report, we are still waiting for the Office of Internal Oversight Services report from the United Nations, and I am advised that there has been good co-operation between the United Nations and the Israeli authorities on that. On UNRWA, as I have said, we are waiting for that report. The House should expect that we will be restoring funding to ensure that humanitarian support is available through that mechanism, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the appalling events that were revealed in connection with UNRWA staff, and we must complete the process that I set out.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Israeli war Cabinet looks divided. The chief of staff is pressing for a “day after” strategy, the Defence Minister has outlined his concerns, and the former Defence Minister and chief of staff, Benny Gantz, has asked to see the Government’s post-war plan for the Gaza strip and wants it to include six strategic goals, all of which look very similar to our own goals, as my right hon. Friend has outlined. Perhaps he would care to comment. The former Defence Minister has threatened to resign if the plan is not announced by 8 June. Will he have to resign, or is there a chance that there will be a plan on which both he and we can agree?

Mr Mitchell: I very much hope that my hon. Friend is correct in saying—and, indeed, hoping—that there will be a plan. His perceptive question shows that there are many voices in Israel, and the fact that he quotes two such senior figures—one seeking to know the “day after” strategy, and the other wanting to see a post-war plan—underlines the response I gave a moment ago to the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Sir George Howarth). We have to lift people’s eyes to the fact that this dreadful conflict will come to an end, and we will then need to have a plan to ensure that the future is very different from the past. I remind the House that the tremendous progress made in the Oslo accords took place on the back of the intifada. Out of great darkness, we must ensure that a proper plan comes forth.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Can the Minister explain how his Government can possibly justify continuing to support a military campaign that has involved the denial of electricity and basic services to civilians; the starving of civilians and the blocking of aid; the bombing of civilian infrastructure; the forced displacement of millions; the killing of journalists and aid workers; and the killing of civilians, including large numbers of children, on an unprecedented scale?

Mr Mitchell: We do not support that. What we support is Israel's right of self-defence, but it must be carried out within international humanitarian law.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): There is a danger that the scope and timing of the ICC's arrest warrants might somehow imply moral equivalence, but it is quite clear that the fighting should stop. What does the Minister think will be the impact of those warrants?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a most interesting point. This smacks of an unworthy, indeed ludicrous, sense of moral equivalence between a murderous, proscribed terrorist organisation and the democratically elected Government of Israel, who are seeking to protect their citizens and recover their 124 remaining hostages.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): When we talk about the role of the ICC, it is not about whether it is moral but about making sure that a democratic state falls within the rule of international law. An estimated 35,000 people have been killed and 132 hostages are still being held. The Arab League has now called for an immediate ceasefire and the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in the west bank until a two-state solution is negotiated. Will the Deputy Foreign Secretary answer the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), which he failed to answer, on the offensive in Rafah? Will we join our American allies in responding to that by stopping the sale of all war components?

Mr Mitchell: That is not what the American Government have done. They suspended one shipment, but they have not stopped any other supply. To answer the first part of the hon. Lady's question, the Government continue to seek a pause in the fighting, which could lead to a sustained ceasefire, as well as to getting the hostages out and aid in.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The Deputy Foreign Secretary speaks about a ceasefire, getting the hostages out, getting the aid in and resuming the talks, but will he address the bigger picture? Behind Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas sits Iran, which is arming and training these extremist non-state actors. As much as we debate the possible long-term governance and security solutions for Gaza, they are unlikely to stand the test of time until the challenge of Iran's disruptive proxy influence across the middle east is challenged.

Iran's destabilising foreign policy is determined by the President, the Supreme Leader and the Foreign Minister, two of whom were killed in a helicopter crash at the weekend. It is clearly for Iran to determine who replaces them, but will we advance our own robust policy in standing up to Iran's proxy influence? Otherwise, we will never secure lasting peace in Gaza.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend the former Chairman of the Defence Committee is right about the malign influence of Iran through its proxies—Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis—on the situation in the middle east. We hope that Iran will cease to disrupt in the way that it does through its proxies. It may well be that the events of the weekend offer an opportunity for a reset.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As I understand the Government's position on the International Criminal Court, it is because Israel was not a signatory to the original treaty and because Palestine is not a sovereign state that the Government do not believe that the ICC has jurisdiction. That leads us to a place where anyone can opt out of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court at any time. That is a terrible place for the Government and for us as a country to be. If the Minister does not agree with that, will he at least agree that the letter from the 12 United States Senators to the ICC, where they said,

“Target Israel and we will target you”

and that they would ensure that

“all American support for the ICC”

is withdrawn, is not a place that this Government will ever be in?

Mr Mitchell: Of course, the Americans are not a member of the Court, whereas the United Kingdom is. The point the hon. Gentleman makes is an important one because, in this debate about these terrible events and the appalling consequences resulting from them, it is important that everyone chooses their language with care.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Deputy Foreign Secretary rightly draws attention to the false moral equivalence inherent in the ICC's statement between the actions of sovereign, democratic Israel and the most brutal activities of a terrorist organisation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such false moral equivalence is always drawn by the enemies of Israel as a way to delegitimise the Jewish state? Does he share my concern with this move by the ICC not just because of the succour it gives terrorist groups elsewhere around the world, but because of the risks within it for ourselves and our troops as they go about defending our interests around the world?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend expresses himself, as always, with great lucidity. It is important that that message is not sent. That is why I repeated what Benny Gantz said and why I said, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who is no longer in his place, that I think the sense of moral equivalence is repugnant.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On 5 April, the Foreign Secretary called for an independent inquiry into Israel's killing of seven aid workers, including three Britons. I have repeatedly raised Israel's, and particularly the Israel Defence Forces', lack of accountability and examples of misconduct with the Minister. It is clear that here, as in other areas, the Government are backtracking on the limited assurances given, despite investigations by the BBC, among others, showing that IDF misconduct continues, despite pledges and commitments to the contrary from Israel. Does the Minister believe that Israel should investigate itself, regardless of the horrors committed—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady will know, Israel has the rule of law and the ability to investigate those matters, but she is entirely correct to say that the Foreign Secretary made it clear that we expect a detailed independent investigation. Israel has taken a number of steps. She will have seen the acts that were taken against those who were responsible for the decisions made in those attacks, and she will be pleased to know that we are considering, with our allies, the best way to inject further independence into that investigation.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): My constituents in Bolton are livid today, because they have seen through the International Criminal Court that there is evidence that

“acts were committed...to use starvation as a method of war”, along with violence; evidence of the collective punishment of the civilian population of Gaza; and evidence that “Israel has intentionally and systematically deprived the civilian population in all parts of Gaza of objects indispensable to human survival.”

Never mind being on the right side of history; will we ensure that we are on the right side of the present?

Mr Mitchell: The fact that the prosecutor has applied for arrest warrants to be issued does not directly impact UK licensing decisions, for example, but we will continue to monitor developments as part of our assessment process. Once again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for acting as such a brilliant conduit between his constituents and the Government, and for his work on the issue.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): In the face of disgraceful attacks on aid trucks at the Gaza border, the Israeli Security Minister is reported to have said that he believes it is not protesters who should be stopping the trucks, because

“it’s the cabinet that should be stopping the trucks.”

That view cannot be allowed to stand. Will the British Government sanction the violent protesters who are destroying aid, and their supporters within the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady will know, we have not been shy about sanctioning some of the settlers who have been involved. We do not talk about future sanctions across the Floor of the House, but she may rest assured that we are very alert to the opportunity for doing more on that. She repeated what had been said by one senior Israeli official about the position in Rafah; she will know that is not the position of most of the senior Israeli members of the Cabinet and it is certainly not the position of the British Government.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): No organisation, international or otherwise, is beyond reproach and always gets things right, so of course we can question what the ICC has come out with. What I find disturbing is the ICC report talking about an almost exact equivalence between the leaders of Hamas, who carried out the most disgusting, brutal and deliberately targeted attacks on 7 October, and the leaders of—not a few rogue elements within—Israel. Does the Minister agree that it is important to have solid, accurate data? We keep hearing data from the Hamas-led health authority, but over the weekend we have had very different data. Does the Minister agree that it would help the debate if we had accurate data as soon as possible?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. He will have seen, as I have, comments over the weekend about the accuracy of figures, particularly the very great likelihood that figures about women and children who have died during the conflict are not accurate at all. His point about moral equivalence, which has been made during the statement, is one that will be widely shared, both inside and outside the House.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The International Criminal Court—the highest criminal court in the world—has applied for arrest warrants for the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and his Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, for the war crimes of murder and the deliberate targeting of civilians, crimes against humanity, and deliberate starvation as a weapon of war against the people of Gaza. It is unequivocal. Do the UK Government accept that they must now do three key things: first, they must reconsider their unequivocal support of Israel by immediately suspending arms sales; secondly, they must call for an immediate ceasefire; and finally, they must restore funding to UNRWA so that it can deliver emergency humanitarian aid?

Mr Mitchell: On his first point, I simply do not think now is the time to make those decisions about what we have heard from the ICC. It would be premature. A pre-trial chamber now needs to consider the evidence and then reach a judgment, so I cannot go with the hon. Gentleman on that point. On UNRWA, I have made very clear where we stand. I hope the aid that was delivered by UNRWA with British support will be delivered in the future. I hope that UNRWA will be able to accept all the reforms that we are requesting that would enable us to do that. As I have said, we are not in the position that we are withholding funding at the moment because we have fully funded our commitment to UNRWA up to the start of this month. The hon. Gentleman says that we should cease our support for Israel. We have been very clear that Israel must abide within international humanitarian law, but equally that we understand that Israel has the right of self-defence.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In March, the Foreign Affairs Committee visited a number of aid distribution centres in the Egypt-Gaza border area, and we heard accounts of how some of the aid going into Gaza would be stopped because of the potential dual use of equipment for not just humanitarian reasons but potentially, by Hamas, military and terror reasons. Will the Minister update the House on the percentage of those trucks that are now getting through to deliver that aid?

Mr Mitchell: The number of trucks getting through is wholly inadequate. That is one reason why we have made 12 air drops—11 by the Royal Air Force—and it is why we now have the maritime corridor. Restrictions on what can be transported by truck into Gaza were a significant problem to begin with. That particular aspect has eased as both sides have understood each other’s position on what is being taken into Gaza, but I am afraid that the amount of humanitarian support getting in by truck is still woefully inadequate.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): New polling by YouGov shows that 73% of the British public support an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, and 55% support the UK suspending arms sales to Israel for the duration of

[Afzal Khan]

the conflict. Does the Minister recognise that his Government are elected to represent the people of Britain, and will they finally represent the majority of the people in Britain by calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and suspending all arms sales to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: On arms sales, the hon. Gentleman knows that it is not for the whim of a politician at the Dispatch Box to decide for or against; there is a proper process to be followed based on legal advice, and he would not expect Ministers to deviate from that entirely proper way of judging these things. We all want a ceasefire, but we want a sustainable ceasefire. That is why the Government have consistently pressed, as endorsed by a United Nations resolution, for a pause in the fighting to get the hostages out and allow aid in. That would be the way to lead to a sustainable ceasefire, as a precursor to a longer-term deal. The British Government will continue, I hope with his support and that of others on the Labour Benches, to prosecute that endeavour.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): How can the Minister argue that his Government respect international law when he denies the jurisdiction of the ICC in this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: I have not denied the position of the ICC; what I said is that we are at an early stage in the process, and cannot reach those judgments at this point.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): We must not forget that civilians and their children are the innocent victims of this war. The UN says that 800,000 people have been forced to flee Rafah since 6 May. In Gaza, there is clearly nowhere left that is safe, so will the Minister explain what he thinks the consequences should be for any all-out attack on Rafah and any forced displacement of civilians?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is correct that about 800,000 people have now left Rafah. Through the pier, we managed over the weekend to get in 8,000 shelter kits, enough for around 40,000 people, but we are part of a growing consensus that is trying to provide support. The Israeli defence force warned 400,000 people to leave. Almost double that have left, and we are doing everything that we can to support them in their new locations. As I have repeatedly made clear, we will not and cannot support an attack on Rafah without seeing a detailed plan, and we have not seen a detailed plan.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Could the Deputy Foreign Secretary tell us in specific terms what military flights are taking off from Akrotiri to Israel? Are the Israel Defence Forces using Akrotiri? Are the US forces using Akrotiri? What is the nature of the overflying of Gaza by the RAF? Is surveillance information being sent to the IDF in response to that? In short, what is the military relationship between Britain and Israel at the present time?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is an extremely senior Member of this House, a former leader of the Labour party, and he well knows that we do not comment on security information across the Floor of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): May I ask Members again to focus on the question please? Please also remember that you have to have been here for the entirety of the statement to ask a question—I am taking your word on that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Other countries have now suspended arms sales. Other countries have restored the funding going forward to UNRWA. Why are we now leading from behind rather than leading from the front on this? Should we not now do the right thing, suspend arms sales and refund UNRWA?

Mr Mitchell: I think I am right in saying that no country has suspended existing arms sales arrangements and agreements, but the fact remains that we have our own regime in that respect. We act in accordance with legal advice and we will continue to do so. In respect of UNRWA, I have set out for the House the processes that we are going through and the hon. Gentleman, like me, will hope that those processes are successful.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Deputy Foreign Secretary enjoyed referencing Mr Gantz a number of times. Mr Gantz has set out his conditions for the end of the war and a “day after”. In response, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s spokesperson said:

“The conditions set by Benny Gantz are empty words whose meaning is clear: an end to the war and...establishing a Palestinian state.”

It is very clear now that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants a forever war and is opposed to a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. What are the UK Government saying to Prime Minister Netanyahu to ensure that he understands where we and the international community stand on this issue—as do many Israelis, including members of his own Government? What action is being taken against Ben Gvir, Smotrich and the Prime Minister of Israel, who are clearly trying to prolong the war in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: What the hon. Gentleman says underlines the fact that Israel is a pluralist democratic society where there are different views. He asked me what the British Government are saying to Prime Minister Netanyahu, and I can assure him that both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have frank, open and detailed exchanges on those matters.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): It is the position of the Liberal Democrats that the UK Government should give their backing to the ICC. If the Conservative Government do not believe the ICC has jurisdiction, which international institution or legal mechanism do they intend to look to in order to ensure that any breaches of the law of war on the frontline can be prosecuted?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady knows, we make our own judgments on international humanitarian law. We are quick to come to the House if anything changes, but nothing has changed since the Foreign Secretary made his comments in Washington, I think, in early April. On the subject of the ICC’s announcement today, I hope the House will accept that it is premature to respond further before the pre-trial chamber has considered the application for warrants.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which has today applied for arrest warrants against Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Hamas leader and others, must be respected. Contrary to what the Deputy Foreign Secretary said earlier, I must correct the record for him: he said that

“we do not think that the ICC has jurisdiction in this case.”

The Israeli Government have ignored, for the past three months, the motion passed by the UK Parliament, as proposed by the Labour Party, for an immediate ceasefire and are instead planning a full-scale offensive on Rafah, which would be a humanitarian catastrophe. Can the Deputy Foreign Secretary confirm whether, if that planned assault does go ahead, the UK Government will suspend arms or component sales to Israel?

Mr Mitchell: It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to seek to correct the record, but his repetition of what I said was absolutely correct, and we have said it since the outset, so he should not be particularly surprised by it. I cannot foretell what the consequences will be in respect of Israeli actions, but I can tell him the position of the British Government on an operation in Rafah: that does not respect international humanitarian law, which is why we have said that we cannot support it unless we see a detailed plan.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Labour believes that international law must be observed. As such, we want the sale of arms and components to be suspended, and we want the perpetrators of violence against innocent civilians, whether Israeli or Palestinian, to be held to account. I am still unclear on what the Deputy Foreign Secretary and his Government believe. Do they believe in upholding international law?

Mr Mitchell: It should come as no surprise to the House that of course the Government not only believe in international humanitarian law but seek to uphold it. I have set out clearly in the House on a number of occasions exactly how we carry out our duties in that respect, and I hope that that will give the hon. Lady confidence. In respect of the International Criminal Court, she is jumping too far ahead. We have set out the limited decision that has been made and announced today, and we should not jump ahead of it.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Deputy Foreign Secretary said earlier that

“The House should expect that we will be restoring funding” to UNRWA. It sounds like the Government have made up their mind. If that decision has been made, and given the absolutely horrendous humanitarian situation in Gaza, why do we not just get on with it? If there is any chance that funding will not be restored, what are the Government doing as an alternative plan to get humanitarian aid in?

Mr Mitchell: The Government operate through other agencies as well as UNRWA. We have been very close indeed to the World Food Programme, through which an enormous amount of humanitarian aid is distributed. On UNRWA, we will go through the stages that I have set out clearly to the House. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured that, from my discussions with the United Nations Secretary-General in New York just over a week ago, UNRWA is funded for the moment, and we

hope that our own funding, subject to the results of the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services inquiry and the implementation of the Colonna report, will be restored.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On the jurisdiction of the ICC, the Government’s statement is out of step not just with the prosecutor but with the impartial independent panel of experts on international law from whom he sought advice. That panel consisted largely of lawyers from this jurisdiction—by which I mean England and Wales, and not my own in Scotland. Here is what they said, and I want the Deputy Foreign Secretary to tell me what part of it is wrong:

“The Panel agrees with the Prosecutor’s assessment that the ICC has jurisdiction in relation to crimes committed on the territory of Palestine, including Gaza...under article 12(2)(a) of the ICC Statute. It also agrees that the Court has jurisdiction over crimes committed by Palestinian nationals inside or outside Palestinian territory under article 12(2)(b) of the Statute. The ICC therefore has jurisdiction over Israeli, Palestinian or other nationals who committed crimes in Gaza or the West Bank. It also has jurisdiction over Palestinian nationals who committed crimes on the territory of Israel, even though Israel is not an ICC State Party.

The basis for the Court’s jurisdiction is that Palestine, including Gaza, is a State for the purpose of the ICC Statute. The ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber has already ruled that the Court’s jurisdiction extends to Palestine, as a State Party to the ICC Statute, on this basis.”

That is the opinion of an illustrious list of mainly English lawyers, with the exception of my dear colleague Baroness Helena Kennedy, who is of course a Scot, although she is at the English Bar. Can the Deputy Foreign Secretary, who I see has one of the Law Officers sitting beside him, tell me which part of that opinion is wrong?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. and learned Lady is an immensely distinguished advocate and lawyer. She will have read the letter signed by no fewer than 600 lawyers that broadly agrees with what she has said, but she may also have read the letter from—I think—1,000 lawyers that disagrees with it. That shows that there are many different interpretations of this matter; hers is one, and as I have set out, the view of the Government is another.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Does the Deputy Foreign Secretary not recognise the damage that is being done to the UK’s standing around the world, and to the rules-based international order and international humanitarian law, by his Government’s refusal to accept first the ICJ ruling and now that of the ICC? He has said that he does not believe that the ICC prosecutor seeking warrants will help, but at what point will he accept that the situation could not get any worse?

Mr Mitchell: The point we have always made is that we do not think it is helpful for the Court to intervene in that way at this point, because the main purpose is to get the hostages out and food and humanitarian resources in. That is the position that the British Government take; of course we respect the Court, but that does not mean that we cannot give our view on what the Court does.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I rather agreed with the comments made about the ICC by the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), but I

[*Sir Chris Bryant*]

would gently point out that I do not think there is a single Member of this House who supports the actions of Hamas on 7 October—in fact, every single one of us has rightly condemned them. For that matter, even very long-standing friends of Israel have offered criticisms of the actions of the Israeli Government over these past few months, as have many Israelis.

Can the Deputy Foreign Secretary clarify something for me? He has suggested that 800,000 Palestinians have had to move out of Rafah in the past week or so. He has also suggested that not enough humanitarian aid is getting through, which is because the Israeli Government are refusing to let it through. He has also said that the Israeli Government have a right to defend themselves—we all agree with that—but within the bounds of international humanitarian law. Who is to judge that international humanitarian law if it is not an international court? Surely it cannot just be a set of politicians sitting in the Foreign Office making it up in their own minds.

Mr Mitchell: To respond to the hon. Gentleman's last point, that is absolutely not the case: Ministers take legal advice, including on international humanitarian law, and act within it. We have been very clear about where we stand; the Foreign Secretary made the point in April, I think, in Washington. If anything changes, of course we will tell the House, but we cannot act on the whim of politicians or Ministers in the House: we act in accordance with the law, and that is what we will continue to do.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Minister said earlier that the Government condemn all attacks on aid workers, and that they support the UN's call for an independent investigation into the killing of aid workers in Gaza. Is the Minister of the same view when it comes to the more than 100 journalists who have been killed during the conflict?

Mr Mitchell: Of course. We are appalled by the scale of the death and destruction that has taken place, and what we say about protecting journalists—which this House has always championed, never more so than when my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) was Foreign Secretary—applies equally well.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I have listened very carefully to the Deputy Foreign Secretary, and I have to say that I find his arguments wanting. It matters that the ICC thinks that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the actions of senior Hamas officials amount to war crimes; it matters that the ICC thinks that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the operations authorised by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Defence Minister also amount to war crimes. Given that the ICC prosecutor believes he has acted within the Rome statute and that the UK is a state party to the ICC, will the United Kingdom uphold any application in this territory if requested by the office of the prosecutor?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is premature in seeking to ask the Government to exercise any such judgment. As I said earlier in this statement, now is not

the time to make these decisions. We need to wait for the pre-trial chamber to consider the evidence and then reach a judgment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Any loss of innocent life is truly horrific and is to be avoided if at all possible. The latest UN reports indicate that Hamas—who are murdering terrorists, as we all know—have inflated the statistics for deaths in their areas; they have been proven to be massively overstated. What steps can be taken to ensure that we are all working with independently verified information, not propaganda, given the fact that Israel has taken greater steps than any other democracy in history to give warnings and circumvent the loss of life as far as possible in this war?

Mr Mitchell: We do think that Israel must do more on deconfliction, but the hon. Gentleman is right that the use of Israeli lawyers in targeting and in the planning of military activity—not dissimilar from what we do in the United Kingdom—is very important. I am grateful to him for the balance that he has expressed, as he always does.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): This country used not only to respect but to champion international law. The Minister's dismissal of ICC procedures today confirms how far the Government have fallen from their adherence to the rule of law. Why are the Government undermining the Court and its British chief prosecutor as he attempts to call those to account for war crimes, including extermination, murder, hostage taking, starvation, targeting civilians and persecution as a crime against humanity?

Mr Mitchell: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman putting it that way. He is an extremely distinguished lawyer, and I hope he will recognise that the point I am making is that the House is rushing to conclusions that are not merited at this stage in the process.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whatever opinion the Minister has on the subject of jurisdiction, the arbiters on that as a point of law will be the judges of the ICC. In the event that any or all of the warrants being sought by the chief prosecutor, as announced today, are granted, can the Minister confirm that the UK Government will render any assistance necessary for their execution? Is that not what a Government who respect the rule of law would do?

Mr Mitchell: Of course. What I can confirm is that the British Government will always act in accordance with the law.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): There is now a perception that the level of evidence the United Kingdom Government require to make a determination on whether war crimes have taken place and to act on them seems to vary with their attitude towards the country alleged to have committed those war crimes. Does the Deputy Foreign Secretary not understand the irreparable damage being done to the reputation of the United Kingdom internationally as a defender of international humanitarian law by this inconsistency?

Mr Mitchell: I simply do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of what the British Government are doing. The British Government are absolutely consistent: we always act in accordance with the rule of law and will always continue to do so.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): For the avoidance of any doubt among Government Members, I have opposed Hamas since 2007. I opposed their atrocities on 7 October and continue to do that, so there are no sides as far as I am concerned; I think the actions taken by the IDF need to be criticised as well, and it needs to be held to account.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) that the ICC does not have jurisdiction. He said to the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), that the pre-trial chamber has not reached a decision. He said to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) from the SNP that we have to wait and that this is not the right moment. Does he believe that the ICC has jurisdiction on this issue? Will he give a straight answer—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's condemnation, over many years, of Hamas. He has repeated what I have said to other Members of the House this afternoon and, if I have understood correctly, he is noting that I have been entirely consistent in all those responses.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): What steps are the Government taking with our international allies to help create the conditions needed for an immediate ceasefire that can be observed by both sides?

Mr Mitchell: Britain was able, through some skilful and deft diplomacy, to get everyone onside on the United Nations resolution that was recently passed,

which talked about a sustainable ceasefire. The position that Britain has always held is that we need to get that pause to enable us to get the hostages out and humanitarian supplies in, in the hope that that pause would lead to a sustainable ceasefire.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Neither the USA nor China nor Russia are party to the International Criminal Court. Does the Minister therefore recognise that, as permanent members of the Security Council, the UK and France have a special responsibility to support the ICC and uphold international law?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that today I have been careful to be very clear about our support for the ICC, but equally to urge the House not to rush to judgment in a process that has a number of stages.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I apologise to those Members who did not get in today. We will take a note of your names and get you in at another time. We must now move on.

George Galloway (Rochdale) (WPB): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order come after statements—those are the rules of the House.

The Prime Minister has requested to make a short statement on today's publication of the final report of the infected blood inquiry. On this occasion, given the nature of the statement, I have agreed that there will be only a few limited and brief responses today, as there will be a further major statement tomorrow, when all hon. Members will have the opportunity to question the Cabinet Office Minister at length.

Infected Blood Inquiry Report

5.17 pm

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker, Sir Brian Langstaff has today published the final report of the infected blood inquiry. This is a day of shame for the British state. Today's report shows a decades-long moral failure at the heart of our national life. From the national health service to the civil service, to Ministers in successive Governments, at every level the people and institutions in which we place our trust failed in the most harrowing and devastating way. They failed the victims and their families, and they failed this country.

Sir Brian finds a "catalogue" of systemic, collective, and individual failures, each on its own serious, and taken together amounting to "a calamity". The result of this inquiry should shake our nation to its core. This should have been avoided. It was known that these treatments were contaminated. Warnings were ignored, repeatedly. Time and again, people in positions of power and trust had the chance to stop the transmission of those infections. Time and again, they failed to do so.

Sir Brian finds "an attitude of denial" towards the risks of treatment. Worse, to our eternal shame, and in a way that is hard even to comprehend, they allowed victims to become "objects for research". Many, including children at Lord Mayor Treloar College, were part of trials, conducted without their or their parents' knowledge or consent. Those with haemophilia or bleeding disorders were infected with HIV, hepatitis C and hepatitis B through NHS treatment, through blood clotting products such as factor 8, including those who had been misdiagnosed and did not even require treatment. Many were infected through whole blood transfusions. Others were infected through their partners and loved ones, often after diagnoses had been deliberately withheld for months or even years, meaning that these infections should easily have been prevented.

I find it almost impossible to comprehend how it must have felt to be told that you had been infected, through no fault of your own, with HIV, hepatitis B or hepatitis C; or to face the grief of losing a child; or to be a young child and lose your mum or dad. Many of those infected went on to develop horrific conditions, including cirrhosis, liver cancer, pneumonia, TB and AIDS, and to endure debilitating treatments, such as interferon, for these illnesses—illnesses the NHS had given them.

Many were treated disdainfully by healthcare professionals, who made appalling assumptions about the origin of their infections. Worse still, they were made to think that they were imagining it. They were made to feel stupid. They felt abandoned by the NHS that had infected them. Those who acquired HIV endured social rejection, vilification and abuse at a time when society understood so little about the emerging epidemic of AIDS. With illness came the indignity of financial hardship, including for carers, those widowed and other bereaved family members.

Throughout it all, victims and their loved ones have had to fight for justice, fight to be heard, fight to be believed and fight to uncover the full truth. Some had their medical records withheld or even destroyed. The inquiry finds that some Government papers were destroyed in

"a deliberate attempt to make the truth more difficult to reveal."

Sir Brian explicitly asks the question: "Was there a cover-up?" Let me directly quote his answer for the House: "there has been". He continues:

"Not in the sense of a handful of people plotting in an orchestrated conspiracy to mislead, but in a way that was more subtle, more pervasive and more chilling in its implications. To save face and to save expense, there has been a hiding of much of the truth."

More than 3,000 people died without that truth. They died without an apology. They died without knowing how and why this was allowed to happen. And they died without seeing anyone held to account.

Today, I want to speak directly to the victims and their families, some of whom are with us in the Gallery. I want to make a wholehearted and unequivocal apology for this terrible injustice. First, I want to apologise for the failure in blood policy and blood products, and the devastating—and so often fatal—impact that had on so many lives, including the impact of treatments that were known or proved to be contaminated; the failure to respond to the risk of imported concentrates; the failure to prioritise self-sufficiency in blood; the failure to introduce screening services sooner; and the mismanagement of the response to the emergence of AIDS and hepatitis viruses among infected blood victims.

Secondly, I want to apologise for the repeated failure of the state and our medical professionals to recognise the harm caused. That includes the failure of previous payments schemes, the inadequate levels of funding made available, and the failure to recognise hepatitis B victims.

Thirdly, I want to apologise for the institutional refusal to face up to these failings—and worse, the denial and even the attempt to cover them up—the dismissing of reports and campaigners' detailed representations; the loss and destruction of key documents, including ministerial advice and medical records; and the appalling length of time it took to secure the public inquiry that has delivered the full truth today.

There is layer upon layer of hurt, endured across decades. This is an apology from the state to every single person impacted by this scandal. It did not have to be this way. It should never have been this way. On behalf of this and every Government stretching back to the 1970s, I am truly sorry.

Today is a day for the victims and their families to hear the full truth acknowledged by all and, in the full presence of that truth, to remember the many, many lost loved ones. But justice also demands action and accountability, so I make two solemn promises. First, we will pay comprehensive compensation to those infected and those affected by this scandal, accepting the principles recommended by the inquiry, which builds on the work of Sir Robert Francis. Whatever it costs to deliver the scheme, we will pay it. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will set out the details tomorrow.

Secondly, it is not enough to say sorry, pay long-overdue compensation and then attempt to move on. There can be no moving on from a report that is so devastating in its criticisms. Of course, in some areas medical practice has long since evolved, and no one is questioning that every day our NHS provides amazing and lifesaving care to the British people. But Sir Brian and his team have made wide-ranging recommendations. We will study them in detail before returning to the House with a full response. We must fundamentally rebalance the system

so that we finally address the pattern, so familiar from other inquiries such as Hillsborough, where innocent victims have to fight for decades just to be believed.

The whole House will join me in thanking Sir Brian and his team, especially for keeping the infected blood community at the heart of their work. We would not be here today without those who tirelessly fought for justice for so many years. I include journalists and parliamentarians in both Houses, especially the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), but most of all, the victims and their families. Many of them have dedicated their lives to leading charities and campaign groups, pouring their own money into decades of running helplines, archiving, researching and pursuing legal cases, often in the face of appalling prejudice. It is impossible to capture the full pain and injustice that they have faced. Their sorrow has been unimaginable. They have watched loved ones die, cared for them as they suffered excruciating treatments, or provided their palliative care. Many families were broken up by the strain. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been knocked off course; dreams and potential unfulfilled.

But today, their voices have finally been heard. The full truth stands for all to see. We will work together across Government, our health services and civil society to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen in our country again. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

5.27 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): This response can begin in only one place, because this is an injustice that has spanned across Governments on an unprecedented scale, and collectively we failed to protect some of the most vulnerable in our country. So as well as paying tribute to the courage and determination of the victims—the infected and the affected—some of whom are in the Gallery today, I want to acknowledge to every single person who has suffered that, in addition to all the other failings, politics itself failed you. That failure applies to all parties, including my own. There is only one word: sorry.

By that apology, I acknowledge that that suffering was caused by wrongdoing, delay and systemic failure across the board, compounded by institutional defensiveness. As Sir Brian Langstaff makes clear in his report, any apology today must be accompanied by action, so I welcome the Prime Minister's confirmation that compensation will now be paid. He should be under no doubt whatsoever that we will work with him to get that done swiftly, because—make no mistake—the victims in this scandal have suffered unspeakably. Thousands of people have died; they continue to die every week. Lives completely shattered; evidence wilfully destroyed; victims marginalised; people watching their loved ones die; children used as objects of research—on and on it goes. The pain is barely conceivable. As well as an apology, I want to make clear that we commit to shine a harsh light upon the lessons that must be learned to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Passing through the doors of a hospital is a moment of profound vulnerability; you entrust your life into the hands of perfect strangers. We go to hospital for care. That is what many of the people affected find so hard to

accept—the betrayal of that trust by people and institutions that were meant to protect them. People like my constituent Mark Stewart, who was given factor VIII in the 1980s as part of a clinical trial, as were his father and his brother. All three subsequently contracted hepatitis C, but only Mark remains with us today.

Over the decades as Mark and so many like him searched for truth and justice, the British state ignored them. The truth, as Sir Brian says today, was hidden from them for decades. That is why this is one of the gravest injustices this country has seen. Yet, we have to be honest: this scandal is not unique. The institutional defensiveness identified by Sir Brian is a pattern of behaviour that we must address. Mark may never get his brother, his father or his health back, but for all the families affected we must restore the sense that this is a country that can rectify injustice, particularly when carried out by institutes of the state. That is our job today, this week and beyond. Frankly, it is the very least that we owe.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for the collegiate tone in which he has responded to today's report, and for his sincerity. He is right that it is irrefutably clear that an unconscionable injustice has been done—the result of a consistent and systemic failure by the state time and again, decade after decade. That is why I apologise wholeheartedly and unequivocally to every single person impacted by the scandal. The anger and sorrow felt across this House is the right response. It is right that we now act on behalf of the victims, their loved ones and the whole community, who expect us to put right this historic wrong.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The thousands of people at Central Hall thanked Sir Brian Langstaff, and he thanked them. As has been said, we should acknowledge the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and her leadership of the all-party group.

Permanent secretaries and Cabinet Secretaries need to say to everyone throughout their chain, "Are we doing something that is right? Are we doing something that is necessary? Are we doing something that will work?" Does my right hon. Friend agree that if those questions had been asked more effectively, the number of tragedies would have been not five for every MP—and five times again for everyone injured or affected—but greatly reduced, and that we would have learned the truth earlier?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by thanking my hon. Friend for his dedicated work co-chairing the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, alongside the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I assure him that Sir Brian's report is highly detailed and sets out a number of recommendations, and that we will respond to it in full as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP leader.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I wish to begin by stating something I think we all now agree is self-evidently the case, which is that this scandal represents

[Stephen Flynn]

the very worst of Westminster: decades of deflection, decades of denial and, of course, decades of deceit; children used as research; parents watching their children die; children watching their parents die; and tens of thousands of people impacted, many of whom are not here to see this day. For those who imposed this tragedy upon them, no consequences have yet been felt. But today is not about them.

Today is about the victims, and I say to them, on behalf of myself and my colleagues in the Scottish National party on these Benches: I wish to offer you three things. The first is an apology. I am incredibly sorry that this happened to you. The second is to say, quite openly, thank you; thank you for your determination and your desire—for being able to pry open the doors of this place and ensure that your voices were heard by all of us. We would not be here today without your efforts. The third is to say to the victims: I can assure you that we will do everything we can to ensure that the Government implement the recommendations, as laid out today.

We have heard the Prime Minister make a very sincere promise in relation to compensation; and we will work with him and his Government, and indeed any future Government, to ensure that that promise is swiftly kept.

The Prime Minister: I welcome the absolute consensus that today is a moment for the families and the community, and for their voices to be heard loudest. Every single testimony and account in Sir Brian's report today sets out a unique story of hurt, suffering and loss. Individually, these accounts are astounding; taken together, they are truly unimaginable. They must be heard and they must be understood, as the right hon. Gentleman said. I thank him for his remarks. I know that we share a determination to work together to ensure that nothing like this shocking and avoidable calamity can ever happen in our country again.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Sir Brian Langstaff's report today has finally uncovered the truth of this appalling tragedy, which has affected the lives of so many. So many have been fighting, as the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition said, for decades to get to this point. Sir Brian has highlighted a devastating and abject failure of the British state: medical professionals, civil servants and politicians, all of whom felt their job was to protect their own reputation rather than to serve and look after the public they were there to serve. Today, as we rightly remember all the victims of this terrible tragedy, will my right hon. Friend commit himself unashamedly to working to ensure that all those in Government—politicians and civil servants—recognise that their job is to serve the public, not to protect themselves?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. As Prime Minister, she launched Sir Brian's inquiry and in doing so began the process of establishing the full truth we have heard today. There is no doubt, as she recognises, that the inquiry came too late, that the compensation came too late and was woefully insufficient, and that the consequences of that failure are stark. That is why today I apologise on behalf of Governments since the 1970s for that shameful failure.

Sir Brian and his team have made a series of wide-ranging recommendations, and I can assure my right hon. Friend that we will study every single one in detail and work urgently across Government and public organisations—our health services, civil society, all—to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again, and that we end the challenges she encountered, where the institutions responsible for serving the public, including the NHS and the civil service, are more concerned by cost than accountability.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Today is about the tens of thousands of people whose lives have been torn apart by this disaster. Many of them have fought and waited for decades to see this day, and, tragically—as the Prime Minister reminded us—thousands have died waiting. I pay tribute to the survivors, the families, the campaigners and the journalists who have fought so long and so hard for justice. Having listened to their stories and having now seen the evidence laid bare in this report, I want, on behalf of my party, to echo the Prime Minister's apology. We are all truly sorry for the pain that people have suffered over decades, under Governments of all parties, and for the failures of politicians and the state to do the most fundamental job: to keep people safe. We must now ensure that full compensation is paid without any more delay, and that nothing like this can ever happen again.

In his report, Sir Brian highlights the fact that “the truth has been hidden for decades”

through a

“lack of openness, transparency and candour”

which has caused enormous damage. Will the Prime Minister join me in backing the survivors' call for a duty of candour on all public officials?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said. Across this House, we share a determination to work together to ensure that nothing comparable to this shocking and avoidable tragedy can happen ever again in our country. Today is a day for the victims and their families to hear the full truth, unequivocally acknowledged by all, and to remember the many, many lost loved ones. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office will make a full statement tomorrow, but we will study every one of Sir Brian's recommendations in detail and work urgently across all parts of civil society to ensure that innocent victims are never again forced to fight for decades to be believed.

Sir Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and, indeed, the words of the Leader of the Opposition.

This scandal—the biggest in the history of the NHS—along with the scandals of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and those covered by the Ockenden and Cass reviews, are linked by public servants putting their reputations and that of the NHS above patient safety and care. Time and again, Ministers—including me—have stood at that Dispatch Box under successive Governments, promising that lessons will be learnt. I ask my right hon. Friend: why will it be any different this time?

The Prime Minister: Sir Brian's report states categorically that this scandal represents a decades-long moral failure of the state, but in particular he highlights an appalling truth: that our national health service failed. It was

known that blood and blood products given by medical professionals were contaminated. It is correct to acknowledge that medical practice has evolved—every day hundreds of thousands of our NHS staff do provide life-saving care for the British people, and we are incredibly grateful—but the report sets out clear and wide-ranging recommendations that we must study closely, and we will work urgently with our health services to ensure that nothing like this will ever happen again.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and for his apology on behalf of the nation. I also thank Sir Brian for his report. Finally—the truth. It is a vindication of nearly 50 years of campaigning for justice. I pay tribute to all those infected and affected, and also, importantly, to those who have lost their lives in the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Two people, on average, are still dying every week. I wonder whether the Prime Minister understands that, although his Government accepted the moral case for compensation to be paid in December 2022, their failure to act on Sir Brian’s second interim report in April 2023 has added another layer of hurt. I hope very much, following what the Prime Minister has said this afternoon, that by the end of this year compensation payments will start to be made to all those infected and affected.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her statement, and for her care and unwavering dedication to delivering justice. She knows better than anyone in the House the devastation that this scandal has inflicted on the community, and the strength they have shown in their fight for the truth. Sir Brian’s report sets out a decades-long failure and makes it clear that this is a moment of national shame. No one could fail to be moved by the stories within it, by the utterly shameful treatment of victims and their loved ones, by the callousness and cruelty that they suffered, and by their outstanding bravery, resilience and refusal to yield to a lifetime of prejudice and trauma. They have fought for the truth to be out, and they were right. Above all, today is a day for their voices to be heard.

Mr Speaker: That completes this short statement. There will be a full statement tomorrow, when all the details of compensation will be brought to the House and all Members will be able to get in.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you received any explanation for why we are getting only half an hour of the Prime Minister’s time? I know there will be a statement tomorrow by the Paymaster General, which we are all looking forward to, but what could be more important than being here and taking questions from—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will answer the question. I have worked very closely with different parties and, most importantly, this is about the families. It is their day, which is why the statement has been done in this way. I am sure the hon. Gentleman would wish to respect that, rather than question it.

Ukraine

5.47 pm

The Deputy Foreign Secretary (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

All across the House condemned Putin’s invasion in 2022. The whole House has supported Britain’s actions to back Ukraine and galvanise the international community. Today, I hope the whole House echoes the words of the Prime Minister as he pledged £3 billion in military aid for Ukraine every year until 2030, and beyond if necessary. He said that

“Ukraine is not alone, and Ukraine will never be alone.”

The war has entered its third year. In the last few months, Russia has been eking out small territorial gains in the Donbas. Now, the Kremlin is probing Ukrainian defences north of Kharkiv. It is unlikely to take Ukraine’s second largest city anytime soon, but in recent days it has taken a dozen villages, so we are at a difficult moment, which underlines the critical importance of accelerating the delivery of vital military support to Ukraine.

Across the country, Russian missiles are raining down on Ukrainian power plants and the electricity grid. Ukraine continues to strike back, including with clear success in degrading Russia’s Black sea fleet and taking out military targets inside Russia. Increases in American, UK and European military aid are now arriving at the frontline, and the costs for Russia remain extraordinarily high. Some 465,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded since February 2022, with thousands of conscripts having their lives tossed away for the sake of only modest tactical advances. Meanwhile, Russia’s military now sucks up over 40% of Government spending, over half of Russia’s national wealth fund is gone, and Gazprom has posted its first annual loss in 20 years, to the tune of \$7 billion. Every rouble that the Kremlin spends on a dodgy North Korean missile or Iranian drone is money that it is not spending on improving the lives of Russian citizens, on teachers, on pensions or on medicine.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have always been sceptical about the impact of sanctions when real warfighting breaks out, and that scepticism has recently been increased by the knowledge that so much Russian oil has been going to India to be refined there and then to be bought up by western countries that are sanctioning Russian oil. Can the Deputy Foreign Minister throw any light on this and on what we propose to do about it?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend speaks with knowledge and authority on this matter. He will know that the imposition of sanctions is a complex matter, that we have to continually ensure that those who break them are held to account, and that that is an iterative process—I believe that is the correct jargon. I can tell him that we have sanctioned over 2,000 individuals and entities, and that without sanctions Russia would have an extra £400 billion with which to prosecute the war.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I concur with the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), when he says that this is not just about oil but about sanctions being broken. What more can we do to stop UK and European companies that are quite clearly exporting their products via other countries, particularly Turkey and the Stans, to bypass those sanctions?

Mr Mitchell: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). This is a highly complex area and it must always be governed by law, including international law. We are working better all the time as we get better at it, and I hope he will accept my assurance that we are doing everything we can to ensure that we get better and more effective at it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am going to make a similar point. I understood that, following Ed Conway's reports on Sky about motor manufacturing and diversion through Azerbaijan, for example, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office was going to take action on this. Is the Minister able to update the House on precisely what actions the FCDO is taking to deal with this blatant sanctions evasion?

Mr Mitchell: I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not give those details across the Floor of the House, but at such point as it would be helpful and we are able to do so, I will assuredly inform the House.

President Putin surely knows that this is not sustainable. He will not be able to outlast the Ukrainians, who are fighting for their very survival, or Ukraine's supporters who have economies 25 times the size of his.

The House will be aware that the situation on the frontline is difficult. Russia has numerical advantages in men and matériel, and we are acting now to help Ukraine hold the line and get back on the front foot.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My anxiety is that all the Minister's figures about what the Russian economy is doing indicate that Russia has put the production of ammunition and matériel on a war footing, while everything I have heard from our western allies says that we have chosen not to do that. It feels as if we give bits and pieces here, there and everywhere—all well intentioned—but it does not add up to us putting the whole of the western military armaments process on a war footing. That is surely what we need to do.

Mr Mitchell: I say to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have a very high regard, that when I have finished my speech I hope he will be reassured specifically on that point.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Deputy Foreign Secretary has talked about the numerical advantage that Russia has over Ukraine. That is why it is so important that injured troops on the frontline in Ukraine are treated, cared for and recycled back into active service as quickly as possible. In Goole, we are proud to have provided over 150 ambulances, including armoured ambulances, which are being used at the front. The Deputy Foreign Secretary spoke about military aid. Can he assure the House that we are also doing everything we can to ensure that proper medical aid and support are being provided to those brave troops?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, and I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend's constituents for the work that he described. Again, if he bears with me, I will be able to come directly to the point that he has made.

It is important to restate what is at stake. No one here in Britain, or indeed in the wider world, should be in any

doubt: this is vital not just for Ukraine, whose determination to fight for its freedom is undimmed, but for us in Britain and beyond. This is the defining struggle of our generation. At stake in Ukraine are vital principles. These are not just words found in the United Nations charter—a charter signed by Russia but which she now flagrantly breaks and dishonours; they are essential foundations for the security and prosperity of the entire world. Sovereignty. Territorial integrity. Right, not might.

The war has brought with it the greatest atrocities on our continent in a generation: the death, rape, torture and deportation of civilians on a massive scale. We see the war's impact spread across Europe, even to our own shores, with espionage, cyber-attacks, disinformation, suspected sabotage activity, airspace violations and GPS jamming, which impacts civil aviation. If Russia were to win in Ukraine, we would be back in a world where the most fundamental international rule—that countries must not seize land from others or resolve disputes by force—was in shreds. Success would only embolden Putin and authoritarian leaders around the world with designs on their neighbours' territory.

The costs of supporting Ukraine now are far less than the costs we will face if it does not repel the invaders. That is why the Government have identified Russia as the most acute threat to British security, and why there has been enduring cross-party and public support in Britain for Ukraine since those little green men first appeared in 2014. It is why we have seen NATO only grow stronger since the Russian invasion, with Sweden and Finland joining an alliance dedicated solely to defending territory, not taking territory. It is why we saw the American Congress decide last month to approve \$60 billion in further US support for Ukraine, and why the EU announced €50 billion in multi-year support. It is why, despite the different pressures some partners face, none but the most isolated and fanatically anti-western states seek to defend Putin's blatant violation of the UN charter. This isolation is Moscow's greatest weakness. Diplomatically, economically and militarily, the balance of advantage lies not with Russia but with Ukraine and her supporters, and we have to make that advantage count.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his positive attitude; we are very much encouraged by what he has said. It is important that Ukraine gets the military aid that it needs, but it is also important that the troops are rotated. I understand that that is one of the issues, because the troops who are on the frontline and under pressure all the time need a bit of respite. What discussions has the Minister been able to have with the Ukrainian army to ensure that there is help for it militarily and in respect of respite and relaxation?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and he may rest assured that British military advice in that respect, and on much else, is not lacking.

I was saying that, in regard to Moscow's greatest weakness, we have to make the advantage count diplomatically, economically and militarily. We and our allies and partners need to out-compete, out-co-operate and out-innovate. Ukraine can and will win, provided that we support it enough, fast enough and for long enough. The key priorities are clear. Kyiv needs immediate military aid, particularly ammunition and air defence, to defend the frontline and protect its vital infrastructure.

One month ago today, the Prime Minister announced our largest ever single package of equipment to help push the Russians back on land, sea and air. Much of this vital kit is already in Ukraine, including 1 million new rounds of ammunition. In April we sent vital spare parts to keep Ukrainian equipment in the fight, with more to follow in the coming weeks, including more than 20 mine clearance systems to defeat Russian minefields.

This year alone, Britain has given more than 1,600 strike and air defence missiles, as well as more Storm Shadow long-range precision guided missiles. We have given £245 million for artillery ammunition, a £325 million programme for drone production and procurement and £20 million of emergency funding to repair energy infrastructure. Since June 2022 we have trained 40,000 Ukrainians under Operation Interflex, and we are encouraging partners to join us in ensuring that Ukraine can counter the immediate threat.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I absolutely support all that the Deputy Foreign Secretary is saying about military equipment, and so on, to support Ukraine in its efforts.

Going back to the previous question, surely there needs to be a two-pronged approach, with sanctions to put economic pressure on Russia, in addition to the military pressure. It cannot be just one on its own. Should we review the effectiveness of sanctions, and potentially extend them?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to say that we need to do both, and we are doing both. Sometimes it is frustrating that we are not able to talk directly to this point in the House, but she may rest assured that we are using the sanctions regime in every way we can, and that we are getting better at it as time goes by and events unfold.

As I was saying, we are encouraging partners to join us in ensuring that Ukraine can counter these threats. That means more ammunition and long-range missiles, more funding and munitions for air defence and more emergency support for energy infrastructure, but we also need to focus on the longer term, making our strength count in a prolonged war.

We will move to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence by the end of the decade, which is the biggest investment in defence in a generation. We will maintain current levels of military aid for Ukraine, £3 billion a year, until the end of the decade, or longer if needed, and we call on others to join us in this pledge. We have promised to double our investment in munitions production to £10 billion over the next 10 years, giving industry the long-term certainty it needs to build extra production capacity. We are also strengthening Ukraine's own defence industrial base, with 29 defence businesses visiting Kyiv in April—our largest trade mission since Russia's full-scale invasion.

Sir Chris Bryant: The Deputy Foreign Secretary is generous in giving way. The point he has just made goes some way towards reassuring me, but I think we will still need to go considerably further on producing arms for Ukraine.

Can I ask about the long-term future of Ukraine? Ukraine needs to rebuild itself, and it is making choices between spending money on armaments and spending money on rebuilding tower blocks that have been blown

up. Why have we still not managed to give Ukraine the £3 billion from the sale of Chelsea football club? And why have we still not managed to get any of the Russian state assets that are sitting in European and British banks through to Ukraine to help it rebuild?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's second point, I very much hope that progress will be made at the G7 meeting later this week. Things are moving in the right direction, and we must hope for success by the end of the week.

The hon. Gentleman is right in what he says about the so-called Chelsea fund, and he reflects the immense frustration that many of us have felt over the last year in trying to get the fund up and running. The Foreign Secretary is absolutely determined that we will do so. It will be the second largest charity in Britain after the Wellcome Trust. Every sinew is being bent to get it to operate. It is mired in legal and technical difficulties, but the hon. Gentleman has my personal assurance that we are doing everything to try to ensure the money is used to good effect.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The news that my right hon. Friend has given the House this afternoon on the amount of military equipment and money going into Ukraine is greatly encouraging. Britain has courageously led the world on co-ordinating the effort against Russia's operation in Ukraine, supported, of course, by the Americans and, to be fair, the Germans, but we three nations cannot do it all. What is my right hon. Friend doing to encourage other rich nations and allies around the world to contribute their share?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to underline the importance of that. I think the position is a little better than he suggests, but he may rest assured that we are pressing everyone to give the support that Britain is giving, in whatever way they can.

We are continuing to ramp up the economic pressure on Russia and, with the US, we have taken decisive steps against the global trade in Russian metals. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, we are bearing down on the circumvention of sanctions and, as the House knows, this was a major focus during the Foreign Secretary's recent visit to central Asia. We are adopting new measures to target the shadow fleet that transports Russian oil.

We have also consistently said that Russia must pay the price for its illegal invasion. Ahead of the G7 summit in June, we have been leading international efforts to build consensus on a lawful route to use Russian assets to generate the maximum possible support for Ukraine. We are, again, working with our partners so that they join us in giving Ukraine the long-term support it needs to win this war by ramping up defence production, supporting Ukraine's own industry and imposing more sanctions to undermine Russia's military industrial complex and reduce its export revenues.

Finally, we need to invest in Ukraine's future security and prosperity by backing it not only in the war but after it. Last year's London recovery conference raised \$60 billion for Ukraine. In January, Britain was the first to sign an agreement offering bilateral security commitments

[Mr Mitchell]

to Ukraine following the Vilnius declaration. And now we are the first to commit to multi-year military support for as long as it is needed.

We are seeing encouraging signs of many partners making similar investments. The Americans and the European Union have agreed generous funding packages. Germany will host the next Ukraine recovery conference in June, and our main NATO allies and G7 partners are now following us in signing long-term security agreements with Ukraine. In July, at the NATO summit in Washington and the European Political Community summit at Blenheim Palace, we will urge our partners to underline once again our unity in standing with Ukraine, which I hope will satisfy my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who made a very good point.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): The Deputy Foreign Secretary lays out the plans for a war that will go on for many years. Can he explain how Ukraine, with a starting population of 41 million, which has now probably halved through emigration and people being killed in the war, will possibly succeed in a long-term war of attrition against Russia, which has a population of 144 million, without NATO boots on the ground? Is that the end game of this situation?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman should reflect on what I said at the beginning of my speech. The gross national income of those who are united against what Russia has done in Ukraine very greatly exceeds all of Russia's assets.

Andrew Bridgen *rose*—

Mr Mitchell: I am not giving way again.

Earlier this month, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Edinburgh was the first member of the royal family to visit Ukraine since Putin's invasion. She followed in the footsteps of Gytha of Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon princess who married the Grand Prince of Kiev. She was one of many figures in British history to have forged links with Ukraine over the centuries. Today we see a greater breadth and depth of co-operation than ever before on not only security, but areas ranging from English language training for civil servants to green technology.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am pleased to hear about the co-operation that my right hon. Friend is setting out and, indeed, his positive message, but he has not acknowledged the important role of the Ukrainian diaspora in the UK, both in supporting those back home and in mobilising public opinion here in support of what this country and others are doing to try to ensure that Russia does not win this war.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right to make that point. The contribution of the Ukrainian community in Britain—those who have come here—has been immense in raising awareness. I remember with the greatest possible affection the concert that took place in Wylde Green in my constituency, where a young Ukrainian opera singer sang the national anthem. At the end of the concert, everyone who had the privilege of being there was fully aware of the dreadful suffering that Ukraine was experiencing.

During his recent visit, the Foreign Secretary launched negotiations on an enhanced 100-year partnership with Ukraine. Our friendship with Ukraine is not only enduring; it is growing stronger. We will stand with Ukraine's people until they prevail in the war, and we are confident that they will enjoy a future that is secure, prosperous and free. Ukraine's cause is just; it matters to Britain. The consequences of Ukraine failing are unconscionable. Our friends and enemies alike are watching to see if we have the necessary resolve to see this through to the end.

Let no one believe that if Putin succeeded in his illegal invasion and conquered Ukraine, he would stop there. He would be emboldened by victory, and the failure of the west, Europe, America and our own country would define our generation's inability to deliver the collective security we have championed continuously since 1945. The cost to us all of that failure would be many times the financial costs we bear today in delivering the necessary military support.

The support must continue if we are to maintain that collective security, the rule of law and the international rules-based system upon which the stability and success of future generations depend. The people of Ukraine have shown extraordinary bravery and determination in resisting Putin's vile war machine. We cannot—we must not—let them down.

6.13 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and the Foreign Secretary for his help in facilitating my visit to Ukraine last week with the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). As Russia's new Kharkiv offensive began, we visited Kyiv to show our solidarity with the Ukrainian people and their Government. They have shown incredible courage throughout the war. On both sides of the House and across the United Kingdom, we are united behind Ukraine.

I must tell the House how important it is to face down Putin for what he has done outside of the capital. I drove with the shadow Defence Secretary to Bucha and Irpin, where hundreds were killed and where mass graves were discovered. We spoke with children kidnapped from Kherson and sent to Russian camps—children who were told that Ukraine no longer exists. This is Vladimir Putin's intention. More than 800 days on, Ukraine is still standing and still fighting. Ukrainian soldiers and civilians alike have shown courage and bravery that demonstrates a 21st-century blitz spirit. They have successfully taken back over 50% of Russian-held territory and destroyed a third of Russia's Black sea fleet. This is more than Ukrainian resilience; this is Ukrainian success. We saw that in Kyiv. We saw innovation flourishing. Start-ups are flourishing, driving forward advances in defence, health and veterans' support. I only wish our media covered more of what the Ukrainian people are doing on the ground, every single one of them. We met mothers and daughters whose fathers are at the front, doing all they can to help in the defence of their nation.

We had one simple message on our visit: if there is a change in Government and we are successful at the election later this year, there will be no change in Britain's resolve to stand with Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes. We told Defence

Minister Umerov, Foreign Minister Kuleba and President Zelensky's head of office, Yermak, that this is Labour's guarantee to Ukraine, and that is why we have fully backed the Government's increased commitment for Ukraine this year and in the years ahead.

The conflict, as the Deputy Foreign Secretary has said, is at a critical moment, not only because of Putin's new attacks around Kharkiv and across the frontline, but because this is an election year here in the United Kingdom, across much of Europe and, of course, in the United States. I have said this before at the Dispatch Box, but it is clear that Putin sees democracy as the weakness of the west and believes, frankly, that he can outlast us. We must show him that our democracy is, in fact, our strength and we do not give in to any short-termism in our approach, and that it is our determination to defend freedom that will keep us united with our allies and behind Ukraine.

As has been said, Putin's war is not only a military one, but a diplomatic, economic and, most definitely, an industrial one. He has successfully moved his industry on to a wartime footing and is now spending 40% of his Government's budget on defence. We have seen him deepening bonds in Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang, and China is increasing its support for the Russian war machine. China is coming perilously close to throwing its lot in with Putin's coalition. That is the truth about Vladimir Putin and why I called him recently

“the ringleader of a new form of fascism”.

He will never make peace if he thinks that he can win on the battlefield, and he will never stop if he is not defeated in Ukraine. Now is the time for us to show our commitment to supporting Ukraine and that that commitment runs deeper than Putin's commitment to invading it.

Is the Minister ready to join with Labour and take three immediate steps that Ukrainians asked us to take back to London? First, they said to us that, across the board, deliveries need to speed up and reach the frontline, especially the welcome packages of military aid from the UK and the United States that were promised in recent weeks. Ukrainians are especially in need of air defences, deep-strike missiles and ammunition—not tomorrow, next week or next month, but now. NATO allies that can send more, frankly should send more.

Secondly, does the Deputy Foreign Secretary agree that UK diplomacy should be accelerated to maintain unity for Ukraine and further isolate Putin? We are entering a vital period of diplomacy in the next few weeks, including at the G7, NATO 75, the UK-led European Political Community at Blenheim Palace and Ukraine's peace summit, in which Ukraine is putting so much stock. At that peace summit, it is vital that we see members from the global south strengthening support for Ukraine, seizing frozen Russian state assets for Ukraine's recovery and closing the sanctions loopholes, which many hon. Members from across the House have raised during the debate. These must be priorities for our Prime Minister.

I noted what the Deputy Foreign Secretary said about that peace summit, but will he confirm whether our Prime Minister has finally committed to attending Ukraine's peace summit next month? He must not only attend, but use Britain's diplomatic leverage to encourage the

widest possible coalition of countries to join. It is important that countries such as India and Brazil are there in sufficient numbers.

Last June, Labour passed a motion in this House calling on the Government finally to set out, within 90 days, how they intend to seize, rather than just freeze, Russian state assets for the purpose of supporting Ukraine's reconstruction. The United States, Canada and other countries are moving forward on that. The UK appears to be watching, so will the Deputy Foreign Secretary set out what steps are being taken, in concert with our G7 partners, to move this forward finally and make clear to the international community that we will hold Russia responsible for the perpetration of this illegal war?

Sir Chris Bryant: My right hon. Friend will know that it is perfectly possible that if there is some kind of agreement at the G7, for which we are hopeful, we might need legislation. My anxiety is that we would want to get the legislation on the statute book as fast as possible, although, obviously, we would want to get it right. On the Labour Benches, we would want to do everything to help the Government, if necessary, to get legislation through before the summer recess, or certainly before a general election. I hope I am not speaking above my pay grade, from the Back Benches, but I hope that that is the position the Labour Party will adopt.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is right to press this issue, as he has for many months, and it is why I press the Deputy Foreign Secretary. We as an Opposition would have thought that we would be further forward at this stage. We recognise that the G7 meeting is critical, and the Government have our undertaking to support that endeavour, but as we hurtle towards the recess and anticipate a general election later this year, we all understand that we are running out of time. That makes my point and that of my hon. Friend absolutely fundamental. I hope the Deputy Foreign Secretary will say a bit more about that.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for making a speech that shows the unity of the House. Quite rightly, he is pressing the Government on a number of issues. When the Opposition support the Government in a matter as important as this, it gives much added force and emphasis. On his specific questions, my hon. Friend the Minister for Armed Forces will respond when he comes to wind up the debate—I think the House has heard enough from me today—but if there are any remaining issues, the right hon. Gentleman and I will be able to speak behind the Speaker's Chair. On all these points, particularly on sanctions and moving together with other countries to try to ensure we are able to impose very serious financial penalties on Russia, I give him my assurance that we are moving as fast as we can. It involves many complex legal issues and getting agreement across the G7, and wider. We are doing everything we possibly can.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that undertaking, which the whole House will have heard.

The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation website reflects that the latest financial penalty levied on any UK sanction target in the regime was in August last year. It is the only penalty issued on the Russian regime since the war began. I say to the Deputy Foreign

[Mr Lammy]

Secretary, how can that be? Having just come back from Ukraine, it is clear that we have to do better than delivering just rhetoric and statements from the Dispatch Box; there has to be action. Just one penalty has been issued since the war began, so will the Minister address that point, which the whole House needs to hear about?

Mr Mitchell: It is not a surprise that the right hon. Gentleman is asking precisely the same questions that I, as the Minister, ask of OFSI. OFSI says that financial investigations take a frustrating length of time to deliver. It assesses every report of new complaints. However, I expect the first monetary penalties to come during this year. We must comply with the law, but as a result of my asking exactly the same questions that he asks, I am told that those financial penalties are in the mix and that we will hear shortly—in any case, during this year.

Mr Lammy: I know the Deputy Foreign Secretary is doing his best. On the issue of repurposing state assets, we are told, “Just wait, we will get there. We have a G7 meeting, we will get there.” I say to him very gently that we are the country of the rule of law; we do not wait for others to get there. With the City of London, we must be able to do better than this. I put him on notice that if we win the next general election, we will review these powers, because we are determined to see that enforcement happen. If our allies in the United States can do it at speed, this great country can do it at speed as well.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is clear from the evidence that many NGOs already have that exports from this country and other parts of Europe go through Turkey, Azerbaijan and China, for example, which are clearly not end-user destinations. Those exports are then being moved to Russia. For example, I am told that Bentley cars are still available in Moscow. If that is the case, where are they being exported through? Quite clearly, it will be places such as China and Azerbaijan.

Mr Lammy: My right hon. Friend conveys the loophole after loophole that countless journalists have pointed out, and that countless members of the public can see. The Deputy Foreign Secretary knows that it is rather embarrassing, when we are in Ukraine with people who are putting their lives on the line, that it is still happening. We have to crack it, we can crack it, and I hope that we will now crack it at speed.

Thirdly, does the Deputy Foreign Secretary agree that we have to boost defence industrial production? The shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, has returned to this subject over and over again. The £2 billion for restocking Ukraine and our armed forces must be fast-tracked. The UK’s defence industrial strategy must be rebooted to grow our defence base at home and drive collaboration with our allies. In particular, United Kingdom and Ukrainian defence companies should be launching new programmes at this time to jointly supply the most advanced technology to both our countries.

This election year, the Labour party is committed to taking the politics out of support for Ukraine. I push the Deputy Foreign Secretary and the Government on these issues in a spirit of working together, and we will

remain determined to work together on this issue. He will have sensed that these questions are coming from both sides of the House. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to win. That is our commitment from the Labour Benches. We are determined that Vladimir Putin will not get his way.

6.31 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is deeply encouraging to hear what unites the two Front Benches on support for Ukraine. Whatever differences there are, those differences and concerns are expressed by people from all political parties and from no political parties. I very much welcome the tone of the debate.

The Prime Minister was right to warn that the next few years will be some of the most dangerous that our country has ever known, and to refer to an axis of authoritarian states—Russia, Iran, North Korea and China—as a direct threat to global stability and global peace. Whether we like it or not, war has returned to Europe. Our eastern NATO allies are right to warn that if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, they might be next. After all, Putin is explicit that his war in Ukraine is against NATO and the west.

The strategic situation is far from satisfactory, but we are at a turning point that hinges on how US policy now develops. That was something the Deputy Foreign Secretary did not address in his remarks; I would be grateful if it could be addressed in the summing up.

The Russian military may be running out of equipment more rapidly than we think, and its economy is more fragile than its hydrocarbon revenue would make it appear. However, Russia is still able to sustain massive casualties, and the Russian population still supports the war. Russia has accepted a subservient position in its relationship with China in order to ensure continued Chinese economic and technological support for the duration of the war.

The US and Europe are distracted from Ukraine by Gaza and other theatres, such as the Sahel and New Caledonia, where Azerbaijan appears to be manoeuvring against French interests. US domestic politics delayed aid to Ukraine by six months—a delay that Russia is exploiting, albeit with massive losses in personnel and equipment.

The delay has offered Putin an opportunity to gain an advantage on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine, but the biggest danger is that Putin will win the war on the diplomatic battlefield, which is more a contest of wills than of military supremacy. Putin still believes that he can wear down the west’s will to support Ukraine before the Russian will to fight fails. Ukraine is now under significantly increased military and political pressure.

However, the re-establishment of US aid and strong statements from the UK and others, coupled with the battlefield losses, have forced Putin to take domestic measures to enable Russia to continue fighting indefinitely. The appointment of the economist Belousov—I hope that I am pronouncing that correctly—as Defence Minister marks a decision to increase the level of militarisation of Russia’s economy, putting it further on to a war footing. The new Minister will have the job of doing that, and of ensuring that the measures do not destroy Russia’s economy, as they did in Soviet times.

Any change programme—and Belousov’s appointment indicates a significant change in Russia—creates a temporary weakness in the organisation being changed. Russia is compensating for that weakness by stepping up hybrid warfare attacks on the west, which could include assassination. I do not think that we should rule out some Russian involvement in the recent attempt on the life of the Slovakian Prime Minister, Robert Fico, who may be widely identified as pro-Russian but who is not.

Official US policy is still not robust enough. President Biden does not want to allow Ukraine to lose, but nor does he want to empower Ukraine to the extent that it could inflict a crippling and destabilising defeat on Russia. The US is treating this like a regional crisis that has to be managed, but war is war, not just a crisis, and this war is part of a global conflict. A war must be won, or far more than the war will be lost.

Ukraine rightly complains that the US will not allow the weapons that it supplies to Ukraine to be used to hit targets on Russian soil. I am sure that the shadow Foreign Secretary and the shadow Defence Secretary encountered that frustration when they were there. Before the recent advance towards Kharkiv, the Ukrainians had to watch the Russians build up their forces on the Russian side of the border without being able to use US weapons to disrupt them. The Russian advance on Kharkiv demonstrates—this is the elephant in the room—that the US policy of limiting weapons use is totally illogical. It puts into jeopardy President Biden’s own policy of preventing Ukraine from losing. It makes this a critical turning point.

During a visit to Kyiv on 15 May, US Secretary of State Blinken said in a speech that

“Ukraine has to make decisions for itself about how it’s going to conduct this war”.

Did that indicate a tacit change of policy? When my noble Friend the Foreign Secretary announced that Ukraine could use British weapons to hit Russian soil, it provoked a huge reaction from Russia, obviously designed to put others off saying the same thing. Blinken’s statement produced no reaction at all, except Russia’s advance stopped when it could have made further progress. Two days after Secretary of State Blinken’s statement, on Friday 17 May, the Ukrainians launched one of the largest drone and missile attacks on Russian targets in occupied territory and also in Russia itself, accompanied on the 16th and the 18th by massive attacks on Crimea.

Secretary of State Blinken’s statement could indicate the first steps towards a significant change in US policy to allow Ukraine to use US weapons against targets on Russian soil, reflecting the realisation of at least some within the Administration that Ukraine must be enabled to win in order to expel Russia from its territory. We do not know. I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Minister for Armed Forces could address that question in his reply. There could be other reasons, such as record daily Russian casualties in their recent attacks. If US policy is not changing, there will be a de facto stabilisation of the frontline, with Russia in a stronger physical and psychological position than before, despite having achieved little of operational importance in terms of territory, and at significant cost in lives and equipment.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Nothing justifies what Putin has done, but what worries me about all this is what will happen if the most likely outcome

materialises: namely, a stalemate. Many people in Europe, such as President Macron and others, will say that we have to start negotiations, so what will our attitude be then?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: It is an unthinkable prospect. A stalemate would be a defeat. A stalemate would be a victory for Putin, who would be holding territory that he has claimed illegally. I thought the Deputy Foreign Secretary was very clear on that, supported by the shadow Foreign Secretary in the same terms. I do not think we should talk about defeat; we should be concentrating on how to ensure that we can expel Russia from all occupied Ukrainian territory.

If the Ukrainians’ hands are tied and they cannot use US weapons to strike targets in Russia itself, they will remain vulnerable to further Russian attacks. Russia will appear stronger than it really is, having obscured its growing deficiency in weaponry. Russia will be able to continue to keep up moderate military pressure on Ukraine, to prevent the Ukrainians being able to benefit from an operational pause—in other words, I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Russians will have the upper hand. Russia will also step up its information warfare and influence campaign in Europe, employing hybrid and grey zone attacks.

Worse, with the US’s failure to call Russia’s nuclear bluff—that is what this policy amounts to—other states, most immediately in the middle east, will increasingly see nuclear weapons as conferring invulnerability. In the last few days it has been reported that Iran is willing to share nuclear technology with neighbouring countries, proving that the nuclear non-proliferation treaty is ineffective. We should be more honest about that. Too many Governments in the west cling to the illusion that the treaty can lead to a world free of nuclear weapons, but even European countries beyond the UK and France may soon have to consider acquiring nuclear capability, or at least accepting US tactical nuclear weapons on their soil once again.

Gaza has put western influence in the middle east into freefall, while tying up western political attention and US military supplies and helping the Russian narrative to become dominant in the global south. Russia’s information efforts have played their part in making Gaza a debilitating issue for the west and interventions in other theatres, such as New Caledonia, keep the west on the back foot. The axis of Russia, China, North Korea and Iran is strengthening. The temporary stabilisation on the frontline in Ukraine means that western European countries have still not yet had sufficient stimulus to make them appreciate the importance and urgency of going on to a wartime footing themselves and increasing their own defensive capacities.

If the US is, in fact, changing its policy, as I indicated it might be, that is a serious game changer and we must encourage it. It gives notice to Putin that eventually he will lose the war; the US can re-establish the credibility of its leadership of the democratic world and of NATO; the Chinese will draw an important lesson about US resolve, which will have significant implications for Taiwan; the Russian model will appear much less attractive to the global south and Russian influence will wane; and the impetus towards nuclear proliferation will lessen.

[*Sir Bernard Jenkin*]

Sadly, some European countries will feel let off the hook, and it will be harder to galvanise a united European defence effort.

What can the UK do? Sadly, even in the UK we are still reacting too slowly. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee in December that the Ukraine war was

“existential for Euro-Atlantic security”,

but there is little sign of that understanding in our day-to-day politics. The Defence Secretary has said that the UK defence industry must be put on to a war footing, which means that the whole of Government must be mobilised for that effort, and our voters must understand that the sacrifices to fund victory in Ukraine will be far less than the costs of defeat for Ukraine in the longer term.

The UK should build a cross-party assessment, which I think has already been built in this debate, of what needs to be done to move the UK by stages on to a war footing and to increase defence capability and capacity, rather than just talking about increasing the defence budget.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am going to bring my remarks to a close, if that is all right.

Even if we do not have enough kit to send to Ukraine, we could help the Ukrainians to make more kit themselves and significantly improve our training effort, which we now know is not providing the Ukrainians with the breadth or depth of training needed to win this war—I hope the Government will respond to that point. We must press the White House to understand that Ukraine must be enabled to win this war, or the war is lost. We must also keep encouraging our European allies to follow suit. We can all learn from the way that countries such as Finland and Poland have moved on to a war footing and are building much increased military capacity at less cost.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

6.44 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I would like to begin by reinforcing the parliamentary unity that is enjoyed on this issue. We have discussed it between the Government and official Opposition; well, the same applies to the third party in this Chamber. The SNP stands fully behind the Government’s actions with regard to Ukraine—and that is really something. We do not agree with the Government on very much, so when we do, it is obviously an issue of significant importance to our constituents in Scotland. Even more important is the message that that delivers to international stakeholders, not the least of whom are in Kyiv and Moscow, about the United Kingdom’s position on this.

Consensus is important, but I am certainly no British nationalist, as I have gone to some effort to demonstrate to the House over the last four years. As an impartial observer, perhaps, of the UK’s ambitions and activities in Ukraine to date, I would summarise them as follows:

a strong start, but flagging and showing some limited ability to endure. Not all these activities are financial. I point to some tremendously effective decisions that were taken by the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), to issue Challenger tanks to Ukraine. They were of very limited tactical use, but tremendously important to the message sent out. I would like to see the UK Government—whichever Department—manifest equally important signals into this conflict that do not command particularly huge budgetary sums.

The war continues to be central to Putin’s narrative that Russia is under threat, as he seeks to divert attention from his failing economic and social policies. We should expect no let-up in that rhetoric from the Kremlin—to the bitter cost of Russian and Ukrainian civilians alike. Russia has violated almost all significant agreements with Ukraine and NATO; if the war were to end on unfavourable terms for Ukraine, there is every likelihood that Russia would subsequently be emboldened to use force where it sees fit elsewhere. It therefore remains essential for European and western security that Russia’s war of aggression fails.

With the current state of the war set as broadly stalemate, with neither side able to attain air superiority, both struggling to carry out mechanised manoeuvres at scale, and challenges in artillery ammunition supplies, Russia’s wholesale war footing and mobilisation of its industrial base should be a cause for growing concern. We should be concerned that the combined industrial might of the west cannot keep pace with Russia’s ability to manufacture and distribute artillery shells.

Russia therefore continues to press Ukraine along the frontline. Ukraine has made strategic gains in the Black sea, causing the withdrawal of the Russian national naval assets there and opening up western Black sea grain routes—doubtless positive, but of limited impact on its territorial defence in the east of the country. Ukraine’s recently passed mobilisation law, which came into effect yesterday, makes it easier to draft conscripts and provide financial incentives, and does not include provisions to demobilise troops that have served for more than three years. That law should be instructive to us in the west about the pressure Ukraine foresees in the months ahead.

As I said, Russia has significantly mobilised its defence industry, increased labour capacity and expanded production lines of existing facilities, and has brought back previously mothballed plants. That is a statement of intent if ever we saw one. Russia’s defence spending in 2024 is expected to consume 30% of Government spending—very instructive indeed. That has led to significant increases in production output, where Russia is delivering approximately 1,500 tanks to its forces per year, along with 3,000 armoured fighting vehicles. Those are figures many of us in the west could only imagine being able to stand up. According to the Royal United Services Institute, 80% of those stocks are refurbished and modernised; nevertheless, that is an extraordinary undertaking for an economy apparently under sanction. The number of systems held in storage means that Russia can maintain consistent output through 2024 and into 2025, but it should be subject to inventory attrition over the period thereafter. It would be interesting to know whether the Government are factoring that into their thinking.

Sir Edward Leigh: This is a very realistic speech. The trouble with this war, as with Russia's previous wars, is that early incompetence has now been replaced by a ruthless authoritarian determination to win at any cost by mobilising the entire economy and being utterly impervious to the loss of human life. I put to the hon. Gentleman the same question that I have put to the House: although we may breathe fire and brimstone about how we are determined to win, what is actually happening is stalemate, and we have to work out how the west will navigate itself around a possible peace negotiation with Russia. I am not saying that I want that—it is thoroughly unpalatable and not a very popular thing to say—but we have to be realistic.

Dave Doogan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution, but I do not share the logic that he applies to the potential outcome in Ukraine. I began in a position of consensus, and I do not think that the Deputy Foreign Secretary would join the right hon. Gentleman in his summation—and nor would I. Whatever the size of the bite that Russia takes out of Ukraine, if Ukraine does not get it back, that is a Russian victory whatever way we cut it and whatever wrapper we put on it, and where Russia prevails, aggression and the tearing up of the rules-based international system also prevail. We cannot allow that to happen.

The strides that Russia has made in regenerating its heavy armour should serve as a wake-up call to UK and western partners. To counter that, Ukraine must have serious supplies of anti-armour weapons. I note that Russia's missile capabilities are being regenerated at significant cost to Ukraine, and that raises serious questions about the efficacy of sanctions, which I will come to shortly. We must ensure the most accurate calibration in the reconciliation of that which Ukraine needs and in how the UK and NATO allies can satisfy that unmet demand.

Ukraine's key foreign military aid requirements are air defences, long-range missiles and artillery ammunition. Its shortages in air defence over the past weeks have allowed Russia to conduct a destructive missile campaign against national infrastructure, civilian populations and military targets, including the largest thermal power plant in the Kyiv region. Long-range missiles are required to strike Russian supply depots, command-and-control centres and military infrastructure, and artillery ammunition is essential for offensive and defensive action on the frontline, but they remain in short supply.

The United States Agency for International Development package passed only on 23 April, as we all watched months of delay take their toll on the war effort. The battle to pass that Bill has sparked fresh fears that a Republican election victory—a matter, of course, for the US electorate—could significantly reduce essential US aid to Ukraine, so it is important that the UK, along with the rest of Europe, has contingency plans in place for a potential reduction in the US footprint in aid to Ukraine. That also highlights the need for long-term planning in the military aid pipeline, as opposed to pulsing batches.

Are sanctions working, and who is suffering? Russian oil products are getting through to the UK despite the UK officially banning the import of Russian oil from 5 December 2022. A loophole in the legislation allows Russian oil to continue to flow into the UK provided that it has been refined into fuel in a third country, after

which it is no longer considered to have originated in Russia. That is deeply disingenuous to domestic and commercial energy bill payers across the UK, who are facing huge increases in their energy bills because of the rise in gas prices caused by the conflict, while aviation fuel and other distillates from Russian oil continue to pour into the UK's economy unabated. What do the Government say to UK taxpayers, who are funding billions in military aid to Ukraine so that it can defend itself from a Russian aggression that is, if we follow the money, part-funded by UK purchases of fuel refined from Russian oil? It is desperate stuff, Madam Deputy Speaker, and you do not need to be a forensic accountant to figure it out.

UK purchases of fuels from China, India and Turkey—much of which originates from Russian oil—have increased considerably since the sanctions regime began. From 2021 to 2023, purchases from India went up from £402 million to £1.5 billion, those from China rose from £30 million to £663 million, and those from Turkey from £1.8 million to £60 million. How do the Government explain that loophole? Will they close it off and, in so doing, close off the revenue to Putin and his war machine?

Not unrelatedly, UK businesses continue to see record growth in exports to Russia's former Soviet state neighbours. That manifold spike coincides precisely with the introduction of sanctions on goods to Russia. Are the Government even interested—let alone concerned—by that patent economic blip and reality? They should be, given the possibility that such exports could contain important components for military purposes. That matters, because although Russian missile production has increased since the war began, Russia faces a serious vulnerability: its most complex weapons, such as missiles, are heavily dependent on western-sourced components. Against the backdrop of a 1860% increase in the export of UK-manufactured vehicles to Azerbaijan, is anybody in the Government really under any illusions about what is happening there?

Russia has maintained a steady supply of the necessary components to make high-end missiles because of the incoherent approach to sanctions adopted by western states. A less laissez-faire approach to countering the Russian defence industry will help to disrupt Russian military supply chains and, in turn, Russian supply lines. That must be a strategic priority for all of us who care about the integrity and future of Ukraine.

6.56 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): This is day 816 of Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian forces have grown increasingly capable in the months since October. They are now frequently striking high-value targets at depths of 120 km behind the frontline. Operationally, they have demonstrated some success in engaging Ukrainian vehicles that were recently moved to Kharkiv. Overall, the Kharkiv offensive is likely part of a broader effort to stress the entire line. It is unlikely to yield a decisive breakthrough, but it will ease the pressure on Russian units fighting in other areas. If that trajectory continues, it will become increasingly difficult for Ukraine to stabilise the front and prevent further territorial losses and casualties.

Russia has deployed precision-strike assets with greater regularity and confidence, typically with reconnaissance from a long-range drone that is closely integrated with

[Jack Lopresti]

missiles such as Iskander, Tornado-S and, occasionally, D-30 SN air-launched missiles. That is called a “reconnaissance-strike contour” in Russian military parlance, and it is clearly having a significant impact on Ukraine’s air defences and command-and-control structures. It is coupled with more tactical elements, such as the widely covered use of guided glide bombs, laser-guided artillery and the Lancet loitering munition.

The shift seems to have occurred because Russia’s reconnaissance drones are able to fly longer and further as Ukraine lacks the air defence missiles to shoot them—and close air support—down. To give an example, Russia’s use of the Lancet loitering munition has expanded significantly in the past three months. There were 178 strikes in March and 140 in April, but there have already been 157 this month. Many of those strikes will have disabled or destroyed key Ukrainian systems such as air defence platforms and artillery.

Alongside that, Russian units are adapting to the use of first-person vision drones in various ways, there are more electronic warfare systems for vehicle protection, and the turtle tank concept is proliferating, which indicates that it is a successful counter measure. FPVs have also provided Ukraine with a powerful and cost-effective form of firepower until now, and have largely served to ameliorate the lack of artillery ammunition. However, if Russian units become more effective at countering them, Ukraine’s lethality will decline significantly.

Russian activity should be expected to peak around the G7 summit in June and the NATO meeting in July. The Government therefore have a window of opportunity to maximise their activity and help Ukraine. The UK has been the driving force in supporting Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion and before. It has stood shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people, delivering the kit that the Ukrainian military needed most and when it needed it, quite often over the initial objections of our allies. The UK was the first to offer training, to provide NLAWs—next-generation light anti-tank weapons—to ship 155 mm artillery shells, to provide tanks, and to supply Ukraine with long-range missiles.

Ukraine must win this war; as has been said by other Members, its failure to do so would result in severe consequences for NATO and the rest of the world. If Ukraine concedes one inch of land to Russia, then Putin, as well as our other enemies in China and Iran, will draw the inevitable conclusion that the west simply is not up to the task of defending our freedom and protecting our way of life, or does not have the willpower to do so. We have trained some 40,000 Ukrainian troops since the invasion began, in addition to our commitment to train Ukrainian jet pilots, but the question remains: how does Ukraine win this war? How does it fully expel Russian forces from its territory? Ukraine needs the right weapons to defend against Russian attacks, but also weapons to support its campaign to liberate its land.

Throughout the war so far, Ukraine has used ammunition and artillery at an astonishing rate: approximately 6,000 artillery rounds per day on average over the course of a two-year period. To put that into perspective, during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the ground war was concluded in just four days, using 15,000 rounds per day. Estonian analysts estimate that around 2.4 million shells

will be needed for Ukraine to mount an effective counter-offensive against Russian forces, or against Russian-backed separatist forces such as those in Donetsk. That target of 2.4 million artillery shells is achievable eventually, but only with additional American support. However, the American capacity for manufacturing 155 mm high explosive artillery stands at 28,000 per month, and an anonymous American defence official has said that the inventory of 155 mm military artillery shells has fallen to an “uncomfortably low” level. As a consequence, there is a target to ramp up production to 100,000 per month by the end of the year.

A discussion paper published by the Estonian Ministry of Defence notes that 4,800 anti-air missiles are required on an annual basis. However, meeting that target would exceed all NATO production capacity at the current rate, with current American levels standing at 3,600 and the rest of NATO’s standing at 1,000. Of those anti-air missiles, Ukrainians have been asking for Patriot missiles; according to the Heritage Foundation, US army stockpiles have stood at approximately 4,410 from 2005 until now, with a production capacity of 240 per year. However, with instances of Ukrainians firing 30 missiles in as many seconds and employing around 10% of annual global production last year, it is clear that the production of air defence missiles has to be stepped up. Companies such as MBDA in my constituency are a key part of that effort.

The manufacturing of Storm Shadow missiles will make a tangible difference on the battlefield. That long-range, conventionally armed, deep-strike weapon is designed to be used in pre-planned attacks against high-value stationary targets with pinpoint accuracy. Those missiles have proven invaluable in targeting Russian positions in Crimea, and the use of those munitions has been highly effective in containing the Russian onslaught. I am glad that our Government agree that Ukraine can use British weapons to strike any targets it deems necessary for its defence. I would like to see our allies in the US and others follow our lead in allowing the Ukrainians to use the long-range missiles that the Americans and others have given them against Russian targets in Russia itself, which would be an absolute game changer.

The facts I have outlined demonstrate that all our NATO allies should follow our example by putting their defence manufacturing on a war footing, especially when it comes to artillery and ammunition. Alliance members must meet NATO requirements, such as the requirement for all members to have a 30-day stockpile of wartime munitions. Only half of members met that requirement prior to the invasion, which is brought home by the fact that by November 2022, 20 NATO allies had significantly diminished their stockpiles. We should be in no doubt that Russia will remain a belligerent neighbour even after it has been thrown out of Ukraine. NATO members, including the UK, will need to maintain war levels of equipment reserves well into the medium term.

The UK was also the first major ally to sign a long-term defence security partnership with Ukraine. That alliance foresees helping Ukraine develop a sustainable defence industrial base while at the same time expanding and fortifying our own. The UK has ringfenced £350 million to forge collaboration and partnerships between UK and Ukrainian drone companies, in order to marry technologies and scale up production to get thousands of drones to the frontline within the next six months. That type of practical co-operation is a win-win for both

of our countries and an example to our allies. Both of our countries benefit from the sharing of technologies, the real-time battlefield testing of equipment, and the further iteration of technological development and collaboration that will help defend this country. That form of practical collaboration should be expanded into other areas of defence manufacturing, and we must assist the Ukrainians to start producing their own equipment in-country, or as near as damn it.

We need to be clear that the money we spend in engaging in this type of co-operation is not aid: it is an investment in the United Kingdom's long-term defence and security. The defence of Ukraine today is the defence of the United Kingdom tomorrow. Over and over again, I have heard at first hand from senior members of the Ukrainian Government their frustration with the bureaucracy that is slowing down that co-operation. I call on our Ministers to work even closer with their Ukrainian counterparts to identify and eliminate those obstructions. I have met representatives from Ukrainian small and medium-sized enterprises; just today, somebody told me that they want to talk directly to their British counterparts in order to develop technology together. I want to see the Ministry of Defence facilitating those conversations, not merely directing them to the big prime contractors.

On Monday 15 January, in response to a question from me, the Prime Minister said in this House that he agreed that we must place defence manufacturing on a wartime footing. We are now in mid-May, and in my view, that process has to be accelerated. We do not have the luxury of time; this cannot be business as usual. We must work with our Ukrainian friends to build the arsenal of the free world together.

7.7 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to participate in this vital debate—a debate full of parliamentary unity, as colleagues have said—because in the past two years, I have been able to meet Ukrainians who have been forced from their home country and have come to the UK. In the early months of this war, I was able to visit refugee camps in Poland, and through the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I have been able to work with MPs from Ukraine on a regular basis at assemblies and elsewhere. The UK's resolute and profound support for Ukraine is one of the few areas in which this Government have acted with consistency and honour, and it is vital that the next Government deepen and intensify our relationship with Ukraine, as well as Poland, the Baltic and the Scandinavian states, which understand the scale of the threat and are ready to act decisively. I welcome the 10-year and 100-year agreements with Ukraine, committing us to a covenant that will endure through time and begin to outline a post-Brexit foreign policy that will define us for the next century.

That reaffirmation of our commitment to Ukraine comes at a critical time. We must all face the credible possibility that the United States will scale back its support for Ukraine after the presidential election. We can no longer expect Washington to take on the mantle of European security, and it is therefore more important than ever that European states hold steadfast in their support for Ukraine. We must recognise that Russia is stronger now than it was at the beginning of this war. The UK's sanctions have proved less effective than predicted,

and Russia has succeeded in strengthening its relationship with China, in which there are, in their words, “no limits”. Russia is deepening its relationship with Iran, North Korea and India, through which Russian oil and gas make their way on to the open market. Russian power grows stronger, not weaker in Africa. The news from Kharkiv indicates that the balance is shifting decisively on the battlefield. Russia's military capacity is intensifying as it shifts to a war economy, funded by its sale of precious metals and natural resources, overwhelmingly to China. In doing so, it is creating a Eurasian economic sphere on which it can depend to access the raw materials necessary for its defence and industrial production.

While we have tended to think about this war in terms of values—of democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law—we have thought less about value and how our relationship with Ukraine must be a productive partnership. Ukraine has the largest titanium, lithium, uranium and graphite reserves in Europe, and we must also understand this war as a battle over the raw materials required for modern defence and industrial production. Titanium is essential for aircraft, helicopter and drone production, and lithium for the batteries that will fuel the vehicles of the future. If Russia is allowed to gain control of this critical resource endowment, the continent's security prospects will be in even greater jeopardy. We must prevent Russia from seizing Ukraine's natural resources, and we must secure them for Ukraine. These are the materials required for the renewal of our common defence capability.

The balance of power is shifting throughout the world. Globalisation has not delivered what it promised, a point made by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). The spread of democracy, human rights and the rule of law has been proven not to be inevitable. We can only defend these values if we are able to defend ourselves. Our alliance with Ukraine is part of that defence, and it must include the renewal of our collective industrial and defence capabilities. We must ensure that it works because we are defending our liberty and sovereignty as well as Ukraine's. The foundation of our partnership with Ukraine must be one of enduring value as well as shared values.

7.13 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I think this House is at its best when we get serious issues of this kind, and those on all sides of the House are in agreement—broad agreement—about what needs to be done. We have heard some excellent and informed speeches from both sides. I think the announcements made at the beginning of this debate by the Deputy Foreign Secretary are very welcome, particularly the £3 billion this country is going to give Ukraine this year and every year thereafter, while some of the significant sums—for example, on artillery and drones—are very welcome.

We have reached a critical point in the Ukraine-Russia war when we, along with our allies, need to decide how far and for how long we can take our support. In recent weeks, Russian forces have made slow but important advances in the area of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, compounding their advances by stretching the Ukraine army along a wide front. Opening up new fronts as well as widening those in the south-east Donetsk and Luhansk regions will stretch Ukrainian forces in a battle of resources, as Ukraine awaits the delayed US aid and equipment.

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

The UK and US have provided strong support for Ukraine, but there have been limitations and critical delays, as others have said, in providing the weapons and equipment needed. We are at a point where this war is dragging on, with limited and slow advances on both sides. The west has provided enough support for the Ukrainians to defend themselves, but not enough to make decisive advances, let alone enough to end the war. We must decide with our allies whether we will step up this support to persuade the Russians to withdraw from Ukraine. What we should not do is allow a war in Europe to drag on for many years and become a frozen conflict. That would cause an increased death toll, damage Ukrainian infrastructure and impact on our own and other western economies. Not only would it continue to prolong the suffering of the brave Ukrainian people, but it would make the job of rebuilding the country in the longer term much more difficult.

There is a strong possibility that, if we are not sufficiently determined to oppose Russia now, its aggression will not cease with Ukraine. We have only to look at what is happening in Georgia at the moment. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the demonstrations against the foreign agents law, it is clear that the majority of people in Georgia want a closer alignment with Europe and NATO than with their historical ties to Russia. That will be a cause for thought in Moscow. I use those words carefully.

In Europe, there is the possibility of risk to a Baltic state or Moldova. What would it mean if a NATO state were targeted next? Estonia's Prime Minister urged NATO allies at the security conference in Tallinn to follow their response by stepping up support for Ukraine, while Moldova has recently defied Russia with a EU security pact deepening defence co-operation. Of course, one of the outcomes, whatever happens in the war in Ukraine, is that both Sweden and Finland have become members of NATO. Those deeply independent, non-aligned, neutral countries joining NATO must be a real slap in the face for the Russians. European countries have a huge vested interest in continuing to provide considerably more equipment and training. As I have mentioned, some countries such as Germany and Poland are to be commended for what they have done.

As I have said, the UK is sending an extra £500 million on top of the £2.5 billion in military aid that it had already pledged to give Ukraine in 2024. In February, the EU agreed to a further £42 billion package, but by March it had failed to meet its targets on sending shells to Ukraine. After the US and Germany, the UK is the third largest supplier of weapons and equipment to Ukraine.

As I said in my intervention on the Deputy Foreign Secretary, who made an excellent speech, I think we must do much more on the diplomatic front to encourage a coalition of the willing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, the consequences of the Russians winning in Ukraine are huge in the longer term. I think it would mean that a number of non-aligned nations will decide that they are perhaps better off with the coalition of Russia and China, rather than with the west, which would be an utter disaster. It is important that we try to build that coalition of the winning, and I am not just thinking of Europe and America. There are countries in south-east Asia and in the middle east that we should be trying to persuade to join this coalition.

The US has been a huge supplier of arms and financial support, and its contributions to the war have far outweighed what has been sent by all other countries put together. In a recent visit to Kyiv, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, pledged ongoing US support for Ukraine after Congress approved the \$61 billion aid package. Arriving at the frontline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) has said, are the ATACMS—army tactical missile systems—which are long-range precision-guided missiles. Of the \$61 billion-worth of aid being provided, about \$8 billion will be used to resupply Ukraine with missiles and ammunition. That is a crucial point, because these missiles are absolutely critical.

The US has also been stepping up its own arms manufacturing, as we heard on the Public Accounts Committee visit to the Pentagon two months ago. That is critical. Europe needs to step up its arms manufacturing, which it has pledged to do, but it seems to be doing that far too slowly. This is not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex said, just about manufacturing. Huge volumes of hardened shelters are required to store the shells. There is a lot attached to building up this capacity, and my hon. Friend was right to indicate those figures. Furthermore, after that first year, the step-up in the second year will be even greater, which is good news.

As the Prime Minister said, we are facing some of the most dangerous and yet transformational years to come. Others have mentioned that the Ukrainians must be free to make decisions on how they use the arms that we supply, and they should not be hampered by conditions imposed by us. It is utter nonsense to watch Russian troops massing on the border near Kharkiv, and then to expect the Ukrainians not to use the vital weapons we have supplied to prevent that from happening.

An important area that has not yet been discussed is that, as any military tactician knows, to win a ground war air superiority is needed. Therefore, if the west really wants to help Ukraine, it must be far more generous in providing fighter aircraft, complete with trained Ukrainian pilots and anti-aircraft missiles. Ukraine has consistently asked the US for fighter jets to counter Russia's air superiority. In May 2023, the US agreed to let other nations supply Ukraine with US-made F-16s. However, the US has hundreds of those aircraft, which are being rapidly superseded, and it could well afford to donate some of them. Instead, it says that the F-16s must be supplied by Denmark, the Netherlands and other nations, and we must train those pilots in how to use them. As others have said, our missiles have been very effective at deterring Russian ships in the Black sea.

I am not really criticising, but the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) slightly dismissed the fact that grain was getting out of Ukraine. It is not only good in itself, but important—others have touched on this—that small businesses are able to flourish in Ukraine. It is important that they are able to generate profits, and even more important that they are able to employ people who are not able to fight in the war, such as women who are not at the front. It is important that the Ukrainian economy is beginning to flourish again.

Dave Doogan: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman at all. I was very specific in what I said, and I talked about a “tactical advantage”, which is minimal.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I entirely accept what the hon. Gentleman has said.

As Russian advances were being made in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin was making a state visit to China, in a show of strength. China is the largest investor in Ukraine after Russia, and it is propping up the ailing Russian economy by buying a significant quantity of Russian oil and gas at cheap prices. China could have a significant influence on Russia to settle the war if it chose to do so. A group of colleagues visited China the other day and made those points, but I do not think we had any impact on the Chinese. Surprise, surprise some might say, but we have to go and we have to engage, otherwise we certainly will not have an impact.

Putin has been making recent changes, dismissing his Defence Minister who had been in charge since 2022—the beginning of the war, when Putin expected Russia to take Kyiv in days—and replacing him with a very different person in Andrey Belousov. He is now overseeing the \$117 billion defence spending that Russia has embarked on, and building up a Russian war machine that is reminiscent of what they did in world war two, by turning the entire economy to a war footing, which suggests that Putin is preparing for a long war with Europe. In addition, Russia's allies, China, Iran and North Korea, have huge manufacturing capabilities that could replace a significant proportion of the Russian arsenal if it wished. If we and our allies are unwilling to provide more decisive support, there will inevitably be a political settlement between the two countries, which will leave Russia in a far more powerful position.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex indicated, we do not know what the US position will be after the elections in November. That is why I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that it is imperative that we engage with both sides in that election—Republicans and Democrats—so that whatever happens we strongly make the point that it is vital that the Americans continue on their course. Otherwise there is a danger that we will not be able to win this war.

Hotbeds of tension that could unravel in the years to come in the middle east and in east Asia around Taiwan and China are being carefully managed at the moment. Eyes are on the west and how we deal with Russia. The more Russia succeeds in Ukraine, the more co-operation between Russia and China seems to be strengthening, and the old enmity between them is reducing. That is incredibly dangerous. Urgent concerted and positive help must be given to the Ukrainian people in their hour of need for as long as it is needed, to deter Russia from taking any further offensive action in the rest of Europe.

7.25 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): For more than two years Ukrainians have been fighting this war on behalf of us all. The brave Ukrainians are fighting for our shared values. They are fighting for our democracy, for our freedom, and indeed for Europe's freedom. Many of those brave Ukrainians have made the ultimate sacrifice. Women and children have paid with unspeakable suffering and death. We are not dying each day to defend Europe from Russia. Our job, and the job of other European and NATO countries, has been to support Ukraine. That has been through military aid,

sanctions, and cracking down on dirty money, yet too often we are playing catch-up, and delays in vital support getting to Ukraine have cost them dearly.

The delay in American support for months has given Putin a new-found optimism, which could prove catastrophic to our Ukrainian allies. Who knows what will happen in the US presidential election? Our country and Europe need to be ready. Our support for Ukraine needs to step up. Any sign of weakness or hesitancy inspires Putin. The result of this war will have a greater impact on Europe than it will on America. It is ultimately our war—Europe's war—and we need to make sure that Ukraine wins.

When armaments are supplied, too often restrictions are placed on them. Limiting the use of long-range missiles is asking Ukrainians to defend their country with one arm tied behind their back. Russia has gone all in to win, and Ukraine being able to fire missiles slightly further will not change Russia's already barbaric behaviour. The massacre of Ukrainians in Bucha shows how the Russians will behave if they win. Ukrainians know that they are fighting for their survival.

There is \$300 billion of Russian central bank funds sitting in the Euroclear exchange, and our Government should be pressuring the EU to use it to support Ukraine. Money seized here should also be used to support Ukraine. China has given Putin a blank cheque; it is supplying him to win. It is also time for talks on Ukraine joining NATO and the EU to begin, and to be hastened. That is what they are fighting for—to be part of the free and democratic world, and ideals that many have fought and died for. Denying them that in the hope of appeasing a ruthless dictator is pointless. History teaches us that trying to appease a bully does not work.

Ukraine is backed by the free and democratic world. Putin is backed by dictators and despots. If Putin wins, every authoritarian regime across the world will be emboldened. Whether we like it or not, there is a war in Europe. There will be a winner and a loser. It is essential that Ukraine wins this war, and we must ensure that it gets what it needs. Ukraine must win, and Europe and NATO must do everything in their power. Ukraine must win, for if not I really fear that Europe and NATO may not survive in the future.

7.29 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Nothing I will say in this short speech in any way approves of what President Putin has done—he is an appalling man; a tyrant who has caused massive damage to infrastructure and countless deaths—but we have to be realistic in these debates. We cannot just will what we want. There is a mismatch between our determination, our interest and our will, and those of the Russian state.

Let us go back in history. When people in the west discuss Ukraine, they often assume this is a simple case of a large state invading a small country that has always been independent. That is not the view of the Russian state or most people who live in Russia. Ukraine means “borderland”, and for centuries, since Catherine the Great, Ukraine was effectively part of Russia. Even under the Soviet Union, Crimea was part of the Russian Federation, and it was only willed to Ukraine by diktat in the 1950s. Not a single Member of Parliament objected to that and the Crimean people were not consulted.

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

I am not in any way defending the Russian position—what they have done is appalling—but from that historical reality, and it is a reality for the Russian state, they are absolutely determined to pursue their objectives, as wrong as they may be. As we have heard, Putin is a tyrant. He has put the entire Russian economy on a war footing. He is apportioning a part of the economy to defence that we have not been spending since the second world war. Although we may want to win the war, we have to be realistic. Given the mismatch in resources between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and given all the difficulties that the Ukrainian state has been trying to cope with in the management of its economy for many years, with corruption and many other issues, it is extremely unlikely, sadly, that Ukraine can win this war.

As I said earlier, this war is following the pattern of earlier wars that Russia has engaged with: early incompetence replaced by an utter determination to win that is completely impervious to the loss of human life.

Jim Shannon: Does the right hon. Member not agree that if the battle in Ukraine is lost, then it will go to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and eventually the whole way back to us? The battle in Ukraine has to be won. It is not a matter of giving in; we have to win it.

Sir Edward Leigh: If we are going to win this war, we have to be prepared to give the resources necessary to do so. The truth is that such is the overwhelming predominance of the American industrial military estate that it could have won the war by now. America could have armed Ukraine to such an extent that it could have won. America could have allowed the Ukrainians to use its weapons to bombard Russian forces within Russia. America does not want Ukraine to humiliate Russia and win this war. America does not want Ukraine to lose the war. America could have won this war by now, as it won the second world war, but apparently it is not prepared to will the resources. We may not agree with that or like it, but that is the reality. We all know the strength of the American economy, and we all know that for months weapons deliveries were delayed.

All that I am trying to do is inject a note of reality into this debate. We cannot keep having these debates, saying, “We are determined to win this war. We must win this war”, when we are not willing the resources. I therefore ask the House these questions. Are we determined to put our own economy on a war footing? Are we determined to spend less on health, education, justice, and all the other good things in which we believe, in order to win this war? Are we prepared perhaps to put our own troops into Ukraine? Are we prepared for our own young men to die, or are we just prepared for thousands of young Ukrainian men to die and not have a single casualty ourselves? Those are the realistic questions.

The most likely outcome is that there will be horror and stalemate, and eventually somebody in Europe—President Macron or that sort of statesman—will then say that we have to conduct peace negotiations. What do we do then? Will we be part of a movement to have peace negotiations? Will we reward Putin for his aggression? Will we accept that there is a stalemate, and therefore Russia is enabled to grab part of Ukraine? What is our

attitude? Nobody yet in this debate so far has seriously addressed those questions. All they have said is that we will win this war.

Members should look deep down into their hearts. Is there anybody sitting in this Chamber—I mean not what they say publicly, but what they think privately—who actually thinks now that Ukraine will win this war? [HON. MEMBERS: “Yes.”] They say that, but how? Given the huge mismatch in resources between Russia and Ukraine, and given the fact that America is not prepared to furnish Ukraine with sufficient armaments to ensure that we win, how will we? I am with you all. I am prepared to put our own economy on a war footing. I am even prepared to send our own troops to Ukraine. I am prepared to spend less on all the things I value, such as health, justice and all the rest. But we have to be realistic, and at the moment we are not being realistic. As a result, Europe is trembling in a sort of arthritic way, neither pursuing the war with full vigour, which is how we won the second world war, nor prepared to conduct peace negotiations. The result is a stalemate, which is deeply damaging to our reputation, our economy and everything else.

I just pose the question. I am not saying that we should give in or that we should have peace negotiations, but I ask those on the Front Benches to be realistic in this debate.

7.36 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I had prepared a speech but will now have to make a different one, given that last speech from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). I think he is an outrider for his own party in his view. First, I want to take on this idea that Ukraine historically is just some sort of outcrop of Russia. I will start and go backwards.

My father wrote his PhD on the Viking incursion into Slavic lands. The Varangians created Kyivan Rus’—the Kyiv empire. It was an empire centred not in Moscow, but in Kyiv. Kyiv predates Moscow as the predominant city of the Slavic lands. If anybody wants to make a claim, it should probably be the people in Stockholm, because it was Swedish Vikings who settled those lands and established that kingdom—I do not think the Swedes now have any such ambitions.

If we move back even further, the Scythians settled Crimea and created the agricultural breadbasket that we know today in southern Ukraine and Crimea. They supplied the Greek empire with its grain. That established Athens and other republics in Greece and fostered the democracy that we know now, because the Greeks could rely on the Scythians for grain. That is the ancient legacy of Ukraine. It is not Moscow or the tsars, but the Scythians and then the Varangians. My first point, therefore, is that the Ukrainians have a clear and historic right to a nation. It is straight out of the Putin playbook to try to denounce the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state.

Secondly, I agree with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough that the UK, the United States and every European nation need to go on to a war production footing. We need to increase our production of basic military equipment, such as artillery shells and bullets—the Minister for Armed Forces knows how many times I have questioned him about this issue. We then need more advanced military equipment too. Actually, the most advanced anti-drone

manufacturer in the world now is Ukraine. We have much to learn from that, and in future we can do many things in joint ventures for our own defence. But we now need to ramp up our own military production. We have underutilised factories here, in the US—they have promised to increase production by the end of the year—and in Europe. To be fair to the Germans, they have done exactly that, particularly in shell production.

It is estimated that the Russians are expending 10,000 to 15,000 artillery shells a day, while at the beginning of the war that figure was over 50,000, so they have depleted their reserves and are just using their current production. It is inconceivable that 30 or so countries in Europe and North America could not match that level of production if we went on to a war production footing.

I had not intended to talk so much about military production. I had intended to talk about how it has been my honour to be the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine since December 2022. In that time, I have organised three humanitarian aid convoys to Ukraine and three parliamentary delegations—I see hon. Members in the Chamber who have been on them.

The people of Ukraine owe us nothing, but we owe the people of Ukraine everything. The sacrifices I have seen—towns and villages destroyed; schools obliterated; men without legs or arms who still want to contribute to their country's war effort. We cannot abandon those people. They did not ask for this situation; it has been meted out to them by a violent, brutal autocrat. I will not call him a dictator—I am not sure whether we are quite there yet—but the last Russian presidential election was not legitimate; it was a stolen election.

We are now in a situation where we are a bit weak minded—I agree with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough on that—and Putin's mind is like a ball of steel. He will stop at nothing. We need to take that same attitude and stop at nothing. He will back down only if he sees strength; he will not back down on weakness. That is an issue not just for the United Kingdom but, as I said, for the whole of Europe and North America and the rest of the democratic world. We need to ensure that we are doing everything.

I will finish shortly, because I know that others want to speak, but I want to make a few points. It is still not that easy for humanitarian aid to flow across the UK border and EU borders into Ukraine. We are still seeing issues with people from Ukraine gaining visas to travel here. It is not acceptable that people have to travel to Warsaw to get a visa. We need consular services. If they cannot be provided in Kyiv, they should be provided in Lviv.

We also need to look at how the funding that we have raised has been spent from end to end. A large proportion of the money raised by the Disasters Emergency Committee from the goodness of the British people has been spent outside Ukraine, because it has been deemed too difficult to spend it inside Ukraine. However, there are small aid charities, such as those that we have been working with, which are willing and able to spend money in Ukraine but have no supply of funding. We need to open up the books of all the charities. DEC will open up the books only for the money that it has collected, not for each individual organisation. We need to see more money being spent in Ukraine.

We have €300 billion sitting in Euroclear. We need to see that money not just frozen, but seized and then utilised for that war effort. Then we will see a change in

the front. The biggest difference that could be made to see a swift conclusion to the war and no more Russian troops on Ukrainian territory is in air superiority. The Ukrainians are losing the war because, owing to the Russians' air superiority, they cannot defend their troops on the ground. We have done a good job in training the first tranche of pilots from Ukraine, and now other countries are also training them, but they need the planes now. We had a setback following the election in Slovakia—we were about to see planes go, and subsequently they have not. We need other countries, and particularly the United States, to supply F-16s. We also need both variants of the Storm Shadow missile made in the UK to go to Ukraine, not just the export variant, which the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) expertly spoke about earlier. Finally, we need the resolve and long-term commitment to support Ukraine; not just to see this as something that happened two years ago and is slowly sliding off the agenda.

7.44 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to follow the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). It was interesting that the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) brought some dissent to the Chamber. The consensus that exists can sometimes stop us thinking freely and thinking of alternatives. It is sometimes helpful to have the sort of devil's advocate approach that he brought.

To the point that the right hon. Member made about the stalemate, as he observes it, we need to think not entirely about the situation on the ground but about what makes us different and what makes Ukraine different from Russia. What we have seen in Ukraine from Russia is chauvinism, as the term is understood more broadly. There is a tendency in the Russian mind to regard itself as superior, as nationalist and as imperialist. That is why we cannot simply talk about an accommodation at this stage. Diplomacy? Yes, of course, diplomacy must go on as the war goes on—the war is but politics by other means—but Ukraine needs to be negotiating from a position of strength, and certainly from a stronger position than it sees itself in now.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary started his speech by talking about the £3 billion that the Government have announced for Ukraine as annual military aid, and he asked whether other political parties will support it. The answer is yes, absolutely. The Liberal Democrats, as other parties have already set out this afternoon, certainly intend to support £3 billion annually for Ukraine. I hope that support for Ukraine does not serve to be a party political issue in the run-up to a general election. Let us look at things differently, but let us have a consensus as we have up to now. The UK has been pretty exceptional in Europe in having consensus across our political parties; let us hope that continues.

The Liberal Democrats develop our policy at conference. We are very democratic; it is voted on by our members. Last autumn, we hosted Kira Rudik, the leader of Ukraine's liberal party, Holos. She gave an emotional speech from the platform, which resulted in a standing ovation that was both instinctive and heartfelt. I think that explains why in my party—I know this is also true of other parties—there is a real determination to stand with Ukraine until the end. But it is also necessary

[Richard Foord]

to think about endgames, endpoints and how the war might end, so I will address that in my closing remarks.

I would like to talk about how the war in Afghanistan ended for the Soviet Union as well as how this war might end given the amount that Russia is spending on defence at the moment, and, finally, about what role China might play in any conclusion to the war. In 1988, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. It did so after 15,000 Soviet soldiers were killed. Many people attribute the withdrawal to the fact that, back home in the Soviet Union, many families were mourning the loss of those soldiers, so there was pressure on the Government in Moscow to withdraw. We will plainly not see that situation here.

In Afghanistan, the motivation was about communist ideology and economic models; for Russia, this is much more a war of religion, of culture and of spiritual questions. The amount of money that the Soviet Union expended on that war was huge. Post 1989, we saw the break-up of the Soviet Union because of the amount of money spent on that war, to keep up with the expenditure of the United States and NATO.

We should give some thought to the popular support for the war in Russia. We know that Russians are following the propaganda pretty closely. An independent polling organisation called the Levada Centre asked the question, “Who initiated the aggression in eastern Ukraine?” Some 48% of Russians thought that it was the United States and NATO; only 20% thought that it was initiated by Kyiv; 14% said that it was difficult to say; and 4% said Russia. I accept that it is a brutal, authoritarian regime where people are scared to give their opinions, but Russians are fed daily on that propaganda about the eastward expansion of NATO after the second world war—it is very much in their minds. We should try to get in their minds. Sun Tzu said centuries ago, “Know your enemy.”

I listened to a fascinating interview on BBC’s “UkraineCast” on 7 May, with Alexander Goncharov, a former Russian military officer who, when asked why the war started, talked about Ukraine prohibiting the Russian language and bombarding civilians in Kursk, Bryansk, Belgorod and Crimea. That is the mindset of Russians who support the war, and we should pay careful attention to it, particularly when thinking about the restrictions imposed on Ukraine for the use of British weapons and how they might be used over the border into Russia.

Finally, thinking about how the war might end, I want to talk about China. Putin visited Beijing last week. At the outset of the war, I supposed that it might end after the intervention of Chinese diplomacy. Instead, we saw a sham of a peace plan from Beijing in March 2023, although on the positive side it encouraged Russia to stop nuclear sabre-rattling. Unfortunately, China is condemning unilateral sanctions and criticising the expansion of collective defence treaties—a euphemism for NATO. Although I still think that Chinese diplomacy could be helpful to us in bringing the war to an end, it will not be on the terms suggested by Beijing last year.

We have talked a lot today about putting the UK economy on a war footing. We should think more about how we encourage our allies in Europe and beyond—

including some of the neutral states that have yet to show skin in this game—that this is a war of liberty against chauvinism.

7.53 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by echoing the sentiments across the House for those supporting the fight in Ukraine against Russia’s unjust and illegal attack on that sovereign nation. I also pay tribute to the work of our NATO allies to support the people of Ukraine and, above all, to the tenacity and dedication of the people of Ukraine in resisting this totally unjust invasion.

We must remember that this is not the first invasion of Ukraine. In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and was engaged in a proxy war for nearly eight years in the Donbas to try to weaken the territorial integrity of Ukraine. This invasion is clearly a war of choice by Vladimir Putin, though we can have all the excuses under the sun why he undertook this reckless action. What we sadly heard from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was basically straight out of the Putin playbook. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) eloquently spelt out the truth of the ancient history of the integrity of Ukraine as a nation, and debunked the Moscow-centric nonsense that Russia has a right to dominate and dictate what goes on around its borders.

If the right hon. Member for Gainsborough wants to be brought a little further up to date rather than hear the ancient history eloquently portrayed by my hon. Friend, let me tell him that when the Soviet Union was disbanded, Ukraine had a third of the Soviet arsenal of nuclear weapons. It declared itself a state in 1990, joined the non-proliferation treaty and signed the Lisbon pact in 1992 to give up those nuclear weapons. The United States, Russia and ourselves, in the Budapest memorandum on security assurances of 1994, guaranteed the integrity of Ukraine’s borders. The present Russian leadership may get into the semantics that it has always been part of Russia—clearly it is not—but it gave an assurance in 1994 that Ukraine was an independent nation. I ask people to read the history rather than listen to the podcasts. If there is one thing that it demonstrates, it is how effective Russia’s propaganda machine has been. We saw that in the 2014 invasion of Crimea when, suddenly, even people who should know better in the national newspapers in this country were writing that Crimea had always been part of Russia. I ask people not to fall for the propaganda.

Can Ukraine resist? Yes, it can. It has had a fantastic, valiant fight so far, but it can do that only with our assistance and that of our allies. Russia has had some 450,000 personnel killed or wounded since 2022. Ukraine liberated Kherson in November 2022, but there has been continued pressure. Russia will go to lengths to put itself on a war footing and to ensure that it keeps chipping away at territory, but at a huge cost to itself. Our strategy must be not just to supply weapons but to crack down on people who are breaking sanctions. We only have to look, not just in this country but in Europe, at the amount of goods being shipped to China, Turkey, Azerbaijan and other countries; clearly, that is not the end destination—they are going into Russia to help the war machine, as has been outlined. It is only with collective will that we will succeed in resisting that aggression.

I am a vice-president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and we—not just the national delegations but the individual Members of Parliament who make up the assembly—have been united in our support for Ukraine since 2022. We first agreed an arrangement with Ukraine as far back as 1991. We have the Ukraine-NATO Interparliamentary Council, which has met on a number of occasions and will meet again this weekend in Sofia in Bulgaria. We are united in our support for Ukraine's military fight. We are unanimous in our support for its defence of its democracy, and in supplying humanitarian help. This weekend, we will pass another unanimous resolution in support of Ukraine.

To those who say, "What happens if we fail in Ukraine?" I suggest they talk to our fellow parliamentarians in the Baltic states, Poland and the rest of eastern Europe. They are fearful that if Russia gets its own way in Ukraine, they will be next. I had the honour of visiting the three Baltic states last year. Each one is conscious that they are a heartbeat away from their democracy being snuffed out by a Russian invasion, so it is important that we contribute.

On the United Kingdom, I agree with the Deputy Foreign Secretary that there has been cross-party support in this House. That is very important in sending a clear message of support to Ukraine, and a clear message to Russia and others, that we will stand firm against this type of aggression. I have been a little concerned, I have to say, since we got the new Defence Secretary. He is now trying to play politics with this issue, which is a bit sad. A few weeks ago, he challenged the shadow Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), on what he would commit to after the election. He should just grow up and stop playing politics with this issue. It is far too important for that; likewise, the political football kicked around about the £75 billion increase in defence expenditure.

Let us be very clear—I have certainly been very clear in the 23 years I have been in this House—that we do need more defence expenditure, not for the sake of it but to ensure that we work with our NATO allies to help them to resist, and to act as a deterrent. People say, "If you support more defence spending, does that mean you are a warmonger?" No, it does not. I work on the very clear principle that conventional deterrence is just as important as nuclear deterrence. We need to keep arguing that. Someone asked what would happen if we get a new American President next year. I will still be arguing—we should continue to argue—for the importance of the transatlantic European alliance. Ukraine may be a long way away from the United States, but the US has found before that if it does not act early, the cost to the country, including in human life, will be 10 times more, if not more, if it has to defend it in a hot war.

It is important that we work closely with our NATO allies and our European allies, too. I see people pointing fingers around Europe, saying, "This country's not doing that, that country's not doing this." But just look at what Europe as a whole is providing for Ukraine. It is a huge contribution that is certainly on a par with what the United States is giving. It is very important that there is no disruption to the flow of military equipment and humanitarian aid.

Is this a fight for the rules-based order? Yes, it is. I have no doubt about that. If Putin gets his own way in Ukraine, it will be a green light to others who want to use force to inflict their will on the world. We are approaching 6 June, which is the 80th anniversary of D-day. People died on the beaches to preserve the democracy that we all hold very dear. I think we sometimes take that for granted. What has happened in Ukraine has put into clear focus that the democracy and freedom of speech we value is very delicate, but it is certainly worth defending.

8.4 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Hear, hear to that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am very pleased to speak in this debate and to add my support, and I thank all Members for their constructive contributions. With everything going on in the world, it can sometimes be easy to forget—even if we see it on the news—the ongoing devastation in Ukraine, because we are not there and we do not see it every day.

I have to start by saluting the courage, tenacity and strength of character of Ukrainian men, women and children. When the war started, I remember one thing impressed me greatly: women in school canteens were making meals for the troops at the front; those who made clothes, whether they were wedding dresses or whatever, were making uniforms for soldiers. That showed me the courage and commitment of the whole nation together. Men, women and children were saying to themselves, "This war is our war," and every one of them, in their entirety, was committed to supporting their troops at the front. I remember saying to people in the House that if only we, in this country, had the same commitment and understanding of the war, what we could do as well. But our Government and our Ministers have shown very clearly their commitment, so with that in mind I congratulate them. Last week, I asked the Minister an urgent question on Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the situation in Georgia. That day, the Minister reinforced the Government's commitment.

It has been some 815 days since Putin's operation and still Ukraine is subject to aggressive military operations, so it is important that we do more to assist. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who is not in his place, asked the question, "Who believes Ukraine can win?" Well, I tell you what, Mr Deputy Speaker, I believe it can. And I think everyone on the Opposition Benches thinks it can win. Members on the Government Benches believe it can win. There might be one or two who are doubters and who are not sure about the future. Perhaps—I say this with great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, because he is a friend of mine—Chamberlain lives on in this House with some people. Thank goodness that that particular individual opinion is one that is singularly held and is not held by everybody else. What a blessing that is.

I want to speak up on human rights and on the religious persecution in the eastern Donbas region. As a member of the Baptist church, I know that many Baptist pastors went missing in eastern Ukraine when Russia came in. They have never been heard of again. They have never been accounted for. Their families grieve for their loved ones. So I ask the question again: where is the justice? The ongoing Russian threat has completely undermined human rights and democracy in Ukraine,

[*Jim Shannon*]

and in Georgia, too. Only last week, Russia launched a new offensive in the Kharkiv region. Our support to Ukraine to combat that has been monumental. It is so important that we continue to support Ukraine in the future, whether it be with missiles, air defence systems or ammunition. What we need—Ukraine has asked for this—is a dome-type self-defence system to combat Russian missile attacks. Our supplies must be central to helping Ukraine in its plight against Russia.

Why do I believe, and why do Opposition Members and some Government Members believe, that Ukraine can win? Well, just last week the British Army was on manoeuvres in a NATO exercise, showing its strength and showing what it can do. If we combine the military might of all NATO countries, it far outweighs what Russia has, so do not for one second think that we cannot, as western countries and as NATO, combat Russia. We can not only equal, but beat what Russia has. I believe that in my heart.

Poland has just announced that it will build a defensive wall or barrier on the border with Russia. That shows its determination, and its understanding of where the threat lies. We should recognise the strength of the combined NATO countries, including the United States. Yes, they were slow to provide the military aid that was needed; there was a wait of perhaps a year and a half for it to come through; but it is through now, and the commitment is there. When all this is added together, it cannot be ignored. The strength of NATO is in the nations that are involved. It is in their outgoing military activity, and their resolve to combat Russia as best they can.

Only yesterday it was revealed that Russia had been using an increasing number of “glide bombs”, which are cheap but highly destructive. More than 200 are thought to have been used in a week to attack Ukraine’s northern town of Vovchansk. Furthermore, 3,000 were dropped in Ukraine in March alone. It has also been said that Ukraine is struggling to combat the bombs. It is therefore imperative that we step in: I know that our Ministers do that, and our Government do that—I never criticise our Government for a lack of commitment, and the support of all parties in the House has made their commitment easier—but we need to ensure that we retain the ammunition and the defences that we need in order to fight back.

I am always mindful of Russia’s army. It is an army of monsters, an army of criminals who have sexually abused and raped girls as young as eight and women as old as 80, with violence and brutality. You and I, Mr Deputy Speaker, and many others in the House, believe that there will be a day of reckoning when Russia, and all those who have committed these despicable crimes, will be made accountable and amenable in this world. The violence carried out against Ukrainian soldiers has been terrible as well; some of the things that have been done are unprintable.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) spoke about why it was so important for us to beat Russia—as, indeed, did I, in an intervention. We should focus on the positivity of beating Russia, because if it is Ukraine today, it will be Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany and us tomorrow. Failure is not in our psyche. This is about defeating Russia, and we must be clear about what we are trying to achieve.

This month, UNICEF reported that nearly 2,000 children in Ukraine had been killed or injured amid ongoing and escalating war. However, the overall tally of children’s deaths is likely to be higher owing to displacements and deaths that have not been recorded. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) spoke of children who had been displaced—who had been told that the battle in Ukraine was over, and had been taken away from their parents and their families. That report comes after Russia escalated its attacks in the Kharkiv region, where several children were killed and hundreds of thousands of pounds’ worth of infrastructure was ruined and destroyed.

According to Save the Children, 2.9 million children in Ukraine are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The two years of the war have taken a devastating toll on the people of Ukraine; more than 10,000 civilians have been killed since it started, although again I must emphasise that the real numbers are likely to be much higher, and will continue to rise. More than half the number of children who are enrolled in schools in Ukraine are missing in-person schooling. I know that education is not the Minister’s responsibility, but I think we need to focus on not just military and humanitarian aid but educational aid for those children. I also know that our Government and our Minister have not been found wanting in that regard, but nearly 1 million children across the country have no access to any in-person learning opportunities owing to the current insecurity. In 2023 alone, UNICEF is said to have given 1.3 million children formal and informal learning opportunities, which is fantastic; but it is important for us to send Ukraine that educational assistance, because for those children so many months without learning will need to be replaced.

The United Kingdom has been a good friend—an excellent friend—to Ukraine, and to Georgia and other countries threatened by Russia. We will always call for resolutions, on all sides, and our deep and long-standing partnership with and support for Ukraine has been unwavering. However, in the interests of freedom, of liberty, of democracy, of justice and of decency, we must stand by one of our partners when it needs help, and more needs to be done to sustain a sovereign and democratic partnership. Today I look to the Minister, and to my Government, to provide an update on our ongoing assistance; and perhaps the Minister can tell us what assessment his Department has made of the impact of the war on young people’s education in Ukraine.

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

8.15 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I welcome the debate, and I thank Ministers for making time for it. My right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary and I wanted to respond to it together rather than delegating the task to others, in order to underline the importance that we attach to the United Kingdom’s support for Ukraine. This has also given us the opportunity to draw some lessons, as my right hon. Friend did earlier, from our visit to Ukraine last week. Like my right hon. Friend, I thank the Foreign Secretary for his help in facilitating that visit. We would be grateful if the Deputy Foreign Secretary passed on our thanks.

While my right hon. Friend and I were in Irpin, we met three Ukrainian teenagers. We talked about their families and friends, about possible careers and about

their hopes for the future—but these young people had been through something so horrific that it belongs in the 1940s. After Putin’s full-scale invasion began, they were kidnapped and sent to camps in Crimea and Russia. Every morning they had to sing the Russian national anthem, and they were sent into isolation if they did not do as they were told. One, a diabetic, was refused insulin and became very sick. Those who were running the Russian camps told those Ukrainian children, “No one cares about you”, “Your families are dead”, and “Ukraine no longer exists”. I want to praise the work of the Ukrainian charity Save Ukraine, which is doing vital work to rescue the stolen children, reunite them with their families and help the survivors to deal with their trauma.

Despite those young people being told “Ukraine no longer exists”, more than 800 days on from Putin’s full-scale invasion it is still standing, and civilian and military alike are still fighting with huge courage. We toured a factory and spoke to the wives, mothers and fathers who had fled from the east to Kyiv in the face of Putin’s invasion, and are now working together to support the Ukrainian war effort. While their loved ones are on the frontline, everyone in Ukraine is fighting to defeat Putin.

The shadow Foreign Secretary and I had one simple message to convey during our visit: the UK continues to be united for Ukraine. If there is a change of Government after the election this year, there will be no change in Britain’s resolve to stand with Ukraine, confront Russian aggression and pursue Putin for his war crimes. We told the Ukrainian Defence Minister, President Zelensky’s chief of staff and the parliamentarians whom we met that this was our Labour guarantee to Ukraine. That is why we have fully backed the Government’s increased military aid to Ukraine, for this year and the years ahead.

The Deputy Foreign Secretary said that in his speech the shadow Foreign Secretary had shown the unity of the House. He was right, and all the speeches tonight have shown the unity of this House. In fact, this House has shown a unity behind Ukraine that goes beyond the debates in this Chamber. As UK parliamentarians, my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), and the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), have all been involved in gathering aid and driving it to Ukraine over the past couple of years. Other Members have taken in Ukrainian families. Like tens of thousands of big-hearted Britons, we have offered, through the Homes for Ukraine programme, shelter, refuge and a life in this country to over 140,000 Ukrainians fleeing Putin’s invasion.

I turn now to the contributions to the debate. Characteristically, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) made a deeply reflective speech with a wide sweep that recognised that, as he said, this war is part of a global conflict. He quoted Secretary of State Blinken, who, as he rightly said, was in Kyiv on the second day that my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary and I were there, which was 15 May. The hon. Member quoted Blinken as saying that “Ukraine has to make decisions for itself about how it’s going to conduct this war”.

In fact, the rest of what Blinken said is important. He said that Ukraine is conducting the war

“in defence of its freedom, of its sovereignty, of its territorial integrity. And we will continue to back Ukraine with the equipment that it needs to succeed”.

The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), who speaks for the SNP from the Front Bench, added the SNP’s voice to the all-party consensus, although I was puzzled when he described himself as an impartial observer of the UK’s activities in Ukraine. However, he was dead right when he said that it is essential for western European security that Putin’s full-scale invasion fails. If he prevails, he will be tearing up the rules-based system. That is why it matters so much to us, as well as to the Ukrainians, that they win.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) has so many innovative defence companies in his area that he speaks as someone with quite a lot of technical expertise. He described how, and with what kit, the Russians are stepping up their rate of successful fire on the frontline. He said that defence of Ukraine today is defence of the UK tomorrow, and I liked that argument. It is an argument that I consistently put in different terms in saying that the UK’s defence starts in Ukraine, and we need to do more on both sides of the House to convey a sense of importance and urgency to the British public so that we can help reinforce their continuing support for the war.

Characteristically, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) made an argument as well as a speech, which I always like to hear. He said that we think about this war in terms of values, sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy, but that we think less than we should about making the long-term partnership with Ukraine valuable to the UK. That seems especially important, as a successful Ukraine will become, in partnership with the democratic west, central to wider European security and prosperity in the future.

The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) rightly urged, as I will in my remarks, more attention and effort on the diplomatic front to build what he called the “coalition of the willing”, and he pointed the attention of his own Government and the House towards countries in south-east Asia and the middle east that should be part of such a coalition. Like the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, he also warned about the increasing co-operation between China and Russia.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) reinforced the argument that my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary made in his speech: we in the UK are still too often playing catch-up on sanctions, and on tackling the dirty money of Russian oligarchs in our country. She urged the Government to demonstrate more action and greater leadership in directing frozen Russian state assets towards the much-needed reconstruction help for Ukraine.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said that he wanted to inject some realism into the debate, and he was right to say that we cannot just will what we want. He said that if what we want is a Ukrainian victory, we must will the resources. However, I say to him that the Ukrainians can cope with what he described as the mismatch with Russia, as long as we and other nations maintain our backing for them.

That point was picked up immediately by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West, who said that the importance of our ramping up production lies in the fact that if we and other allies of Ukraine provide ammunition and weaponry, Europe and the US can,

[John Healey]

between us, easily counter the levels of increased Russian production. He showed a really extraordinary grasp of the history of Ukraine and of the reality of Ukrainian history, rather than the Russian revisionism that we sometimes hear. I pay tribute to him and the other officers of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine for their work.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Would it not also be sensible to emphasise that if we want this war to go on forever, we should allow Russia to stay in control of sovereign Ukrainian territory? If we want to have a clean and clear end to this conflict, the only way to do so is to expel Russia from illegally occupied territory.

John Healey: I will come to some of the military challenges faced by Ukraine in a moment, if I may; the hon. Gentleman made that point very powerfully in his speech earlier.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) echoed what we have declared as Labour's intent: to try to take the politics out of the UK's support for Ukraine in the run-up to the election. I trust that the Government will respond in the same way. Like the hon. Member for The Cotswolds, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said that more diplomacy is required with countries that he described as having yet to declare their position, alongside the military aid that the UK is supplying.

I think my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Kevan Jones) was the only one who reminded the House that the Ukrainians have not just been fighting Russia since February 2022; they were fighting it for over eight years before that, after proxy forces invaded parts of the Donbas and Russia seized Crimea. One of the things that my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary and I found most moving about both of the visits we have made to Ukraine is the wall of remembrance for fallen heroes, which has the photographs and details of all those who died before February 2022. Over 13,000 Ukrainians lost their lives through fighting the Russians on Ukrainian soil. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham also reminded us, in his role as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, that the Parliamentary Council at NATO had established relations with Ukraine way back in 1991. He asked what would happen if we failed in Ukraine. He was right to say that the Baltic countries and the former eastern bloc countries all know that they will be next.

Finally, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded us about the pattern of military aggression from Russia, not just in Ukraine but in Georgia. It is exactly what the UN charter is designed to prevent: big nations redrawing international boundaries by force. It is exactly why it is so important that Putin does not prevail. When we were in Kyiv last week, the message of those we met was consistent. They described the conflict in Ukraine as being at a critical moment, with new offensives around Kharkiv and new attacks along the length of the frontline. That is an easy thing to say, but the length of the frontline for the Ukrainians is 800 miles. That is as far as London to Aberdeen and back. The scale of the challenge they face is huge.

It is tough for Ukraine at the moment, and it is set to get tougher still in the months ahead. Its most urgent and complex challenge is to stabilise the front in the coming weeks and prevent what are local tactical gains by Russia from becoming a wider operational success. Stabilising the front depends on the prompt delivery from the west of air defence, artillery and long-range strike systems. Also, it depends not just on the western allies; it depends on the Ukrainians to construct effective defensive fortifications, to boost their own military manpower, to maintain the quality advantage that they have in training their forces and also to restore morale.

Alongside this, the Ukrainians have also scored significant successes with their own offensive operations, and we must not lose sight of that, particularly outside the land war. These have involved long-range strikes with indigenously produced weapons systems, partisan warfare in parts of Russia and the occupied territories, special forces operations and maritime operations. These are no longer symbolic; they are increasingly substantial in their effect. They have destroyed one third of the Russian Black sea fleet. Notwithstanding Putin walking away from the Black sea grain initiative, they have opened up freedom of navigation in the western side of the Black sea and Ukraine is now exporting more grain than it did under the initiative when Putin gave it the go-ahead. It is also exporting many other goods. For the large majority of Ukrainians, it is quite clear that the stakes are nothing less than the survival of the state and the nation. People in Kyiv told us, "Even if the west stops supporting us, we will not give up fighting."

This has also become a war about the survival of Russia as a state and the survival of its elites. Too often, the western view has been that this is somehow a war of choice for Russia, but that has underplayed how Russia has once again become a country whose primary vocation is war. In that vein, Putin has now moved his industry on to a wartime footing. He is now spending a total of 40% of his Government's budget on defence. This war is not only military; it is also diplomatic and economic, and Putin will not make peace if he thinks he can win on the battlefield. He will not stop at Ukraine if he succeeds there.

Our recent military aid packages from the UK and allies have been really warmly welcomed and received in Kyiv, but more is needed. Deliveries of air defence, ammunition and long-range missiles need to be speeded up, and further diplomatic and economic action must be taken to isolate Putin further. We have to be able to show him that things will get worse for Russia, not better.

That is why we are asking Ministers and allies to take three immediate steps. First, deliveries of military support need to speed up and reach the frontline. As NATO's Secretary-General Stoltenberg has said, any country that can send more should send more. Training for Ukrainian troops should also be expanded.

Secondly, UK diplomacy should be accelerated leading up to the G7, with the NATO 75th anniversary, the European Political Community meeting and Ukraine's peace summit all taking place in the next few weeks. The purpose will be to strengthen support for Ukraine, seize frozen Russian state assets and close sanction loopholes. All those must be the outcomes of successful summits over the next few weeks.

Jim Shannon: I mentioned the necessity of helping civilians with humanitarian aid. If we help the civilians, we also encourage the soldiers at the front. Does the right hon. Gentleman believe we need to focus on that, too?

John Healey: Yes, the hon. Gentleman makes a sound point.

Thirdly, as many speakers have said, we must boost industrial production. The £2 billion for stockpiles, to re-equip Ukraine and replenish our own forces, was allocated in the spring Budget of 2023. By the end of last year, only a third of that sum had been committed and none of it had been spent. I have now been waiting four months for an update on the progress on committing and spending that £2 billion. It must be fast-tracked and it must be used for stockpiles. It cannot be used to fill gaps in the defence budget, which was the National Audit Office's concern. We have to reboot our industrial strategy, grow our defence base at home and further collaborate with Ukraine and our allies.

We are proud of the UK's leadership on Ukraine, and the Ukrainians have told us how important that bipartisan support is to them. The President's chief of staff told us, "The UK elections are the only ones we are not worried about this year." On military support for Ukraine and reinforcing NATO allies, the Government have had and will continue to have Labour's fullest support.

I conclude by returning to where I started. The charity Save Ukraine told us that well over 20,000 Ukrainian children remain stolen and in Russian hands or on Russian territory, but it is determined to bring every single one of them home to their families and home to their country. Across this House, our determination must be just as strong to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes for it to win.

8.36 pm

The Minister for Armed Forces (Leo Docherty): This has been a powerful and sincere debate, and I am very grateful for the contributions from across the House.

The shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), started by reflecting on his recent visit. He talked about the courage of the Ukrainian people, and he said that this is, indeed, a critical moment. Putin believes he can outlast the democracies of this world, and of course we will disprove that assumption. The shadow Foreign Secretary asked three important questions. First, he asked about speeding up deliveries, and we are straining every sinew to expedite the delivery of lethal aid. This year we have taken our contribution up from £2.5 billion to £3 billion.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether we will accelerate UK diplomacy, and I can give him that assurance. We have the G7 summit, the NATO summit in Washington in July, the EPC and, of course, the Ukraine peace summit. I cannot comment on the Prime Minister's diary, but I know the summits will be attended at the very highest level. He also asked about seizing state assets and sanctions. Of course, the G7 summit in June will be the critical moment. As the Prime Minister has said:

"We and our G7 partners...should be bold and pursue all routes through which immobilised Russian sovereign assets can be used to support Ukraine, in line...with international law".—[*Official Report*, 15 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 38.]

The direction of travel is clear, and we are expediting that work.

We should also have no embarrassment about our remarkable and decisive contribution to Ukraine's security. Those from the UK who visit Ukraine should hold their head high with pride at our contribution to protecting Ukraine's sovereignty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) made a characteristically knowledgeable speech, in which he laid out the contest of wills that is under way in Ukraine. He spoke interestingly about the role of Russia's new Defence Minister, Belousov, and how that should make us concerned about the wholesale Russian mobilisation to a greater war footing. He also pointed out that it is a global crisis, not just a regional crisis, which is the important context in which to understand it.

The hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) also confused me when he said that he is impartial—I know he did not mean it in that sense—but he rightly spoke about the concern we should have about Russia's military might. He asked about the refining loophole for the export of hydrocarbons. I can assure him that a huge amount of diplomatic and technical work is being done, with delegations right across the middle east, central Asia and the Caucasus, to ensure that countries at risk of sanction circumvention change their policy to ensure that they are not exploited.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) gave a characteristically knowledgeable description of the military situation and the huge military-industrial challenge. His mention of the capabilities in his constituency was very welcome. Of course, the huge resource and energy that we are putting in to supplying the Ukrainians with what they need to develop their drone capability also attends to our own consequential drone strategy, as does our commitment of £10 billion over the next 10 years to increase supplies of our own munitions, in the context of needing to ramp up industrial capabilities not just for supplying Ukraine but for backfilling our capabilities. Indeed, we have an important role in what he termed, and I welcomed this, "the arsenal of the free world."

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) made some welcome comments on his personal experience. He pointed out the role of China and the hydrocarbons relationship with Ukraine, which is important, and the important role played by the so-called Eurasian economic sphere. That economic context and the hugely consequential deposits of titanium and lithium in Ukraine could make it an important global player in its longer-term economic development, which is important for how we understand its capacity for its own reconstruction.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) pointed out that this is a critical moment in the conflict and mentioned the regional context. His mention of Moldova was welcome. We recognise the critical challenge faced by that country. He should be assured that we are putting a huge amount of political and technical energy into supporting Moldova in building its state institutions. He urged more work on the diplomatic front, which we are doing. He talked about the importance of air capability and of more grain flowing through the Black sea, which is actually as a consequence of the remarkable military gains achieved by the Ukrainians, often with remote, uncrewed maritime vessels. That is illustrative of a remarkable revolution in warfighting, which we should also note.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Public Accounts Committee looked in great detail at how we built capacity during the covid pandemic for producing vaccines. Will the Minister look at the lessons learned in that campaign? In particular, during that campaign we invested directly in capacity, not through the firms that were producing. Will he look at that as a method of how we could rapidly build up our military capabilities?

Leo Docherty: That is one of the things we are looking at.

I was grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), who spoke about this being Europe's war, not just America's, which was an interesting contextual point. She spoke about the brutality in Bucha and the strategic importance of a Ukrainian victory, which was welcome. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) made a provocative but sincere speech and asked the question, "Do we have the resolve to win?" The House answered that question with a resounding yes—we do have that resolve.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) made a welcome historical point, putting in context the journey to statehood for Ukraine, mentioning the Viking establishment of Kyivan Rus', the Scythians and Crimea. He also mentioned the ancient grain-based relationship with Europe, which was an interesting insight, and which disputes much of the propaganda coming out of the Kremlin. He pointed out the human cost of the war in Ukraine.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) spoke about the chauvinism of the Russian state, which was a good way to put it. He outlined his party's support for our policy, for which I was grateful. He drew an interesting and relevant parallel to the Russian experience of invading Afghanistan.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) paid tribute to the tenacity of the Ukrainian people. He pointed out that the first invasion was in 2014. For understanding the geopolitical journey of Ukraine, 1992 in Lisbon and 1994 in Budapest are important dates that we must all recognise when we consider our posture. The views of his fellow members of the NATO parliamentary delegation from eastern Europe and the Baltic states were welcome because they are highly relevant. I agree with him that increased defence spending is not an indication of warmongering; no—it is the surest safeguard of peace.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of the struggle of the whole nation, which was a good way of putting it. He spoke about the brutality of Russian forces, the threat to the Baltic states and the horrendous impact on the education of young people in Ukraine, which will surely last a generation.

I was grateful to the shadow Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who reflected on his visit to Ukraine last week, and the horrific experience particularly of young people there; he gave two examples of young people being kidnapped, sent to camps and told that Ukraine does not exist.

Well, the whole House knows that Ukraine does exist, and it has proved that to the tyrannical invader in magnificent fashion over the past two years.

I was grateful, as ever, to the right hon. Gentleman for reiterating his support for the Government's policy, and for the unity and resolve reflected across the whole House—across the political divide. He mentioned the 800 miles of frontline, which indicates the scale of the challenge for the redoubtable Ukrainian military. In answering his three questions, I can give him the assurance that our energetic and dynamic support in supplying lethal aid and military training will continue. Our effort is reflected in the increase of resource therein, from £2.5 billion to £3 billion this year. Our energy in that quarter will be matched by our diplomacy across the landscape of important diplomatic events this year, which I have already mentioned, and we will sincerely carry out a ramping up of industrial production. I give him the commitment that we will keep him and his Opposition colleagues updated as that is expedited.

Putin's war has demonstrated one thing above all others: he will never be able to subdue the will of Ukrainians to be Ukrainian, which is why he should end his unwinnable war, and the hideous suffering he is inflicting on Ukrainians and Russians, by withdrawing his forces. Putin should also know that this is not the outcome Ukraine and its allies are planning for. In January, the Prime Minister and President Zelensky signed an historic 100-year partnership, and more and more of our allies are following suit.

Since Putin's invasion of Crimea, we have helped to train over 65,000 Ukrainian military personnel. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, we have sent almost 400 different military capabilities; in terms of resource value, that amounts to £3 billion this year. We are making long-term investments in Ukraine's security, in the air, on land and at sea, including by hosting a forum with Ukrainian defence companies this week.

Taken together, our current support will help to keep Ukraine in the fight; our continued support and diplomacy will ensure it prevails; and our long-term support and co-operation will help the Ukrainian people to rebuild their country, strengthen its defences and deter future aggression. Putin thinks he can outlast us, but he should be in no doubt. The United Kingdom will stand with the Ukrainian people for as long as it takes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): The occupant of the Chair, as hon. Members know, is always completely impartial. However, the sentiments of the House are quite clearly unanimous on this issue—slava Ukraini.

Business without Debate

PETITIONS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Steve Double be added to the Petitions Committee—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Families in Temporary Accommodation

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

8.48 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I rise to speak out of desperation on behalf of the 112,660 homeless families, 145,800 children, and 20,000 babies who are currently living in temporary accommodation. I meet at least three or four of those families every single Friday at my advice surgery, as they are put into cramped, uninhabitable or overcrowded temporary accommodation. When I use the word “temporary” I am being misleading, because homeless families are being placed in temporary accommodation for so much longer than anybody ever should. Some 3,700 families have lived in temporary accommodation for over five years. One family has lived in it since 2009. Some children spend their entire life living in so-called temporary accommodation.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I was informed by the Shared Health Foundation about a woman who had to flee her home with her three children because of domestic violence. She has been put into temporary accommodation that is unfit for human habitation, and has been told that she is likely to be there for 10 years. Is that not absolutely inexcusable?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: My hon. Friend’s story of that particular family is sadly not unusual. I know of the work of the Shared Health Foundation, which is part of the secretariat of the all-party parliamentary group on households in temporary accommodation. I know what brilliant work it does, and that, in the foundation, my hon. Friend will have a strong advocate in trying to resolve the difficulties that she is experiencing. I will use my speech to tell the House about a few families I know of, and the disadvantages that their children face at every stage of childhood, from pregnancy all the way up to A-levels.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for rightly bringing forward this debate on families in temporary accommodation. People in my constituency face similar issues. Some sofa surf and some have been in temporary accommodation for years. Does she agree that there is a need for much more new build social housing, and that it can only go hand in hand with funding and planning in local authorities, which needs to be centralised? Does she agree that that is one of the solutions?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I agree; indeed, it is the only solution. The only way we are going to bring an end to use of expensive and appalling temporary accommodation is through building more social housing units. After I have spoken about the consequences of temporary accommodation, I will look at its cost to the taxpayer, and the billions of pounds that we are spending on it, which frankly I could think of such better uses for. Finally, I will speak of the solution to this mess.

Stories of dislocation and crisis alone could fill the debate. I have managed to get two or three such cases resolved in the last week. These are a selection; I could have doubled, tripled or quadrupled the examples of

the conditions that people are being kept in, but I will start with just one. Joanna was placed in a shared house when she was four months pregnant, along with four men she did not know. She had been living there for 14 months, and by the time she came to see me she had a nine-month-old daughter. Like countless other pregnant women and parents with small children, she worried endlessly for her safety. The biggest worry for people like Joanna is that they have no safe sleeping arrangements for their babies. That is important, because we know that between April 2019 and March 2023, 55 children died as a result of the temporary accommodation they were housed in—42 of them were under one. The most likely cause of death is sudden infant death syndrome because of the lack of safe sleeping provision, such as cots. I would like to think that I speak for the whole House when I say that that is unacceptable.

After their children start going to primary school, families in temporary accommodation face a whole new set of challenges, because at least 30,000 families were placed in a borough outside their home: taking children out of school, and the families away from their support networks; taking parents and adult children away from jobs; and taking the families away from the hospitals and GP surgeries that they might desperately need. Once we remove a desperate, vulnerable family from their home environment, there are consequences for their children in school attainment and attendance, and all sorts of other things.

The guidance code on dealing with homeless families suggests that priority for local temporary accommodation should be given to children in their exam years. That is a great aspiration, but I know it is not being realised on the ground because local authorities cannot find such accommodation, particularly for larger families. Most schools would be loth to take a child in year 11 or year 13 because they would be in the second year of their exams and the curriculums would not match. Schools of all statuses are concerned about their performance. One child was moved homes five times in the first five weeks of his GCSE exams and was forced to rely on a charity that paid for his taxi to his first exam.

On one day at the civic centre in my constituency, the only temporary accommodation that could be offered to families was in Telford—170 miles away from their home borough—and that is not unique. How can someone possibly start putting their life back together when they are 170 miles away from the borough they have been living in? It is a ludicrous situation, and it means that thousands of children turn up at school dirty, tired and underdeveloped, far from ready for their vital first year. Some will have grown up confined to a small room, shared with the rest of their family, with no space to play, walk or socialise with other children. Others might live in mixed housing blocks alongside drug users, where their older siblings prefer to use a potty in the cupboard rather than queue in the corridor for a shared toilet.

I am happy to take the Minister to the temporary accommodation that many of the families that I represent have to live in. She can meet Mr and Ms N, who have five children all under the age of eight. They were originally living in my local borough of Merton in south-west London when they were made homeless, but they have been sent to every corner of London to find temporary accommodation—first to Walthamstow in north-east London and then to Ilford. Ms N is now

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

living over an hour away from St George's Hospital in south-west London, where she needs to go for her for appointments, medication, and scans. Her kids are missing school because of the more than two hours they have to spend on public transport every day.

The Minister can also meet Mr and Ms G, who were made homeless when they were living in Colliers Wood, which is also in my home borough of Merton. They were moved to West Croydon, from where their kids had a 90-minute journey to school, and at the end of last year they were relocated to temporary housing in Tottenham—again, miles away from the place they called home for nearly two years. They had finally found a school where their children were happy and starting to be more social, confident and secure, and I can read to the House what their primary school had to say about one of their children:

“Alfie is currently in reception. He has settled in really well and has a strong friendship circle. His attendance is extremely strong at 97% and amounts to only two absences due to illness. His punctuality is currently 100%.

Alfie's confidence has grown, and we are very proud of his development. We look forward to seeing him progress at this school.

Alfie's parents have relied on a strong network of parents to help them navigate through the daily aspects of school life.

I would worry that the impact of moving school as well as a new home would be very upsetting for him.”

That is one of the many consequences of our country's lack of investment in new social housing. I am conscious of time, although I realise I have benefited from the early closure of the previous debate.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In January of this year, my local authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, had 153 households in temporary accommodation. That figure was 101 in January 2022. The use of hotels alone cost the council £625,000 in the last financial year, diverting resources away from other much-needed support services during the cost of living crisis. Does my good friend agree that the Government have failed families in temporary accommodation?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I agree. Those families are being failed, and they are being failed by us all unless we get action to build more social housing.

The shocking thing is that the weaker someone is, and the less fight they have, the worse they get treated. A child with special needs will often find themselves in the ridiculous situation whereby the social services department—in the same council as the housing department that placed the child outside their borough—scraps the transport to their special school because their council has moved them out of their area. It is extraordinary that we make victims of those people, who just cannot stand up for themselves.

Members would not believe the fortune that taxpayers spend on such unacceptable accommodation—accommodation that you wouldn't put your pet in. London boroughs spend £90 million every month on it, which is 40% more than they spent last year. Councils in England alone spent £1.74 billion on temporary accommodation in 2022/23—that is 10% more than the

year before and a 62% increase over five years. Some councils seriously risk bankruptcy because of the cost of temporary accommodation.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): My hon. Friend, who is undoubtedly a doughty champion for those in temporary accommodation in constituencies up and down the country, is making a powerful and moving speech. The Secretary of State has expressed his regret about the number of children living in temporary accommodation, even though he has sat on the Government Benches throughout. The figures that my hon. Friend outlines make for very grim reading indeed, and it is clear that we cannot go on like that. Does she agree that a future Labour Government will have to work at pace across all Government Departments, rather than in silos, to get those numbers down, just as we did last time we were in office?

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Providing more social housing, and giving more support to families in temporary accommodation, needs to be a mission of the next Labour Government.

It strikes me as extraordinary that we, as a nation, are spending £1.74 billion on temporary accommodation, knowing that the figure will not go down any time soon. In Merton, we have one of the lowest numbers of families in temporary accommodation. The figure stands at between 400 and 500 families, but that is 400% higher than it ever used to be. With the ban on section 21 evictions again kicked into the long grass, I have no doubt that I will continue to see more and more families turn up at my weekly advice surgeries having been evicted from their homes and forced into temporary accommodation.

However, we can solve this crisis; it just needs the political will, which is, I would argue, something that we have been missing over the past 14 years. I do not know how anyone can say that building more social housing has been at the top of the Government's priority list, given that we have had 15 housing Ministers in 10 years, with an average tenure of nine months each. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) is very talented, and I know that she is sympathetic to our arguments and has helped the APPG on temporary accommodation greatly, but I think even she would find it difficult to struggle around this generational crisis in less than a year.

I try not to take things personally in politics, but when a Government treat housing as a political game—another hotseat for the latest Minister, only for them to be turfed out months later—it is difficult not to be angry. Never has this country needed a cross-party, long-term consensus about tackling our housing crisis more than it does now, and never have a Government seemed so ill equipped for that challenge. I appreciate that I may be biased, but the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities must be desperate for a Labour Government, just to give it some stability. I bet that a fair few of the 112,660 families living in temporary accommodation would like to see that, too.

Here is what we can do. There are 19,334 hectares of unbuilt green belt within a 10-minute walk of London train stations where there is enough space for 1 million new homes—that would be a very sensible start. Then,

we could look at dealing with land bankers: in 2019, the FTSE 100 house-building companies were sitting on land banks of more than 300,000 plots between them. That is even more land that could be used for some of the families I have mentioned today. Finally, it feels like stating the obvious, but we could bring back mandatory house-building targets for local authorities. It is incredibly important to bring back those targets, and I am glad that Labour Front Benchers have committed to do just that.

There is one party in this House refusing to build on the grey belt, removing housing targets and delaying the ban on section 21 evictions, and its Members are not sat on the Opposition Benches. I issue a plea to the Government: build the homes my constituents deserve, so that we can end the vicious cycle of temporary accommodation. The situation is desperate, and I hope that the Government give it the political will it deserves.

9.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), both for securing this important debate and for raising such important issues. I was delighted to work with her and her APPG on the new homelessness code of guidance for cots in temporary accommodation, and I look forward to working with her on other matters.

The whole House will agree that every child and every family deserves a decent, safe and secure home. First, that means making more good-quality, affordable homes available to families and having an effective safety net to prevent homelessness before it occurs. We are delivering on that goal by increasing supply: in the Conservative party manifesto, we committed to build 1 million homes in this Parliament, and we are on track to achieve that. I know that the hon. Lady is very genuine in her desire to see more housing starts, but I would simply say that London, under its Labour Mayor, was the worst-performing region for housing starts in 2022. We are delivering more affordable homes—nearly 700,000 since 2010—and scaling up that delivery through the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme, which will provide thousands of new homes for rent and sale across the country.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh: Last year, Merton Council had 72 two-bedroom properties and 34 three-bedroom properties to offer the 10,000 families on its housing register. The situation is so dire that it will not be long before a local authority goes bankrupt just on the back of temporary accommodation costs. Surely the Government have to intervene and do something.

Felicity Buchan: Yes, and I will go on to explain what the Government are doing. One of our schemes is the local authority housing fund, through which we have given £1.2 billion to local authorities so that they can build and purchase housing, both for recent arrivals such as Ukrainians and Afghans and for temporary accommodation. I believe that the hon. Lady's Borough of Merton was a beneficiary in round 2 of the local authority housing fund, and received just under £750,000.

As I was saying, we have an affordable homes programme, which is a massive £11.5 billion programme that will provide thousands of new homes for rent and sale across

the country. As the hon. Lady mentioned, the quality of temporary accommodation is also very important. The number of non-decent homes has fallen by 2 million since 2010. What is more, from April we restored the local housing allowance rate to the 30th percentile. This means that 1.6 million low-income households will be on average about £800 a year better off, making it more affordable for families on benefits to rent properties in the private sector.

Navendu Mishra: I am grateful to the Minister for mentioning the local housing allowance. It has been uprated, but rents in Stockport are already some of the highest in Greater Manchester and the north-west, and local housing allowance is not sufficient to meet market needs in Stockport. Will she revisit this issue, and specifically look at the rates in Greater Manchester and the north-west, reflecting not only on the need but on the average rates?

Felicity Buchan: The local housing allowance has been uprated to the 30th percentile, which means people should be able to afford the bottom 30% of properties on that allowance; the intention is not that they can afford every property. The provision falls under the Department for Work and Pensions, but there is an ongoing commitment to review the local housing allowance.

Ultimately, we all want to avoid people facing homelessness in the first place, and we are putting almost £2.4 billion over three years towards tackling this issue, including £1.2 billion through the homelessness prevention grant. Since the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 came into force in 2018, more than 740,000 households have been prevented from losing their housing or have been supported into settled accommodation. The Act supports the most vulnerable, including by providing temporary accommodation to pregnant women and victims of domestic abuse. We have come a long way, but I recognise that challenges remain and the impact that living in temporary accommodation is having on too many families.

The hon. Lady mentioned the data from the National Child Mortality Database. Clearly, that is incredibly concerning, and it is why we updated the homelessness code of guidance in February to make it clear that temporary accommodation should not be considered suitable for a family with children under two years old if there is not enough space for a cot, and that housing authorities should support families to secure a cot where needed.

Where families are placed in temporary accommodation, I share the ambition to improve housing quality across the board, and to ensure that families know how to complain when they are being let down. This is the thinking behind the new proactive consumer regime being introduced via the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, which gives the Regulator of Social Housing new tools to hold social landlords to account. The current review of the decent homes standard and measures in the Renters (Reform) Bill also aim to strengthen standards and regulation across all tenures, including temporary accommodation.

The hon. Lady mentioned the health and education impacts of living in temporary accommodation, and that is something I want to dig into more deeply. I had a conversation last week with the Shared Health Foundation,

[*Felicity Buchan*]

with which I know she spends time. We had a productive conversation, and I commit to working across Departments to look at improving health and education impacts for those in temporary accommodation. We are committed to ensuring that all children, especially the most vulnerable in our society, are safe and have access to an excellent education. That is why we are providing more than £2 billion in 2024-25 through the pupil premium to support disadvantaged pupils, which will include many who live in temporary accommodation.

Concerns have been raised with me that children, and indeed adults who are in temporary accommodation, may lose their places on NHS waiting lists if they move out of their integrated care board area. I have been reassured by colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care that that should not be the case. I know

that was a concern of the Shared Health Foundation, and I am happy to follow up on any of those concerns, but that should not be the case.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Lady for raising these issues. None of us wants to see large numbers of people in temporary accommodation. We want those numbers to fall, which is why we have a series of Government initiatives such as the homelessness prevention grant, the local authority housing fund and the local housing allowance rate. It is clear that we must address the drivers and impact of homelessness on children living in temporary accommodation. We all need to work collectively to get those numbers down and do the best we can for the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Question put and agreed to.

9.16 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 20 May 2024

[CAROLYN HARRIS *in the Chair*]

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods

[*Relevant document: Summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and accessibility, reported to the House on 14 May 2024, HC 188.*]

4.30 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 632748 and 651094 relating to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and accessibility.

It is a pleasure, Mrs Harris, to serve under your chairmanship. The petitions call for an independent review and an exemption for blue badge holders, and were signed by more than 17,000 people. I congratulate the creators of the petitions, Mike Spenser and Mark De-Laurey, who are here today. Many thanks to the Petitions Committee for producing a survey, completed by 7,000 people, to which I will refer in my speech.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods, or LTNs, are traffic-control measures that reduce motorised traffic within a limited area. They are intended to make active travel more comfortable and enhance public spaces for pedestrians. Studies have shown that there are benefits, from improved road safety to better health outcomes, as people are encouraged to walk and cycle rather than drive. Their introduction, however, has proven to be controversial in some of our communities.

There is an irony in the fact that the introduction of LTNs was intended to bring communities together when, in some cases, they have now become a source of controversy. Of the respondents to the Petitions Committee survey, 78% said that LTNs had a “negative” or “very negative” effect on them, with only 17% saying that LTNs had a “positive” or “very positive” effect on them.

I support the efforts to create a more sustainable transport system, and actions to tackle what is a climate emergency. It is my intention to use this debate to present some of the challenges and to put forward recommendations for action that can be taken to prevent the problems that so many of our communities have experienced.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): More than 28,000 deaths a year are linked to air pollution. Does my hon. Friend, who has begun her speech excellently, agree that much more needs to be done to monitor and reduce air pollution, so that we can improve the quality of life for us and our constituents?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I absolutely agree with her, and I will come on to that later in my speech. It is really important that we tackle not only air pollution and air quality but some of the inequalities that may come about as a result of some of the changes being introduced.

Although the basic idea of LTNs dates back to the 1970s, the latest wave and the name itself are far more recent. During the pandemic, the Conservative Government encouraged local authorities in areas with high public

transport use to reallocate road space to help to enforce social distancing and encourage active travel. Statutory guidance was issued, and the Government’s active travel fund provided money for LTNs as experimental traffic orders, or ETOs. Many would argue that that is where the problem possibly started.

Although the reasoning behind the introduction of LTN measures was understandable given the circumstances, the way in which they were implemented has created problems. As they were introduced as ETOs, the usual legal obligations to carry out a full consultation were often waived, and some councils decided to perform their public sector equality duty on a rolling basis. This resulted in changes being imposed on communities without their input or approval, often without sufficient information, and with little regard for equality considerations.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I stated back in March ’22 that I was concerned that continuing with the roll-out of LTNs in my area before bus prioritisation would worsen congestion, further negatively impact bus uptake and increase division around active and public transport measures in Oxford’s communities. As my hon. Friend is stating clearly and eloquently, the timing of the introduction of LTNs in cities like Oxford has underlined the lack of a joined-up approach to the issues.

Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the manner in which the Conservative Government initially funded these projects, stating that LTN money could not be used for longer-term, more integrated transport plans? Does she agree that while many local residents will understandably support LTNs in the streets they live on, if we are to tackle the climate crisis, we have to ensure that everyone, not just those on higher incomes, can get from A to B and travel in a cleaner, greener way? People who live on council estates surrounding city centres also need their transport needs considered.

Marsha De Cordova: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes the point that we must ensure that communities are brought along on this journey and that there are challenges that the Government have not addressed.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I will make some progress.

Common complaints about LTNs have included the shifting of traffic to boundary or sacrificial roads, increased congestion, barriers for emergency services, worsening pollution and a negative knock-on effect on public transport. Many communities that have been impacted by traffic moving to densely populated areas are from poorer and black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. One survey respondent described the impact, saying:

“The traffic was pushed out of [an] extremely wealthy [area] and onto the roads of the poor...The result was complete GRIDLOCK. The arterial roads remain highly congested to this day and it is horrible and stressful to be stuck in polluted traffic for hours on a journey that should take mere minutes.”

The introduction of LTNs has in some cases had a greater impact on disabled people, with 86% of those who responded to the survey saying that LTNs had a “negative” or “very negative” impact on them. Some of

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

the concerns included the installation of bollards and planters, locked dropped kerbs, excessively longer journeys, which are not only inconvenient but lead to higher costs, and the failure to exempt blue badge holders from LTN schemes.

Increased travel times are not just mild inconveniences. Many disabled people often find commuting far more exhausting. In the most extreme cases, the added hassle caused by the longer journey time makes travel difficult, robbing them of the energy they need for when they arrive at their destination. Worryingly, travel times were also linked to the increased cost of petrol and taxi fares, adding to the financial burden borne by disabled people. That has the potential to prevent them from travelling or, worse, to keep them trapped in their homes. Someone living with multiple conditions said:

“The LTN has added to my journey times and costs and also my fatigue levels are increased due to the extra stress and travelling, added to this I suffer with anxiety as MS means I sometimes need access to a toilet quickly, with my journey time now increased threefold it makes it very difficult.”

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent speech she is making. The LTN she describes sounds as if it has physical barriers. Does she agree that where an LTN is enforced through camera technology and residents can enter or leave their homes by the route that suits them best, they do not suffer from the problems she has described so well?

Marsha De Cordova: Making sure that routes are accessible is crucial, and using technology such as cameras can be a way forward. I will come to that shortly.

Ruth Cadbury: Sorry.

Marsha De Cordova: That’s fine—no need to apologise!

Moreover, not all LTNs have blue badge exemptions; that is the focus of one of the petitions we are debating. Although LTN schemes are different everywhere and councils have different policies for blue badge holders, disability is not a geographical issue. The lack of exemptions has led to there being a postcode lottery. One respondent to the Petitions Committee survey said:

“I cannot take my mother who has a blue badge to medical appointments as it would result in going through an LTN and getting a fine.”

Southwark Council in London recently had to scrap its plans for a low-traffic neighbourhood after a backlash from residents, including local disability groups, as blue badge holders and disabled motorists would not be exempt. Many of the benefits of LTNs do not help disabled people. For instance, active travel measures such as cycling infrastructure are not always accessibly designed. Narrow cycle lanes, designed with a standard two-wheel bike in mind, cannot be used by trikes or other non-standard vehicles. This really is about creating an inclusive public realm.

The accessibility issues around LTNs show that society is rarely designed with the needs and interests of disabled people in mind, and that often leads to their exclusion. In fact, many of the issues predate the introduction of the schemes and stem instead from the existing barriers.

LTNs are inaccessible because street spaces themselves are not inclusive, so simply removing them is not a solution, as the status quo ante was not always inclusive and accessible.

A basic principle of the disability rights movement has always been, “Nothing about us without us”, which signals the importance of consultation and co-production in any policymaking that impacts our lives. Given the sometimes routine exclusion of disabled people from decision making, the existing approach to policy development has had and will have a wide impact. Poor consultation on low-traffic neighbourhoods and their imposition in a time of national crisis has allowed controversy to arise.

At first glance, the Department for Transport’s review in March this year shows support for LTNs, but the responses were based on a limited set of data. The surveys featured were limited to residents of only four geographical areas, and they had a low response rate. The review also failed to consult public health professionals, older and disabled people’s groups, and those representing black, Asian and ethnic minority communities.

The Government have issued guidance on the implementation and monitoring of LTNs, which could help to ensure that future schemes are more inclusive and have community buy-in and support, but given some of the concerns about the Government’s review, there is a case, outlined in petition 632748, for an independent review that has a specific focus on the impact on disabled people and consults all the relevant people and stakeholders. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government will agree to that? In the short term, LTNs must permit access to blue badge holders, as Mike Spenser called for in his petition.

A more sophisticated LTN design might include cameras, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) mentioned, to permit other vehicles and allow disabled people to access areas via any vehicle they choose, including taxis. Not all disabled people are blue badge holders, and many of them rely on public transport, including taxis.

Another recommendation could be for the temporary suspension of LTNs introduced during the pandemic until legal obligations are met and assessments and proper traffic baselines have been carried out. Although LTNs are the responsibility of local authorities, will the Government consider updating the guidance so that such an approach can be adopted? The current guidance is based on legislation that can lead to statutory requirements to consult, but if a traffic regulation order is made, key stakeholders such as the police and ambulance service must always be consulted.

There is also a requirement in the regulations to consult other organisations that represent people likely to be affected by the provisions of the order, as the local authorities see fit, but have the Government considered amending the legislation to put in place a mandatory requirement to consult other groups and stakeholders, such as those representing disabled people? LTNs can work in certain areas if they are supported by the community, which includes those who live on boundary and sacrificial roads. To enable that, will the Minister agree to develop a national framework for local authorities to use when planning new LTNs and monitoring existing and new schemes?

Successful and sustainable improvements to our transport system and public realm must always consider the interests of all who will be affected. Disabled people know this all too well; however, the interests of all communities everywhere can benefit from this simple lesson, and we can avoid the problems that we see today. I think all of us present can take that point. I am sure the House will agree that for a system or a scheme to work, it is important that we bring our communities together behind us so that all schemes can be successful.

4.45 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for introducing this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and every one of those members of the public who chose to add their names to the petitions and take part in this debate.

I represent a constituency that has thankfully not had low-traffic neighbourhoods inflicted on it, and I am here to argue that we do not want them. We have seen how they operate next door in Enfield, and we do not want that kind of traffic mayhem transported into our borough. I want my constituents to be able to get where they want to go without too much unnecessary hassle.

A successful economy depends on movement and mobility, and schemes that deliberately cause traffic delays by restricting access to our road network cause economic damage. Ultimately, such schemes make the economy grow less vigorously than it would otherwise have done, and make everyone worse off than they would otherwise have been.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Battersea, this is not just an issue that impacts people who drive cars; it affects people in buses, taxis and vans, all of which are hit by the congestion caused by LTNs. We all know that local businesses suffer when their customers and suppliers find it harder to get to them, which is another consequence of the schemes. However, people's simple freedom to live their lives in the way they want is also restricted by this kind of anti-car measure, which inflicts unnecessary delay and headaches on them.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The right hon. Lady makes a powerful point that people should live their lives as freely as possible, without too many interventions, and should therefore be free to use their car. Does she not recognise that other road users, such as people who walk or cycle or young people who try to walk to school, but who feel that cars are endangering them or making them less free to use the road, are on the other side of the argument?

Theresa Villiers: Of course, I am a strong supporter of measures that have a positive impact on cycling safety, and we must ensure that the rules of the road strike the proper balance to protect vulnerable road users. However, I do not believe that LTNs are the way to deliver that.

Ruth Cadbury: Like me, the right hon. Lady represents an outer London suburban borough. In her constituency, are there really no residential roads that are a continuous traffic jam as rat-runners queue to get to the main road by missing the main junctions? Before LTNs were implemented, the residents of those roads, such as Wellesley Road in Chiswick or the Teesdales in Isleworth,

did not have the freedom to go home or leave home in their own cars because of the continuous traffic jams outside their homes.

Theresa Villiers: Of course, I accept that rat-running takes place, but again, I do not believe that LTNs are the right way to deal with that; there are much better alternative ways to manage traffic that should be considered first. I am especially concerned that older people, who perhaps do not find it as easy to get around as they used to, are particularly disadvantaged by LTN schemes, as that generation might be dependent on their cars or on taxi transport. It would certainly help if blue badge holders were exempted from the schemes, but that does not cover the millions of people with very real mobility impairments that are not serious enough to qualify for those badges.

On the rationale for the schemes, we are told that it is to get us out of our cars and make us walk and cycle, but what about the parents of young families who cannot simply load their young family on to a bicycle, as blithely advocated by the Mayor of London and Transport for London?

We also live in an era of increased awareness and concern regarding crimes against women, so we must also listen to the women who feel real fear and insecurity because an LTN means they can no longer be dropped off right outside their home by a taxi when they come home at night. They might find it more difficult to get taxi transport because they live in an LTN. The equalities impact of LTNs and a range of anti-car measures were not properly taken into account before the schemes were introduced.

As I have said before, I am a strong supporter of measures to improve cycling safety, but dogmatic measures forcing cars out of more and more road space are not the right answer and the air-quality benefits of LTNs are heavily contested. The additional congestion that they cause on main roads might worsen emissions in those locations, which are often places where people on lower incomes live, including many people from minority ethnic communities. Again, the equalities impact of the schemes is severe.

Traffic does not evaporate when we close roads, much as TfL would wish it to. It just moves to a different road. An area can be told to put up with increased emissions because a more affluent nearby street has demanded an LTN. Such projects can be extremely socially divisive, as has been clearly illustrated by the debate in places like Tower Hamlets.

Roads policy from the Mayor of London and London Labour boroughs has too often seemed to reflect the views of a limited number of vocal pressure groups, rather than the broader consensus of opinion and rather than embracing the views of women, minority ethnic communities, the elderly and the disabled. Consultation has far too often been inadequate, not least because it tends to focus only on the people who live in the street to be included in the LTN and ignores those who travel through those streets or the roads on to which traffic is displaced.

Wera Hobhouse: The right hon. Lady is being generous in accepting interventions, and I thank her for that. I used to be a councillor—not in my constituency but in another local authority—and the problem was always

[Wera Hobhouse]

one of consultation, which I fully agree with. More people should be consulted on planning applications, but the argument is always about what is mandatory and what a councillor must do to consult, which is quite narrow. We know that councils are all cash-strapped and do not have the ability to consult more widely. Does she agree that we need a mandate to consult more widely, as well as the funds for that?

Theresa Villiers: If councils are not able to consult adequately, they should not introduce the schemes in the first place. Over the past 24 hours I have received emails from many people, particularly in London but beyond as well, which seem to me to be cries for help from people who are frustrated that their lives have been turned upside down by the schemes.

LTNs are an experiment that have failed. They harm our economy and our capital city, and they punish people just for trying to get around in a bus, a car or a taxi. It is time to halt the introduction of new LTNs and time for the Government and the Minister to intervene to start removing existing LTNs. The madness must stop.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I call Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg. [Interruption.] Sorry, Sir—Wera Hobhouse.

4.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris, and thank you for upgrading me to Sir Wera. We are having a good debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on introducing it so thoroughly. I also congratulate the people who signed the petition so that we could have the debate. Of course, the whole point of these debates is that they come to the House because people want us to debate certain issues, and I am always in favour of doing so; it is important that we do.

In many of our local council areas, low-traffic neighbourhoods have become very contentious, with both opposition and support. The term LTN is new, but the concept is not: the planning principles of LTNs have been used in street design since at least the 1960s. The concept has suddenly become controversial because of the motives behind LTNs, such as reducing traffic and encouraging active travel, and because they are at odds with the Government's new-found pro-driver policy.

Most of us are all sorts of things: we are motorists, we are pedestrians, and we are cyclists; we use the road in all sorts of ways. It is important to look at the issue in the round and to understand the different uses of the road by different users. It is particularly important, as has been mentioned, to ensure that vulnerable road users are not excluded from our streets. That is an important principle to which all local councils need to adhere.

In Bath, my local council has been very brave in introducing a wide range of LTNs—12 in total. That has created a lot of reasons for people to write to me. I have had 57 people write to me about LTNs, but there are 70,000 people in my constituency, so although 57 is a relatively large number, we have to think about the number of people as a proportion. We are usually written

to by people who do not agree with what is being done, rather than by those who agree with what is being done. Among the 57 are people who agree with LTNs. One wrote recently:

“Dear Wera, I just wanted to write in support of these zones. As a cyclist (walker and motorist) they are wonderful for those neighbourhoods. I live on the...estate and there have been moans about the LTZ at Sidney place—I have not noticed a change in the congestion myself and fully support the trial.”

I congratulate my local council on having been brave, as well as on making the LTNs a trial. Councils have to be careful to support what they introduce with data, and I have challenged my own council to provide such data to local communities and to those who oppose LTNs. I have facilitated access between local groups who are opposed to a particular LTN and councillors and council officers, so that we have discussions and so that people understand what LTNs are for, what is being measured, what the council wants to achieve and how LTNs can improve our neighbourhoods. It is important that each council is transparent about what it wants to achieve, provides the data, and communicates and engages, as we have heard. The council must ensure that it includes as many people as possible in the debate about how it wants to move forward.

An official study commissioned by the Prime Minister, which was intended to show that LTNs are unwanted, concluded that they are genuinely popular, particularly once they are implemented. The Department for Transport surveyed residents in LTN trial areas in London, Birmingham, Wigan and York: 45% of respondents supported the schemes, 21% opposed them, and 58% were unaware that they lived in a low-traffic neighbourhood.

It is no wonder that the Government delayed the publication of the study, because ultimately it produced the opposite of what the Government thought it would produce. Despite the results of its own report, the Department for Transport has said that it will no longer provide central funding for LTNs, and there are also plans to cut councils off from Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency databases.

This debate must be evidence-led. As I have said, it should be about the evidence, not about what people fear. Change is always difficult; managing change is one of the most difficult things that we have to do as politicians, as I remember well from my time as a councillor. People are afraid of change, and the most important thing that we need to do as political leaders is respond to and communicate on people's fears about change.

The debate has to be evidence-based, and there are some legitimate concerns, as we have already heard. For example, disabled people worry about their mobility. In most cases, proper consultation, comprehensive exemptions and more accessible transport options are solutions that widely dispel those fears. LTNs themselves must be fully accessible, with dropped kerbs and no street clutter, otherwise disabled people feel penalised for driving without access to alternatives. As I have already said, whenever there are concerns, people can write to me, and usually those fears are dispelled once they fully understand how the schemes are implemented.

LTNs have clear benefits: they improve air quality, increase the number of journeys made by walking and cycling, and show reductions in street crime. A study found that after three years, street crime decreased by 18%, with an even larger reduction found for violent

crimes, and the most significant reduction for sexual assaults. One study found a 50% reduction in road casualties within LTNs with no increase on neighbouring roads. I know the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) is going to speak because what is being done in Bath city centre will affect neighbourhoods in his constituency. People fear the possible result in neighbouring wards or boundary streets, but clear evidence from the surveys shows that there is no such result. If there is evidence of it, of course we need to look at that.

Early findings indicate that LTNs make neighbourhoods a lot safer after they have been introduced. Air pollution is an invisible killer. A claim often made by opponents of LTNs is that emissions increase outside the designated LTN, but there is little evidence to suggest that that is the case. Researchers at Imperial College London found that NO₂ declined by 5.7% within liveable neighbourhoods, and 8.9% on boundary roads. The Government's own report acknowledges:

“By reducing traffic and emissions, LTNs can contribute to a cleaner, safer environment”.

Improvements to air quality, coupled with increases in active travel, contribute to healthier lifestyles, with long-term benefits through reducing demand on the NHS.

It is unfortunate that an unhelpful argument has broken out between central Government and local authorities. Local authorities want to work with Government to reduce emissions and make our roads safer, but this Government are intent on reducing councils' abilities to do so. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said that councils should consult more widely, and I agree with that. It is the best way of increasing democracy and allowing people to be part of the decisions made in their neighbourhoods. However, councils do not have the money or resources to do that, so the mandatory requirement is very limited, and although money is being put towards wider consultation, councils are being hampered. I absolutely agree that councils must consult more widely in order to include a wider group of people, but they also need the money to do so, which they currently do not have.

That consultation would be great for democracy, except that we then have to think about how widely we consult. Is it the whole of the city? Is it the whole of the city and North East Somerset? Should it go beyond North East Somerset? Councils often end up consulting just the neighbours who are directly affected. As I have said, I am sad that this issue has ended up in debate, when we could have had an agreement across our communities, local government and central Government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I will speak at greater length later, but the main thrust of the petition is to seek a review. That is what the Government have done, and that is what we are debating today. The debate is about a review of LTNs, and she is characterising it as a “them or us” situation. With respect, I am not sure that is a fair approximation of the review sought by the petitioners, which is exactly what the Government have provided.

Wera Hobhouse: Absolutely; I agree. It is meant to be about a review, but I find the argument is often skewed towards the people who simply object. I am happy to listen to what the Government have to say in response

and to what the review process is producing. In my constituency of Bath, we are in the middle of a big discussion about LTNs and their principles, and I speak as a constituency MP.

Implementing LTNs must be bottom up and not top down. Councils must work closely with residents when they intend to implement LTNs. I look forward to the wider discussion, but, as I said, there are many proven benefits to the principles of LTNs, and I hope those principles are not neglected in the Government's review.

5.5 pm

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I begin by saying what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris, and by thanking you for understanding that I will not be able to stay till the end? I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on her fine introduction to this important discussion and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on her speech, which I agreed with almost in its entirety.

It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). My seat is a doughnut seat: the hon. Lady is the jam in the centre of the doughnut, and I am the heavy, leavened dough that surrounds the hon. Lady's jam.

I wish to speak in the debate because of the effect that LTNs are having on my constituents. The anti-car policies that are being introduced have a big effect on people living in rural areas. They affect them as they try to go about their business without the concomitant benefits. An LTN being introduced in a city does not help someone living in a rural area who needs to go through, or do business in, that city. The fact that it also has effects on the businesses in the city is perhaps more a matter for the hon. Lady than for me, although many of my constituents own and have interests in businesses in Bath.

We have touched on consultation. As I understand it, opposition to the Sydney Place scheme has been 100:1 and more than 4,000 people have signed a petition against it—it is about not just the 57 who may have written to the hon. Lady, but the thousands of people living nearby who will be affected. We have to remember that, in 2022, 78% of journeys were taken by car and that, however much we wish to pretend otherwise, we are a society, a nation and an economy based on the internal combustion engine. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet said, that is where our economic activity comes from. It is how people get to their jobs and take their children to school. We have to make a choice, as a Government and as local councils, about what approach we take to politics. Do we really think that we should be telling people how to lead their lives? Should we tell them what is good for them and make them do it?

Ruth Cadbury: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. I do not know his seat well, but he has described it as a doughnut of the countryside around Bath. Would he not agree that, if everybody who can drive who lives in the centre of Bath or London drove everywhere, the whole road system would be gridlocked, and that providing safe alternatives—decent public transport, and safe routes to walk and cycle—takes up a lot less space than everybody driving their own vehicle?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady says that, but the self-same council that is keen on these low-traffic neighbourhoods has cut the number of buses in my constituency. It has kept most of them in Bath, but the ones in the rural areas it has cut like Billy-o.

Wera Hobhouse: It was the West of England Combined Authority Mayor who cut the number of buses in Bath, and my councillors have made many representations about that. Traffic has been one of the biggest issues ever since I turned up in Bath over 10 years ago, and traffic has doubled in the past 15 years. How does the right hon. Gentleman propose that we deal with that?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am glad the hon. Lady asked me that question because, before the Lib Dems took charge of the Bath and North East Somerset Council, I was working with the previous council on the Bath bypass. That would have joined the A36 and the A46 and been the most sensible thing to do, but in accordance with this whole LTN, anti-motorist approach, as soon as the Lib Dems got in, they did not want the bypass. Why? Because they hate the motorist. They do not like people taking charge of their own lives; they think they know best and they want to tell people what to do. That is why this approach is so bad.

I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to take away the funding from the schemes, to apply the rules and guidance that came out, I think, on 17 March, to make them into firm law and to implement them on the schemes that are already in place. We should be on the side of freedom and of liberty, of people going about the lives that they choose to lead, rather than thinking that we know best.

The thing that has reduced pollution has been not LTNs, but improvements in the internal combustion engine and, most crucially, the move away from diesel engines. Bear in mind, it was not that long ago that the know-all Government were telling people it was such a good thing to have diesel engines. People were pushed into having them and the percentage of diesel engines in this country shot up. Why? Because the Government of the day wanted to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and ignored the emissions from particulates and oxides of nitrogen, and that led to a decline in the air quality where cars were, which is being improved now, as people have gone back to petrol engines or diesel engines have been improved.

That is the way to do things, to maintain liberty, freedom and choice, and to recognise that the overwhelming majority of journeys are taken by car and that the free flow of traffic is essential to our economy. The Government made a decision in the emergency of the pandemic to do something that seemed to be a solution at the time. Many decisions were taken during the pandemic that, with hindsight, turned out to be wrong. This is one of them. It is time to reverse it. It is time to back freedom and the motorist.

5.12 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Harris.

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on her excellent introduction to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to a review of low-traffic neighbourhoods, but I certainly hope that they are not stopped, as the

right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) have suggested they should be.

In my constituency, measures to create what we might now call low-traffic neighbourhoods have been in place for decades. On Chiswick Lane, a barrier that keeps traffic from cutting through from Chiswick High Road to the A4 via Airedale Avenue, Netheravon Road and Beverley Road has been there for more than 40 years. Worpole Road in Isleworth is closed to through traffic trying to take a shortcut from the A316 over to Old Isleworth. Pears Road in Hounslow used to be a back road avoiding Hounslow High Street and Hanworth Road. Chiswick Common Road has long since been cut off as a vehicle route from Chiswick High Road to Turnham Green Terrace. Those have been in place for a long time. They use physical barriers such as bollards and planters, and no one—no one—has contacted me or their local councillors demanding their removal. Furthermore, if those barriers were to be removed, there would be many objections.

Such measures to prevent rat-running were implemented because there was an issue for residents on those roads. The number of drivers avoiding traffic jams on main roads by using residential side roads grew over the past 10 or so years, in particular, following the mass use of real-time sat-navs.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree that a council does not pick issues out of thin air, but responds to residents writing to the council in large numbers to say that they want change? The council does not just decide to do something to annoy people.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Lady makes a good point. My experience is with Hounslow. I cannot say whether each local authority implemented change that was needed—or whether they plucked ideas out of thin air in 2020—but that is certainly the case in Hounslow.

The nightmare for residents who live on roads that are rat runs, particularly since the mass use of sat-navs, is that it varies; at some times of the day there is speeding, and at others there are continuous traffic jams, with vehicles spewing fumes and preventing residents from driving into or out of their own road. That environment takes away the freedom of children and older people to feel safe walking around their neighbourhood, particularly at junctions and crossroads. National figures show that more people cycle where they feel safe. Many of us own bikes but are not brave enough to cycle when roads are busy.

All the low-traffic neighbourhood measures that were implemented in Hounslow in 2020 were introduced in neighbourhoods or on roads where residents had long been angry about the impact of rat-running and had been calling on their councillors—I was one of them—for action for years. The measures introduced by the Government in 2020, during covid, which are probably the one thing I can compliment former Prime Minister Boris Johnson on, provided regulatory change and the funding to make implementation by local authorities happen quickly.

Local authorities, including Hounslow, used temporary measures to try out what worked. Some roads are now low-traffic neighbourhoods as a result of that work, including the whole south Chiswick area, which I will

come to shortly; Green Dragon Lane, a road with almost all social rent housing where only a minority of people have use of a private vehicle; Occupation Lane in Brentford, at the top end of a council estate; and the Teesdales near West Middlesex University Hospital, where there were continuous battles between drivers trying to pass each other on a narrow road with resident parking.

Since they were implemented on those roads and others in Hounslow, the LTN measures have been achieving exactly what residents had asked of the council. They are stopping through traffic using the road as a shortcut while allowing residents to pass freely. Residents can drive into and out of their roads, and walk to and from their homes safely, especially when crossing and at corners. No longer are there long traffic jams with vehicles spewing out fumes and drivers getting angry when trying to pass.

Some of the schemes were revised. One was tried that removed through traffic from Turnham Green Terrace in Chiswick, a popular shopping street with very narrow pavements. The idea was to make it more business friendly, but local councillors asked for it to be removed, so it was. The schemes can be modified. Another popular shopping street, Devonshire Road, was closed completely. Concerns were expressed by the shop owners, but not by the restaurant and bar owners, so Devonshire Road is now open to through traffic during the day so that people can access the shops, but in the evening it reverts to a traffic-free road with tables and chairs outside on the carriageway, which benefits the restaurants and bars.

Physical barriers are not the only tool. In many cases there are often far better tools to create a low-traffic neighbourhood. Hounslow has made extensive use of camera technology and enforcement so that any vehicle can enter and leave a neighbourhood or road whichever way suits its driver, so long as it enters and leaves by the same way it came in, or arrives, stays and then leaves later.

I want briefly to address school streets, which are a subset of liveable neighbourhoods. There have been over 30 in Hounslow, and headteachers have told me of their benefits. They have cut out a lot of the conflict between the tiny minority of parents who insist on driving their children to school and the much larger number of parents who walk their children to school and get very angry at the behaviour of some selfish drivers. Those drivers are no longer able to have close access to the school. One headteacher told me that an awful lot of families are now walking to and from school rather than making a trip of a couple of hundred yards in a vehicle every day.

Hounslow's largest low-traffic neighbourhood started life before covid and was known as the south Chiswick liveable neighbourhood. Rat-running drivers seeking to avoid the Hogarth roundabout when travelling from the A3 or A316 to head west on the M4 or A4, or travelling either way between Chiswick bridge and Kew bridge parallel to the River Thames, had long been an issue. Thousands of vehicles a day were travelling straight through that neighbourhood without stopping, and most of them were long-distance; they were not local Chiswick vehicles.

In 2019, after full consultation, residents supported in principle the implementation of the liveable neighbourhood for south Chiswick. It was actually implemented in 2020 using the covid emergency measures, because funding had not been available prior to that. The impact has

been significant: a 50% drop in through traffic, more people walking and cycling, and a drop in average vehicle speeds. On the boundary roads, there were not greater traffic jams and higher volumes, but a reduction in traffic of between 2.8% and 9.3%, despite the closure of Hammersmith bridge. That suggests that low-traffic neighbourhoods encourage a modal shift away from private vehicle use and towards public transport, walking and cycling.

The most remarkable impact we have seen in Chiswick is the loss of a council seat in the 2022 elections by the party that campaigned vigorously against the low-traffic neighbourhood that had been implemented two years earlier. For the first time in 48 years, a Labour councillor was elected to represent the Chiswick Riverside ward—hardly evidence that local people hate the LTN.

Following concerns raised locally, Hounslow has made improvements to the LTN scheme, and could perhaps make some more. I would like to see improved signage warning drivers that they are entering an LTN. Another suggestion is the use of a “one strike and then you’re fined” rule to warn people not to drive through the area again. I have been fined for not being able to see a sign in an area I did not know very well. I was a bit annoyed with myself. It was a school street and I was driving through at the very end of the school street restrictions. That annoys people, and does not help their ability to support what I believe overall are very good policies.

There is no doubt that restricting through traffic in an area achieves its purpose if it is done well and there is a need, with less pollution directly outside people's homes, safer roads and easy access for residents. There is national evidence that there is more walking and cycling in quiet areas, and that more walking and cycling in retail areas—Walthamstow town in Waltham Forest being the best example—has strong economic benefits for local businesses and high streets. We know the benefits to tourism areas of easy, safe, segregated cycling infrastructure or quiet areas to cycle. I do not know how many other people look for cycling opportunities when they are going on holiday, but good cycling measures are a draw to tourists.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods, if they are implemented where they are needed, are properly consulted on and use clear signage and appropriate technology—camera enforcement or bollards and planters, as appropriate—can work.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for her speech. As she is drawing it to a close, and as she has said that low-traffic neighbourhoods can work, I want to pick up again on the barriers that disabled people face. Does she agree that it is important to co-produce the design of any low-traffic neighbourhood with disabled people and their organisations to ensure that they are inclusive? Does she also agree that those who have a blue badge should be exempt from such schemes?

Ruth Cadbury: As Front Bencher myself, I will defer to my colleague on the Front Bench today, although it seems to me that exemptions for blue badge holders would make sense, for the reasons that my hon. Friend gave in her speech.

Let us remember that disability is not one thing. Some disabled people rely on a private vehicle to get about. Many disabled people cannot drive, for all sorts of reasons. Many, particularly frail elderly people, can walk short distances, but need to feel safe. They want to

know that they can be seen at the corners of roads when trying to cross, so pedestrian build-outs and clear crossings, and so on, are essential. Good design is important, as is segregation between pedestrians and cyclists, where appropriate, so that no one fears being mown down by somebody cycling too fast in an area that should be for pedestrians. That is particularly true of one form of low-traffic neighbourhood: pedestrianised retail areas or town centres—although I am not sure whether we are talking about those in this context.

Nobody likes getting a fine for driving a route that they have always driven, but there is no reason why councils cannot use a first strike and then a fine the second time for those who did not notice the changed signage. I agree that we should consider exempting blue badge holders, particularly for a barrier-based LTN where the alternative journey is a long way round. However, if the proposals are not working and not delivering the improved environment that residents said they wanted, they can be reversed and something else can be tried.

The majority of my constituents do not have sole use of a private car and, being in London, do have alternative travel choices. Those who live on roads in LTNs should have the choice, so that, should they want to restrict their road, they can. They should not have the choice to use their road as a shortcut imposed on them by other drivers, particularly those who are not even local, such as—in our case—those driving between Surrey and Heathrow airport. Why should our residents have to put up with those drivers using their small residential roads as a shortcut?

5.28 pm

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to respond to this debate on behalf of the official Opposition with you in the Chair, Ms Harris. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for sponsoring the debate and all those who have added their names to these two important petitions: a petition calling for an independent review of low-traffic neighbourhoods and a petition calling for the exemption of blue badge drivers from low-traffic neighbourhoods.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions this evening—I have been getting better at learning the names of Members' individual constituencies, but bear with me if I get any of them wrong, Ms Harris. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) is quite right that we must continue to work hard to reduce the impact of air pollution on our constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said that we need a joined-up approach—I quite agree with that—and that everyone should be able to travel from A to B in a green way.

I heard a lot from the right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) about the so-called war on motorists and how there were alternatives to it. I have to say, I did not hear many mentioned, but I thank them for their advocacy on behalf of their constituents. I think this shows the importance of proper consultation and considerate planning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said that low-traffic neighbourhoods can work when they are supported by the residents they affect, but that that must include consultation and co-production with disabled people. I

agree with the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) that effective consultation is important and that the views of all the different kinds of road users should be taken into account. Crucially, I agree that the debate must be based on evidence. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) was right to draw attention to the ongoing consultation about LTNs. Where there is a clear need for change, action should be taken. Her recognition of the positive impact on school zones was also important.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods have become a common part of many communities across the country in recent years. They play an important part in delivering safer streets and cleaner air and in helping encourage people to use active travel to get around. We know that benefits local economies, improves physical and mental health and brings down carbon emissions.

In many areas, LTNs have become a core part of life for the communities who live in them, with many enjoying the reductions in noise and air pollution thanks to the reduction in congestion as a result of roads being closed to through traffic. Obviously, there often need to be exemptions: emergency services, public transport, permit holders, and sometimes taxis. However, the overall reduction in most through traffic from LTNs is still significant.

Studies have shown that in areas where LTNs have been introduced, traffic has been reduced by 32% on average, with only a 4.5% increase in traffic on boundary roads. Nitrogen dioxide pollution has fallen by up to 9% in some areas with those schemes. Inside LTNs in Waltham Forest, road injuries have fallen by up to half compared to before the schemes were introduced. Data shows that 61% of people living in low-traffic neighbourhoods support the schemes. It is important to talk about the benefits of the schemes, because, despite what the Government try to say, the evidence shows that for the most part they are popular with local people and effective at achieving the desired reduction in levels of pollution and road injuries.

However, not everybody who lives in low-traffic neighbourhoods supports the schemes. Some have legitimate criticisms of how the schemes have been designed and implemented. In some individual cases there has arguably been a failure to consider the needs of particular groups, including—as is the subject of one of the petitions—those with limited mobility and blue badge holders. We can all agree that local authorities that introduce the schemes should ensure that accessibility needs are carefully considered and prioritised as proposals are designed and consulted on.

Many low-traffic neighbourhoods already exempt blue badge holders, but many do not. The Government's own review on low-traffic neighbourhoods has found that of the LTNs surveyed, 38 exempted blue badge holders and 34 did not. It is clear that more can be done to ensure that LTNs consider the needs of those with limited mobility. I am interested to hear the Minister's views on how the needs of disabled people, and those with limited mobility, can be considered from the start of the process when it comes to designing and implementing low-traffic neighbourhoods.

There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that the needs of all constituents are properly considered, and supporting the right of local communities to make the right decisions for their areas. That point—that this is a decision for local communities—is extremely important.

Measures to improve road safety around schools and in residential streets are vital for the safety of children, are often demanded by local communities themselves, are essential to meeting legally binding objectives set by central Government on, for instance, air pollution, and are ultimately decisions to be made by those who know their local areas best.

Labour's position on low-traffic neighbourhoods is clear: they are decisions that should continue to be made by local authorities, not be decided by diktat from Whitehall or Westminster. Of course, these decisions must be made with proper consultation, and the concerns of each community must be taken on board. Central Government have a role to play in ensuring that is the case, but if we go too far we risk undermining the independence and autonomy of the elected local decision makers who know their areas best.

Although I appreciate the strength of views in the petition that calls for a review of LTNs, as colleagues have noted the Government recently commissioned a review and published it just weeks ago. It came after the Prime Minister claimed that he wanted to stop "hare-brained" safety schemes and the so-called "war on motorists", so let us look at some of its findings. Some 58% were unaware that they lived in low-traffic neighbourhoods altogether. Of those who were aware, more people were positive than negative. A clear majority of people were concerned about the number of vehicles travelling through their areas, and they were equally concerned about the pollution that they caused. That is not exactly the outcome it appears the Prime Minister was looking for when he commissioned the review. Perhaps that is why it was reported that the Government tried to permanently shelve it.

It would be remiss of me not to point out the pure hypocrisy behind the Government's apparent about-turn on low-traffic neighbourhoods. Despite decrying these schemes, which their own review have found to be largely unobtrusive and popular, as part of the so-called "war on motorists" senior Conservatives themselves championed the schemes from the start. In July 2021, a prominent politician described low-traffic neighbourhoods as "transformational", and warned:

"if you are going to oppose these schemes, you must tell us what your alternative is".

Who was that? It was the disgraced former Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

In November 2022, another distinguished colleague of ours in this House said that decisions on low-traffic neighbourhoods are

"entirely a matter for local authorities...to make."—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c.493.]

Who was that? Why, it was the right hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), the Chair of the Conservative party. Would the Minister like to tell us what the current Prime Minister thinks the alternative to these schemes is? Does he agree with the right hon. Member for North West Durham that they are best left to local authorities themselves to decide on?

It is increasingly clear that the Prime Minister's desperate attempts to deflect on to this so-called "war on motorists" are just hollow soundbites with no substance behind them. Just a quick look at his record confirms that. The cost of driving is soaring: car insurance costs are up 80% in just two years. The charge point roll-out for

electric vehicles remains off track. The Government are set to miss their own 2030 target of 300,000 public charge points by several years. The state of our local roads today is just shocking: there are more potholes on British roads than craters on the moon.

Despite the Prime Minister's and the Transport Secretary's desperate attempts to politicise local transport issues such as road safety, school streets and reducing local air pollution, the evidence tells us that these schemes remain largely popular, and that they are effective and inobtrusive for most people. Although the Prime Minister may be keen to airbrush history, not too long ago these very schemes were championed by the most senior figures in his own party.

Many LTN schemes are far from perfect, and there are perfectly legitimate questions about how to design them with sensitivity to the needs of constituents—especially disabled people and those with limited mobility. I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on how we can best support local authorities to do just that, but we should not forget the basic principle that decisions about local roads and local neighbourhoods are best made by those who live in those neighbourhoods and those who have been directly elected to represent them. These powers and responsibilities have been devolved to local government for many years. We should not let a desperate quest for political relevance from those at the top of Government to lead us to put our lives at risk, fail to tackle harmful air pollution and backslide on the basic principles of local democracy.

5.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for her introduction. I particularly thank everybody who submitted their name in support of the respective petitions.

Let me gently push back on the hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood). There is not a question of trying to politicise something given that the very purpose of the Petitions Committee is that we in Parliament answer a petition. It is not from any of us; it is from the people who put forward their names for a petition. Then, there are criteria from the Petitions Committee, and we then try to address and answer those petitions.

While I will get into the substance of this particular debate, the first and fundamental point, surely, is that traffic management has existed under various statutory formats for some considerable time, and the implementation of what is now called low-traffic neighbourhoods dates back in statute to the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) outlined regarding her area of Chiswick, there have been versions of that in some shape or form for a very long time, and local communities have co-existed with them on an ongoing basis.

However, there is no doubt that this issue has caused concern and is upsetting—and, in certain places, dividing—communities. It is also the case that the administration of the blue badge scheme, which dates back to section 21 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, is something that is causing genuine concern—I am going to try to address that in detail—by reason of the implementation of low-traffic neighbourhoods.

I want to try to address this debate as calmly and even-handedly as I possibly can. There are a number of reasons for that: both because I think it is the right thing to do as a Government Minister—where we are trying to navigate different sets of priorities in different local communities—and because, clearly, the purpose of the original petition was for Government to have a review. The review that we published on 17 March sets out in quite some detail the approach that the Government take, but it is a first version. The final version will be produced later this summer.

Marsha De Cordova: The Minister will know that, as part of any review, it is best to gauge the views of all key stakeholders. One key stakeholder group that really did not have an opportunity to contribute was older and disabled people. For example, the leading charity for transport issues, Transport for All, was not engaged or consulted as part of this review. Will the Minister agree to ensure that, as he publishes the future review, they will be consulted? It is so important that the voices of disabled people and their organisations are heard in this. Will he commit to that?

Guy Opperman: With great respect, I am going to push back slightly because, clearly, one of the key purposes of this review, which I am going to set out in quite a lot of detail, is an assessment of issues in relation to what are called exemptions and exceptions. Included as part of that are vehicles exempted from restriction—generally indicated on the traffic signs; those can include permit holders, buses, taxis and disabled badge holders. There is a detailed section on exactly that point, and there are further sections about how implementation should take place for that. More particularly, we are, on an ongoing basis, engaging with the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—or DPTAC—via the Local Government Association and individual local-government organisations. With respect, I will return to that in a little more detail later.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods clearly expanded during the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic. The rapid roll-out led to concerns that they were being imposed, and that communities had not been fully involved in their development. There were also concerns that the roll-out did not properly take into account the needs of many organisations, including disabled people, and representations were made in a whole host of ways, leading up to the actual review itself.

We have to accept that low-traffic neighbourhoods can work where they are well designed and where there is, crucially, local support for them. But they can also do harm where they are poorly thought through and introduced with insufficient public engagement and support.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am not going to give way to the hon. Lady yet; I want to try to make some progress. I will, of course, let her come in at a later stage.

The Government have been clear that effective traffic management is not about dictating travel choices, but about enabling more choice in how people make their journeys. Local traffic measures must work for residents, businesses and emergency services. We can bandy about examples of successes and failures—there is no doubt

whatever that there have been both—but it is clear that some communities have been upset and antagonised by low-traffic neighbourhoods. That is particularly true in London, and one could give examples from Tower Hamlets and, I believe, Ealing and Streatham. Certainly, as a cyclist in London, I have experienced and seen some, and I did a further visit to the Wandsworth Bridge Road last week. Some of those communities have introduced low-traffic neighbourhoods and then abandoned them.

Similarly, where I live in the north-east, a low-traffic neighbourhood was introduced in Jesmond. It has subsequently been abandoned, in circumstances where there has clearly been an impact on the local community, which was upset about how it was implemented, and a massive effect on businesses. There must be due consideration of the impact on local communities, which we all like to represent in our constituencies, and of the consequences of channelling all traffic, for example, on to one major road, while massively reducing traffic on side roads and impacting on parking. Businesses will unquestionably suffer as a result of a downturn in the local economy, and they have done so.

Anneliese Dodds *rose*—

Guy Opperman: I will not give way yet, so let me make some progress. We need to ensure that changes to local roads properly take account of communities' views and are implemented in a way that does not fundamentally dictate how people should travel.

I want to keep returning to the petitioners, because they are the people we are addressing today. The first petition asks that the Government carry out an independent review of LTNs. After the initial reply was sent in April last year, the Prime Minister announced in July that he was commissioning just such a review. He also set out—a fair point has been made—the plan for drivers, and a fundamental effort was made to look at all aspects of how transport was being undertaken.

The review of LTNs commenced in September last year, and set out to ensure that schemes work for residents, businesses and emergency services, the last of which have not, with respect, been mentioned as much as I thought they would be in the debate. This additional project was separate from the work already under way to review schemes funded through the second tranche of active travel funding, including a deep dive into the impact of segregated cycle lanes and low-traffic neighbourhoods. It included a literature review, a survey of local authorities in England, an in-depth study of four schemes, and interviews with key stakeholder groups.

The LTN review completed in January this year and concluded that there are some significant key issues with the implementation of LTN schemes in England. That was based on externally commissioned, independent research and analysis carried out by an independent contractor. I will not go into the details of the particular points that can be found upon reading. There has not been much reference today to the document of 17 March, but I strongly urge all colleagues to read it in detail. However, I have a little time, so I will set out the opening couple of paragraphs:

“Last year, the Department for Transport commissioned a review of low traffic neighbourhoods... The research shows that, while they can work, in the right place, and, crucially, where they

are supported, too often local people don't know enough about them and haven't been able to have a say. Increasingly and frustratingly, we see larger and larger low traffic schemes being proposed by some councils despite concerted opposition by local residents and by local businesses, and in some cases"

—as I have outlined—

"being removed again. This guidance makes it clear that should not happen.

It also sets out that, even if they are introduced, councils should continue to regularly review low traffic neighbourhoods, ensuring they keep meeting their objectives, aren't adversely affecting other areas, and are locally supported. This guidance makes clear our expectations, and... will carefully consider how councils follow it, alongside other appropriate factors, when looking at funding decisions."

I do not propose to read out a substantial review document, but it goes on to say:

"Ultimately government can make changes to the legal framework if advice is overlooked—although working cooperatively with local councils is by far preferred. We need a fair approach, where local support is paramount, and this guidance sets out how that can be achieved."

Wera Hobhouse: I do not think anybody in this room would disagree with anything the Minister has read out, because it is about the engagement that local councils have. For that reason, does he not agree that Bath and North East Somerset Council is taking exactly the right approach? It is having a trial period of LTNs, with proper success criteria that can be evidenced. If an LTN does not work against the success criteria, it will be removed. Is that not the right approach?

Guy Opperman: I do not propose to sit in judgment on an individual local authority's approach in trying to persuade local communities, which is the purpose of this process, that there should be restrictions on one cohort and that there might be difficulties for other cohorts—I include bus travel, emergency services and problems for the disabled—and to make an assessment of whether that individual local authority is doing a good or a bad thing. What I will say, however, is that, self-evidently, the things we have talked about are not happening up and down the country at present; that is patently clear. We can say that very clearly because a large number of local authorities are abandoning their LTNs.

Anneliese Dodds *rose*—

Guy Opperman: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I will let her come in in a second.

In answer to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), she should ensure that her local authority, if she has such influence, sets out an approach that tallies with the guidance and ensures that businesses, disabled groups and key organisations, including public transport and emergency services, are not adversely affected.

I echo the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg): there is a concern and a danger that those who benefit in the inner city will be impacted by those on the outskirts of local communities. We have seen exactly the same thing with traffic-exclusion zones and the ultra low emission zone, where there are very strong arguments for such measures. There is a very small traffic-management approach in the centre of Bristol, for example, but the wider London version measures hundreds of square miles, and the impact can patently be seen in the opposition

from some groups and the way in which it has been implemented. I hope that that answers the point from the hon. Member for Bath.

I promised the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) that I would give way, so I will do so now.

Anneliese Dodds: Does the Minister accept that his Department has been part of the problem? He talks about enabling choice, but I wrote to the Department for Transport in 2022 to say that there was a need for a joined-up approach and that there were concerns about how bus operators would operate, which was critical for people who were not able to cycle or walk. The response I got back did not say that my city could have a joined-up approach or that it could have longer-term funding. Instead, it effectively said, "This is the programme." If we really are going to have action on the climate crisis, perhaps his Department should have listened a little more.

Guy Opperman: I slightly regret giving way to the hon. Lady, who raises an individual letter about her individual city. The review is addressing something that has existed for many years, and the Government think they have come up with a balanced and measured approach. I would also make the point that other aspects of the implementation have to be done, as in her area, by the local authority. It is for her local authority to take the local community with it. If it is not taking the local community with it, it is incumbent on the local authority to look at how it is implementing these things and at whether it can continue to sustain that. With respect, multiple local authorities have failed to do that and have then had to abandon schemes, which sadly reflects badly on those local authorities.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Minister be clear with the House that no more central Government funding will go to these schemes? Government statements have indicated that there are circumstances in which access to the DVLA database might be restricted; how bad does a scheme have to be before the Government will consider taking that step?

Guy Opperman: I probably should not be taking so many interventions. I am trying to respond to the debate without prejudicing the final version of what is an interim review.

My right hon. Friend is a very experienced Cabinet Minister of old—that is not a very fair way of describing her previous experience—and she will understand that I have an obligation not to prejudice the final version of the review. I merely direct her to paragraph 3 of the foreword, which I did not read out—I was not going to read the whole thing out—but says that

"a consultation will also be launched on targeting the use of DVLA data by councils to enforce substandard LTNs and other anti-motorist traffic schemes."

If my right hon. Friend looks at the actual review, there are passages contained therein on funding. However, much as I said, the preference is to have worked with local authorities; it is only in extreme circumstances that the issue of funding that my right hon. Friend describes would come into play. I suggest she takes the individual document and awaits the final Government version, which will be there and responded to.

Simon Lightwood: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I am sorry but I will not. I have taken multiple interventions and am going to try to make some progress. I am only on page 6 of my speech, which was meant to take only 10 minutes.

The review that has taken place has flagged particular concerns over the impact on disabled residents, the high number of penalty charge notices, the cost of the LTN schemes, and even concerns from individual emergency services that delays to crews caught up in LTNs could potentially risk lives. Those are not concerns that should be under-managed in any way.

Many disabled residents, as well as groups representing the views of disabled transport users, felt that inadequate consideration had been given to their needs and the impacts of LTN schemes on disabled people. In addition, several LTN schemes reported by local authorities to the DfT had not carried out equality impact assessments. We believe we have tackled these issues through the draft guidance, which sets out clear expectations for comprehensive and in-depth local engagement and full consideration of the needs of all road users in such a scheme.

We are clear that we will not support LTNs in future unless they are designed and delivered having had regard to the new statutory guidance, which will apply to new and existing schemes. Although it is guidance, we reserve the right to take further action if local authorities do not follow it. Local authorities are expected to consider the guidance. As with the new guidance on 20 mph limits, those that do not follow it could find implications for the future award of funding. As I have set out, I will pass that message on.

On the key accessibility point, the Government are committed to improving transport accessibility and supporting disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else. The LTN review found that too many schemes had not fully considered the impact of the changes on disabled people. I make the point that local authorities are bound by the public sector equality duty, and it is for them to ensure that they fully consider the impact of any proposed scheme in such a way. Any infrastructure they install should be delivered in a way that enables them to comply with equalities legislation.

The second petition we are debating requested that a flag be added to DVLA records to identify vehicles that belong to blue badge holders, so that they can be automatically exempted from any restriction and not attract enforcement activity. Although I understand the concern, I am afraid that currently that is not a viable solution. I will try to address in detail why that is the case. Clearly, blue badges are linked to the individual and not the vehicle. A badge holder may travel as a driver or a passenger in any vehicle, including a taxi or minicab, allowing them to access more easily the goods and services that they need to use. Therefore it is not possible to flag with the DVLA every vehicle in which a blue badge holder may travel. Likewise, although local authorities have access to a record of blue badge holders in their area, badges are registered to the individual and not the vehicle in which they travel.

Notwithstanding that, our draft LTN guidance makes it clear that local authorities should always consider exemption from restrictions for blue badge holders, as well as for deliveries and other essential services. It also

addresses things such as emergency services. Again, I do not want to read out the entirety of it, but I encourage anyone who is passionately interested or who is contemplating this matter to look at the sections on exemptions and exceptions and how the individual situation for disabled people can be improved. The guidance sets that out in quite a lot of detail.

To answer the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) when she identified particular problems, I make the strong point that there should be considered, ongoing, good-practice principles of monitoring and evaluation, in line with the active travel fund monitoring guidance, but, where local authorities detect hotspots, where a disproportionate number of PCNs are issued or where representations or appeals are being made, that should alert them to a possible need to review the cause. The monitoring of PCNs and challenge levels should be carried out from the outset. That clearly includes monitoring the impact on local communities, the impact on the disabled, the impact on individual businesses, and the way in which the fines are being taken.

I cannot address much more, given the nature of the guidance being an unfinished document that the Government have to respond to.

Simon Lightwood: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Guy Opperman: Very well.

Simon Lightwood: I will be brief. In my reading of the Department for Transport website and the “Low Traffic Neighbourhoods” research report, at no point is it mentioned that it is an interim or draft report. Will the hon. Member elaborate on that and explain, if it is an interim report, when the final report is expected?

Guy Opperman: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has misinterpreted that. The final report will be this summer.¹

The situation in terms of the way ahead is that we need to find a way in which our local communities can use a process that has been around for a considerable time and managed in local communities in, by and large, a satisfactory way, but has clearly been expanded substantially over the last few years. We need to find a way in which the Government can provide the guidance and then local authorities can implement the schemes in an appropriate way. If they are not implemented in an appropriate way, clearly there have to be consequences.

I assure the petitioners, who are the most important people here, that we are working to ensure that local authorities give proper consideration to the needs of all users and gain buy-in across the local community, in all shapes and forms, when discussing and then implementing any local authority LTN schemes.

6.3 pm

Marsha De Cordova: First, I again thank not only the original petitioners for creating the petitions but the thousands of people who took the time to sign them, and the many thousands who responded to the Petitions Committee’s survey on low-traffic neighbourhoods and accessibility.

1.[Official Report, 21 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 10WC.](Correction)

I also thank all the hon. Members who spoke today. It was a robust debate, despite the Minister's response. I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), who is no longer in his place, and my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for their contributions.

I must say that in my view the Minister failed to address some of the points that I raised in my questions about the accessibility of the schemes and the need for an independent review. We ask for an independent review because sadly the Government carried out a review that was not exhaustive and did not include many key stakeholders, such as disabled people. We learned today that it was an interim review and that a review will be published in the summer. I am lost for words as to what to say about that, other than to make a final plea to the Government, once again, to ensure that

disabled people are included as part of the review. Involving committees linked to the LGA is not the same as consulting the 14 million disabled people, potentially, who live in affected areas, including me.

On the issue of blue badges, it is a shame that, with the petitioners present, the Government have come forward with no solution to ensure that anybody who holds a blue badge is exempt from the schemes. Ultimately, this has been disappointing, but the conversation still needs to go on. As we have said, low-traffic neighbourhood schemes can work if they are done properly, are led by evidence and are fully inclusive and accessible to us all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 632748 and 651094 relating to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and accessibility.

6.6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 20 May 2024

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry Report

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen): Today, Sir Brian Langstaff has published the final report of the independent infected blood inquiry. I am authorising a copy of the report to be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am very grateful to Sir Brian for his forensic and detailed report, his team's diligent work over the six years of the inquiry, and the sensitivity and care with which he has ensured that the people directly and indirectly impacted by the infected blood scandal have been front and centre of his inquiry's work. His report is a very substantial document, and it will be impossible for anyone reading it not to be deeply affected by its content. The report lays bare the devastating consequences of the use of infected blood and blood products, and I hope it answers the questions that the infected and affected have been asking for so long.

I have listened to the strongly held views of those members of the infected blood community that I have spoken with; this day is about the truth, the community, and a time for reflection about those they have lost, and the suffering which they have endured over decades.

It is right that the Government should formally recognise this significant report on the day of publication, and so the Prime Minister will give a short statement to Parliament later today. There will be a further statement tomorrow in the Commons regarding compensation.

The Government will look to provide the House with a further opportunity to debate the infected blood inquiry's final report.

[HCWS481]

JUSTICE

Online Divorce Applications

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my noble Friend Lord Bellamy KC, has today made the following statement:

There is a statutory bar against applying for an order for divorce before the end of one year from the date of the marriage (section 3 of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973).

A digital service for divorce proceedings was first introduced in 2019, which included a validation function to stop applicants making their applications before one year and one day from the date of their marriage.

A new system was built to reflect the implementation of the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 introducing no fault divorce, and it went live on 6 April 2022. We have identified a technical fault with the new system, which allowed applications to be made after a year of marriage (as opposed to one year and one day) between 6 April 2022 and 23 November 2022. The error was rectified as soon as it came to light, to prevent any future applications from members of the public being submitted early. We have since reviewed all 90,431 applications made during this period and identified 67 cases where members of the public submitted an early application and subsequently received their final divorce order from the courts. The premature applications were not rejected during the court process at the stage of issuing a conditional order, or a final order.

The independent judiciary are looking at how best to deal with the cases. Until they reach a decision, all final divorce orders of the court will remain final orders.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service has written to all those people who have received a final divorce order from the court. HMCTS has established a dedicated helpline and contact email to offer guidance and support.

[HCWS482]

Petition

Monday 20 May 2024

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Recommendations of the Infected Blood Inquiry

The petition of residents of the constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth,

Declares that people who received infected blood and who have suffered as a consequence have, along with their families, waited for 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 Debbie Abrahams, *Official Report*, 16 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 524.]

[P002982]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) [P002990].

Observations from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (John Glen):

The Government are grateful to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, and for City of Chester, for submitting the petition 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 their 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 3 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 Corrections

Monday 20 May 2024

Ministerial Corrections

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Leaseholders and Freeholders

The following extract is from the Adjournment debate on Leaseholders and Freeholders on 15 May 2024.

Sir Liam Fox: The issue of rent charges also applies to freeholders; it is not just leaseholders who are the victims. An amendment to the Rentcharges Act 1977 would deal with the problem once and for all, so I encourage my hon. Friend to look at amendments to that Act when we bring forward legislation on this subject. If the Government do not want to bring forward such an amendment to the 1977 Act, I would be more than happy to table one.

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are impacts on both freeholders and leaseholders. Different types of property and tenure are impacted in different ways. Elements of the rent charges regime will be extinguished by the 1977 Act, which he rightly referenced, in 2033; that has been in law since before I was born.

[*Official Report*, 15 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 400.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley):

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: there are impacts on both freeholders and leaseholders. Different types of property and tenure are impacted in different ways. Elements of the rent charges regime will be extinguished by the 1977 Act, which he rightly referenced, in **2037**; that has been in law since before I was born.

JUSTICE

Justice Questions

The following extract is from Justice Questions on 14 May 2024.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Victims should have the right to know who this Government are letting out of jail early. With today's news that, despite Ministers' protestations to the contrary from the Dispatch Box, high-risk offenders have been released early, why should the public have any confidence that this is a Government who put victims first?

Laura Farris: I want to provide some reassurance to the shadow Minister. Under our scheme, no sexual offender, no terrorist offender and nobody who has been convicted of a serious violent crime or been convicted for four years or more will be eligible for early release. I would just remind him that the slight distinction between our scheme and that conducted under the last Labour Government between 2007 and 2010 is that we have a governor lock. That means that the governor of any prison can prevent an individual prisoner from being released early if they do not think that it is suitable to do so, and that was not the case under the last Labour Government.

[*Official Report*, 14 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 119.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris):

Laura Farris: I want to provide some reassurance to the shadow Minister. Under our scheme, no sexual offender, no terrorist offender and nobody who has been convicted of a serious violent crime **and** been convicted for four years or more will be eligible for early release. I would just remind him that the slight distinction between our scheme and that conducted under the last Labour Government between 2007 and 2010 is that we have **an exemption process**. That means that **His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service** can prevent an individual prisoner from being released early if **there are concerns about their risk**, and that was not the case under the last Labour Government.

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