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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 24 July 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin proceedings, I should advise the House that there is a fault with the Annunciator system that means it is slow to update. There may therefore be a delay before the current information is displayed. I hope that the fault will be rectified as soon as possible—I understand that the Clerk is already at work with his technical electrical skills as we speak.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

First Minister and Deputy First Minister

1. **Adam Jooe** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. [900000]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): It is great to see the House so full for Northern Ireland questions, and I congratulate all colleagues recently elected in Northern Ireland.

I met the First Minister and Deputy First Minister twice in my first four days, during which we discussed a wide range of issues, including the Government's commitment to repeal and replace the legacy Act. I plan to update the House shortly on how we will begin that process.

Adam Jooe: It is very good to see my hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on the Government Benches. I am sure the commitment that the Secretary of State has just given us will be welcomed by many in Newcastle-under-Lyme and, indeed, in Northern Ireland, given the lack of support for the legacy Act. Can he undertake to consult widely on the Act's repeal and replacement, and will he keep the House informed?

Hilary Benn: I can indeed give my hon. Friend that assurance, because the problem with the legacy Act is that it has almost no support in Northern Ireland among political parties and victims' families. We have given a very clear commitment to consult on how the repeal and replacement will work: in the end, we hope to get a large measure of support for a new approach, which the current approach has failed to secure.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. He will recognise that Northern Ireland is represented in the Executive, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and now in this place by more than just the parties of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Will he give an assurance that he will deal openly and transparently with all those parties?

Hilary Benn: I will readily give the hon. Member that assurance. I have met with all the party leaders, and the commitment to consultation that I have just given to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jooe) will extend to all the parties in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I warmly welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his place. I know he brings considerable qualities to his role, and I look forward to working with him on behalf of all the people in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to his predecessor, the right hon. Chris Heaton-Harris, who did such an excellent job and is much missed on the Conservative Benches.

I very much welcome the positive meetings that the Secretary of State has had with all parties since he was appointed. Following those meetings, may I ask him to reassure the House that on his watch, he will be an active supporter of the Union and an advocate for it?

Hilary Benn: I join the hon. Gentleman in expressing the House's collective thanks to my predecessor, and congratulate him and his hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) on their appointments. I look forward to working with both of them.

The Government are strongly committed to our United Kingdom, as was clearly set out in our manifesto. I hope the hon. Gentleman will see that reflected in our work as we take it forward.

Alex Burghart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his answer. The Government's manifesto states that they are

"committed to implementing the Windsor Framework in good faith".

However, that manifesto did not mention the Command Paper, which was vital in getting Stormont back. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that Command Paper contained a number of measures to strengthen the Union—the East-West Council and InterTrade UK, to name but two. Will the Government faithfully implement all those commitments in the Command Paper, which are designed to strengthen the Union?

Hilary Benn: As the hon. Gentleman knows, when we were in opposition, we supported the two statutory instruments and the Humble Address. We will set up the independent monitoring panel, and we have recently had a success in developing our relationship with the European Union over dental amalgam: the new Government have secured a 10-year derogation, which has been widely welcomed by the parties in Northern Ireland.

Casement Park: Redevelopment

2. **Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the redevelopment of Casement Park. [900001]

10. **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on funding for the redevelopment of Casement Park. [900009]

11. **Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): How much funding he plans to make available for the redevelopment of Casement Park. [900010]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Government are committed to ensuring that Euro 2028 benefits the whole of the United Kingdom. We are working as quickly as possible with all partners to assess the options on the Casement Park project.

Sammy Wilson: Many people were surprised when the Secretary of State, on first being appointed, made it his priority to deliver on Casement Park. Committing £320 million for a stadium to host five matches at a time when there are huge waiting lists to be dealt with in the health service, and with special educational needs and social housing needing funding, is an indefensible use of public money. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the Government's view has not been influenced by any personal interventions by the chief of staff of the Labour party, for whom this is a personal project, and can he confirm that such an intervention would be a breach of standards in public life?

Hilary Benn: I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that I said this was a priority because a decision needs to be made. The fact is that the Government have inherited a commitment to hosting the Euros at Casement Park. It is now a year and three quarters since UEFA awarded that right to Northern Ireland, and to the United Kingdom and Ireland, but nothing has happened during the year and three quarters since then to progress the project. We are left with a situation in which the cost has gone through the roof, and even if we had the money, we do not know if we could build it in time. That is why the Government are looking at it, and that is why I said it was a priority to make a decision.

Claire Hanna: The Gaelic Athletic Association is overwhelmingly a force for good across our island, and I was pleased to see so many in Britain enjoying the magic of the hurling final via the BBC on Sunday. GAA fans in Northern Ireland, like Northern Ireland football fans awaiting sub-regional stadium funding, have been let down by a decade of Stormont dither, by sniping such as we have just seen and by the last Government. Had they green-lit the project when they said they would, construction would have been well under way in time for the Euros. Can the Secretary of State assure us that Casement will ultimately be built, and that spectacles such as we will see for Armagh this Sunday will in time be hosted in Belfast?

Hilary Benn: I think we all wish Armagh well in the all-Ireland final. The Executive are committed to the Casement Park project—it has been a commitment for

over a decade now—but it has not progressed. Windsor Park got an upgrade, Ravenhill got an upgrade and it is important that Casement Park is built. That is why I said on my recent visit that one way or another that project needs to be completed.

Jim Allister: Will the Secretary of State explain to the 356,000 citizens of Northern Ireland who await out-patient appointments and to the 94,000 who await in-patient admissions why, in the Government's view, it seems to be a priority to pour hundreds of millions of pounds into a GAA sports stadium instead of fixing our health service? If the Government commit money and the Euros do not come to Belfast, will the Government not be in a position in which the rugby stadium and the football stadium did not get a penny of Treasury or Northern Ireland Office money, but the GAA did? How could that be fair and how could that be proportionate?

Hilary Benn: I hope very much that sport will be a force for unity in Northern Ireland, rather than a source of division. When it comes to the health service, the hon. Gentleman makes a very powerful point. The state of the NHS in Northern Ireland, with the longest waiting lists in the United Kingdom, is a function, if I may say so, of decisions that the Executive have failed to take over many years. The people of Northern Ireland want to have a better health service, and that needs the plan to which the new Health Minister is committed.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that we would not be in the final minutes of extra time on whether Casement Park can be rebuilt in time for the Euros if the previous Government had actually done something about it after we were awarded host status a year and three quarters ago?

Hilary Benn: I agree with my hon. Friend. The facts speak for themselves: a year and three quarters since we were awarded the wonderful opportunity to host the Euros, nothing has happened on the project.

Barnett Formula

3. **Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): Whether he has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on a revised financial formula for Northern Ireland. [900002]

9. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): If he will have discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on reforming the Barnett formula for Northern Ireland. [900008]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The interim fiscal framework agreed earlier this year introduced a needs-based funding formula set at 124% of spending per head in England, based on the advice of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, and we are committed to taking forward these discussions with the Executive.

Sorcha Eastwood: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and look forward to working with him in his new role. Fixing Northern Ireland's financial framework is crucial to ensuring that our public services are properly

resourced, and indeed that impacts on my constituents in Lagan Valley. Will he ensure that any new arrangements are fully baselined and informed by independent expert analysis?

Hilary Benn: The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council was set up to help to answer the question about what the need is in Northern Ireland. It came up with a range of between 121% and 127%, and opted for 124% in the middle. The fact that that was in the interim fiscal framework that the previous Government negotiated is welcome, and was welcomed by the Finance Minister in Northern Ireland. We are committed to taking those discussions forward, and I understand that the Finance Minister in the Executive has already met the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Jim Shannon: May I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his place and wish him well in the role that he now plays? The Chancellor has indicated that there will be a 5% increase in wages for health workers and those in the education sector, but unfortunately, given the current Barnett consequentials for Northern Ireland, that will not mean 5% for those workers in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State urgently look at that issue to ensure that health and education workers in Northern Ireland deserve the same increase in their wages as those on the mainland do because, quite clearly, I am here for them?

Hilary Benn: As the hon. Gentleman will be well aware, decisions about pay in Northern Ireland are a matter for the Executive. Any additional spending in England will apply through the Barnett consequentials to Northern Ireland in the normal way.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to needs-based funding for Northern Ireland. Does he agree that how funding is allocated and how further revenue might be generated are matters for the devolved Administration and the Assembly?

Hilary Benn: I certainly do agree. All Governments, including the Northern Ireland Executive, have the money they have coming in, the money they can raise in addition, and how they will prioritise their spending. The Northern Ireland Executive have more funding per head of population than England, and it is for the Executive to take decisions about what their priorities are, and allocate funding accordingly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to their positions, and thank them for their gracious phone call last week to welcome me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) to our positions. On Monday, the Business Secretary slipped out a written statement, rather than coming to this House, revealing that the Government have decided not to proceed with an export development guarantee, or emergency loans that would save Harland and Wolff, despite its unique role and outstanding defence contract. Will the Secretary of State use his position to continue the support that the previous Government gave to Northern Ireland, and make it clear to the Treasury that the

people of Northern Ireland expect the Government to intervene in this case, and support Harland and Wolff, as is desperately needed?

Hilary Benn: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment. The reasons for the Government's decision about Harland and Wolff were clearly set out in the written ministerial statement that my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary laid before the House. Harland and Wolff is now talking to its main supporters, Riverstone, about potential additional financial support. We are committed to shipbuilding across the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland, and as that written ministerial statement made clear, Harland and Wolff is an essential part of the £1.6 billion contract for the fleet solid support ships.

Public Services

4. **Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): What steps he plans to take to support public services in Northern Ireland. [900003]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): I am delighted to be appointed to this role, and I look forward to working closely with Executive Ministers to see public services transformed in Northern Ireland. I will be meeting the First and Deputy First Ministers tomorrow in Stormont, as well as the Northern Ireland Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt.

Gavin Robinson: I welcome the Minister of State and Secretary of State to their positions. I am delighted to see them in post, and I know they are committed to effective public services and stability of the institutions in Northern Ireland. May I caution that in a number of responses that we have received from the Front Bench, we are having a recurring conversation that the fiscal framework that was announced back in December on an interim basis does not solve the problems we have? Even the stabilisation money that was agreed back in December has already been forecast as necessary to sustain pay in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister of State engage earnestly not only with what the Government—both of this hue and the previous Government—have been saying for the past six months, and recognise that to provide good public services in Northern Ireland we need not only to sustain, but to transform?

Fleur Anderson: I agree with the right hon. Member. Money is allocated specifically for transformation of public services to improve service delivery outcomes. In Northern Ireland, three in 10 people are on an NHS waiting list; that number is one in 10 here in England. That figure needs to be transformed for health outcomes.

I will be talking about funding when I meet Executive Ministers, but I will also be talking about other ways in which our doors, and those of other Government Ministers, too, are open. We are determined to work together to transform public services.

Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act: Repeal

5. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to repeal and replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [900004]

12. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps he is taking to repeal and replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [900011]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): As set out in the King's Speech, the Government are committed to repeal and replace the legacy Act. As well as scrapping conditional immunity, we will set out steps to allow troubles-era inquests and civil claims to resume. We will consult with all interested parties on a way forward that can obtain the support of victims and survivors, and comply with our human rights obligations.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment. Clearly, any delays will in-build a legacy for the victims and their families, who have waited a long time for closure on these issues. I understand absolutely the need to create consensus across Northern Ireland for what will be proposed, but will he set out the timeline and the plan for achieving that and agree to come back to the House to update us when that plan is ready?

Hilary Benn: I am happy to give the hon. Member that assurance about keeping the House informed and reporting to it on my plans. As far as the independent commission is concerned, the Government have decided that we will retain it. That is because the Stormont House agreement—we want to return to the principles that it set out—envisages both information recovery and continued investigation. Those two functions are in effect combined in the independent commission. I met Sir Declan Morgan yesterday to talk about how that work can be taken forward. The commission is now open for business and available for families to approach to find an answer, for which many of them have been looking for so long.

Mr Holden: The former Member for Plymouth Moor View was a strong advocate for veterans in Cabinet and in government. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure veterans in Basildon and Billericay and across the country that any future legislation will protect now-elderly veterans from vexatious legal action in the future?

Hilary Benn: I pay tribute to the work that veterans and members of the police and the security services did over many years during the troubles in trying to keep people safe from terrorism. I undertake, as part of the consultation that I have already set out to the House, to consult veterans' organisations.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position. Will he further outline what discussions he is having with groups and organisations who represent innocent victims? Will he assure the House that in repealing this legislation, there will be no pandering to those who were the victim makers? What meaningful engagement is he having with the Irish Government, who oppose the Act but have disgracefully refused to deal with the many allegations of state collusion with the Provisional IRA? I am thinking specifically about the long-awaited public inquiry into the Omagh bombing.

Hilary Benn: I discussed the matter with Micheál Martin when I saw him early after my appointment, and he has expressed the hope that a way forward can be found that might lead to the withdrawal of the interstate case that Ireland has brought. I will certainly engage with victims' organisations—I met a number of them during my time as shadow Secretary of State—because I am committed to trying to find a way forward. In the end, if this is to work, it must work for the victims' families, because they are the people who say, "What went before hasn't given us what we were looking for."

Windsor Framework Agreement

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Whether he plans to review the Windsor framework agreement. [900005]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): No. We are committed to implementing the Windsor framework in good faith in partnership with the EU, and to taking all steps necessary to protect the UK internal market. We are also looking to negotiate a sanitary and phytosanitary veterinary agreement with the EU, which could help.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the Secretary of State commit to all the provisions of the "Safeguarding the Union" agreement?

Hilary Benn: I already set out my answer to that in response to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart). We are taking forward those commitments, but we can make progress by working in partnership with the European Union. What was achieved recently on dental amalgam is a good example of precisely that.

Veterinary Medicine Supplies

7. **Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure long-term access to veterinary medicine supplies in Northern Ireland. [900006]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): I understand how important and urgent this issue is. I thank the hon Member for his contribution to the veterinary medicines working group, whose work we have committed to continuing. He will know that a grace period for veterinary medicines will remain in place until the end of 2025, which provides continuity of supply to Northern Ireland. The Government will make progress on this issue as quickly as possible.

Dr Hudson: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Windsor framework secured by the previous Government extended that grace period to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland until the end of December 2025. That includes vaccines and anaesthetics, so it is vital for biosecurity and both animal and public health that access continues. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will strain every sinew to secure permanent access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland, and will they continue the Cabinet Office's veterinary medicines working group, on which I sat, which was working so hard to find a solution?

Fleur Anderson: I can confirm again that the veterinary medicines working group will continue. We recognise its importance, and we will continue to work at pace on a long-term solution, because continuity of supply and knowing about it well in advance of next December is very important.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State and his team to their place, and I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna). I can only hope that the success of the hurling at the weekend means that the BBC will consider showing the shinty-hurling international that takes place every year.

I welcome attempts by the new Government to continue to rebuild trust with Northern Ireland political parties and to improve relations with the European Union, which offers the opportunity to reduce trade frictions between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Could the Secretary of State set out what he is doing with ministerial colleagues and other Departments to open the door to securing a veterinary agreement with the EU, which will further reduce those barriers to trade?

Fleur Anderson: The Government are committed to working at pace on a long-term solution, including a veterinary agreement. That might change the relationship with the EU and build more trust, and so a bespoke agreement may be needed, but we are working at pace to secure that.

Relations with Ireland

8. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Irish Government on UK-Ireland relations. [900007]

14. **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Irish Government on UK-Ireland relations. [900013]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): A fortnight ago, the Minister and I met the Tánaiste Micheál Martin in Hillsborough, where we discussed strengthening relations between our two Governments, given the importance of our relationship with Ireland. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach also held a bilateral meeting ahead of the European Political Community meeting last week.

Dr Gardner: Duchess China, which I believe are the suppliers of your excellent commemorative china service, Mr Speaker, is based in my constituency. The Republic of Ireland is an important export market for the company, and Northern Ireland is an important part of its domestic market. How will relations across the Irish sea and the Northern Ireland-Ireland border be enhanced for the benefit of companies such as Duchess China?

Hilary Benn: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the company that she mentioned and the products that it produces. We are committed to protecting the integrity of the UK internal market, so that great firms in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland are able to sell right across the United Kingdom and internationally. Northern

Ireland in particular has extraordinary opportunities and so much potential, which we need to build on. One of the most important contributions that the Executive can make is to ensure stability, because that is what investors are looking for.

Emily Darlington: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his position, and I hope that he will be able to rebuild those relations that were strained through the Brexit process. Small and medium-sized business in Milton Keynes Central have gone under because of the additional paperwork and restrictions caused by our strained relations with the EU. Will he confirm that he is talking to the Irish Government and others about how to reduce those barriers to trade?

Hilary Benn: There is no doubt that the change in our trading relationship with the European Union has brought additional costs and paperwork for businesses, whether they are selling to the EU or into Northern Ireland. The Windsor framework is the means by which we are trying to manage that. I supported the Windsor framework, negotiated by the previous Government, because it represented an important and significant step forward. The reason why we have to continue to implement it is because if we are going to get the veterinary and SPS agreement, and other agreements we are seeking with the European Union—

Mr Speaker: Order. We still have other questions.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Anglo-Irish agreement is absolutely vital, and the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach is to be welcomed. Prime Ministers' diaries become very full; will the Secretary of State use his good offices to ensure that that dialogue between Taoiseach and Prime Minister continues to build on that relationship to see it flourish still further?

Hilary Benn: I can indeed give that assurance. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has agreed there will be an annual summit.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that it is important that, in discussions with the Irish Government, they understand that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, whether they consider themselves to be British, Irish or Northern Irish, can see that it is the United Kingdom context that allows them that diversity, and that improving the lives of present generations is the best way to preserve the lives of everyone for the future?

Hilary Benn: I join the hon. Gentleman in that commitment to improving the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. As a Government, we are committed to working on that with him and all his colleagues in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and all new Members to the first questions to the Prime Minister in this Parliament.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900050] **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 24 July.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I know the whole House will be shocked by the news that a soldier has been attacked in Kent. Our thoughts are with him, his family and our armed forces who serve to keep us safe. We wish him a swift recovery. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

The whole House will also want to join me in wishing Team GB good luck as they travel to Paris for the Olympic games.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, discussing how this Government will bring about the change the country has decisively voted for. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings today.

Calum Miller: May I begin by welcoming the Prime Minister to his first questions as Prime Minister? I associate myself with his remarks about the soldier in Kent, and, of course, send my wishes to the British Olympians.

At Combe in my constituency, Thames Water pumped sewage into the River Evenlode for over 2,600 hours last year. Thames Water was allowed by Ofwat to withdraw £7 billion in dividends, yet now wants to jack up my constituents’ bills. I welcome the water Bill in the King’s Speech, but does the Prime Minister agree with my constituents and me that the system is broken, and will he now commit to scrapping Ofwat and replacing it with a tougher regulator that will finally put people and planet ahead of water company profits?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Member to his place and thank him for raising this important issue in relation to water. Customers should not pay the price for mismanagement by water companies. We have already announced immediate steps to put water companies under a tougher regime. The Minister responsible for water, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), will meet the bosses of failing companies to hold them to account for their performance. After 14 years of failure with our rivers and beaches, it falls to this Government of service to fix the mess of that failure.

Q3. [900052] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place.

Many young trans people and their families are extremely concerned about the restrictions on puberty blockers implemented by the last Government. One of my constituents, a parent of a trans child, told me:

“I’m so worried about my child. I’m terrified for what this means for them and where Britain is going on these issues.”

Will the Prime Minister meet young trans people, their families and organisations supporting them, so he can hear why they feel so strongly that the restrictions must be reversed?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend back to her place. Our guiding principle must be the wellbeing of children. This is a serious Government, and we will approach that question with care, not with inflammatory dividing lines. The Cass review was clear that there is not enough evidence on the long-term impact of puberty blockers to know whether they are safe. The Health Secretary will consult organisations supporting young people and families, and I will ensure that there is a meeting with my hon. Friend and the relevant Minister as soon as that can be arranged.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in expressing my shock at the attack on a British soldier. Our thoughts are with him and his family as we wish him a speedy recovery.

I also join the Prime Minister in his warm words about our Olympic athletes. I have no doubt that after years of training, focus and dedication they will bring back many gold medals—although, to be honest, I am probably not the first person they want to hear advice from on how to win. [*Interruption.*]

I am glad that in our exchanges so far we have maintained a cross-party consensus on important matters of foreign policy, and in that spirit I wanted to focus our exchange today on Ukraine and national security. The UK has consistently been the first country to provide Ukraine with new capabilities, such as the long-range weapons that have been used so effectively in the Black sea. Those decisions are not easy, and I was grateful to the Prime Minister for his support as I made those decisions in government. In opposition, I offer that same support to him. Will he continue to be responsive to Ukraine’s new requests, so that it does not just stand still but can decisively win out against Russian aggression?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for not only raising the question of Ukraine, but doing so in a way that can maintain the unity across the House that has been so important to the Ukrainian people. I can assure him that we are, of course, talking to Ukraine about how it deals with the Russian aggression that it is facing and has been facing for many, many months. I will continue to try to do that in the way that he did, which is to reach out across the House to share such information as we can to maintain the unity that is so important.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the Prime Minister for that response. I also found that one of the United Kingdom’s key roles as Ukraine’s closest ally was to encourage other countries to follow our lead in providing new military capabilities. In that vein, I am sure that when the Prime Minister saw Chancellor Scholz recently he thanked him for the considerable air defence that the Germans are providing to the Ukrainians, but did he also raise with him the issue of the Germans perhaps providing long-range missiles, just as the UK, America and France have now done?

The Prime Minister: I had the opportunity in Washington, at the NATO council, to talk to our German counterparts. There was a strong theme there on Ukraine, discussed with all our allies, and part of my message was to urge all our allies to provide further support for the Ukrainian people where they can. That was well received, and there was unity coming out of the NATO council that that is what we must all do.

Rishi Sunak: I am glad to hear the Prime Minister raise the NATO summit, because I very much welcome the message that came out loud and clear from that summit, and indeed in the Prime Minister's words from the Dispatch Box on Monday, about Ukraine's irreversible path to NATO membership. Does he agree that fatuous Russian claims on Ukrainian territory must not act as a block to Ukraine's joining the NATO defensive alliance?

The Prime Minister: I wholeheartedly agree. It is for NATO allies to decide who is a member of NATO—formed 75 years ago, a proud alliance, and probably the most successful alliance that has ever been formed. That is why it was so important that at the summit we were able to say that there is now that irreversible path to membership. It is a step forward from a year ago, and President Zelensky was very pleased that we have been able to make that successful transition.

Rishi Sunak: Thanks to the complex legal and diplomatic work that the UK has led over the past several months, together with our allies Canada and America, I hope the Prime Minister will now find that there is a sound and established legal basis to go further on sanctions, seize Russian assets and use them to fund Ukrainian reconstruction. That work has taken time, but I hope he is able to take a look at it. Can he confirm to the House that this work is something that he will take forward? If he does, I can assure him that the Opposition will support him in doing so.

The Prime Minister: Again, I am grateful for this opportunity to say how united we were on the question of sanctions across this House. The use now made of what has been seized and frozen is an important issue on which I think we can move forward, and I know the Chancellor is already beginning to have some discussions about how we can take more effective measures. Again, I will seek to reach out across the House as we do this important work together.

Rishi Sunak: I very much welcome the Prime Minister's response. I also welcome both his and the Defence Secretary's recent emphasis on the importance of the Tempest fighter jet programme. It is a crucial sovereign capability, as he mentioned, and important for our alliances with Italy and Japan. Furthermore, however, other countries also wish to participate. In government, we had begun initial productive discussions with our friend and ally Saudi Arabia about its desire potentially to join the programme, so could the Prime Minister confirm that he will continue those initial positive conversations with Saudi Arabia? Again, I can assure him that he will have our support in doing so.

The Prime Minister: Let me make this absolutely clear: this is a really important programme. Significant progress has already been made, and we want to build

on that progress. I have had some initial discussions, not least in Farnborough, where I was just a few days ago.

Rishi Sunak: Finally, in the dangerous and uncertain world in which we now sadly live, I know at first hand how important it is that our Prime Minister can use his prerogative power to respond quickly militarily to protect British national security, sometimes without giving this House prior notice. These are perhaps the most difficult decisions that a Prime Minister can take, and I welcomed his support when I made them. I want to take this opportunity to assure him of the Opposition's support if he deems it necessary to take similar action in the future. Does he agree that while the use of the prerogative power is sometimes politically controversial, it is essential to ensure the safety and security of the British people?

The Prime Minister: I agree that it is essential, and our security is the first duty of government. I was grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for reaching out to me personally when action had to be taken, to ensure that I was briefed on the sensitive issues that lay behind the decisions that he had to take. As I mentioned to him last week, I will endeavour to ensure that we proceed in the same way so that he has access to all the information that he needs to come to a determination, which I hope will be to support the position that this Government take.

Q4. [900053] Kim Leadbeater (Spennings Valley) (Lab): Welcome back, Mr Speaker. May I congratulate the Prime Minister on such a positive start to his premiership, and on resetting the dial on politics as public service and a force for good? Irrespective of our different views and opinions in this Chamber and beyond, it is a very important message. As such, will he join me in wishing the very best of luck to the 83 cyclists who have set off from West Yorkshire this morning on the ninth Jo Cox Way bike ride? They are travelling 280 miles down the country to London and celebrating all that we have in common through the power of cycling—including, sadly for the cyclists, probably quite a lot of sore legs and aching muscles.

The Prime Minister: Of course I wish them good luck. I admire them; I am not sure I envy them—it is 280 miles—but it is a brilliant cause. The whole House misses our dear friend Jo, and I know that she would have been incredibly proud to have seen this Government in place and would have played a big part in it. I welcome my hon. Friend back to her place, and I know that she will continue in Jo's spirit, with the same dedication and determination. I think I am right in saying that her parents—and, of course, Jo's parents—are in the Gallery today to see this first PMQs. We will always have more in common than that which divides us.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Lib Dems.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place for his first Prime Minister's questions. I associate myself and my party with the comments he made about the appalling attack on the soldier in Kent. Our thoughts are with his family, friends and comrades. I also associate my party with his comments on Team GB—we want them to succeed in Paris.

The Prime Minister has inherited many messes, and one is the scandal of the carer's allowance repayments. An example is my constituent Andrea, who is a full-time carer for her elderly mum. She went back to work part time—mainly for her mental health, she tells me—and was earning less than £7,000 a year. She has been hit by a bill from the Department for Work and Pensions for £4,600. Andrea is just one of the tens of thousands of carers facing these repayments. They are being punished for working and earning just a few pounds more than the earnings limit. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and other family carers to try to resolve this matter?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for raising this matter. He of course has been a tireless advocate for carers, and I do not think any of us could have been other than moved when we saw the video of him and his son that was put out during the election campaign. He talks about Team GB. I am glad that he is in a suit today, because we are more used to seeing him in a wetsuit.

In relation to this issue, we have a more severe crisis than we thought as we go through the books of the last 14 years and we must review—*[Interruption.]* I know the Conservatives don't like it, but there is a reason the electorate rejected them so profoundly. We will review the challenges that we face. We want to work with the sector and, where we can, across the House to create a national care service covering all these aspects, and we will start with a fair pay agreement for carers and those who work in the care sector. I am very happy to work across the House with all the people that care so passionately about this issue.

Ed Davey: I am grateful for the Prime Minister's response. I hope he will look at the matter of carer's allowance. Family carers save the taxpayer £162 billion a year. If we get this right, many could go back into work. But there is another care crisis that is even bigger, and that is the crisis in social care. I am sure that, like me, he has heard about the millions of people around the country for whom this is their biggest issue, as it has been for decades. After a once-in-a-century election, does he not think there is a once-in-a-century chance to fix social care and thus help our NHS? I ask him to set up a cross-party commission on social care so that we can address this urgent matter.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Member is right. It is a crisis, and I am sorry to have to report to the House that it is not the only crisis that we have inherited. There is crisis and failure absolutely everywhere, after 14 years of failure, that this Government of service will begin the hard yards of fixing, including in social care. We will work across the House, and we do endeavour to create a national care service. That will not be easy, but we can begin the first steps and we will share that across the House where we can.

Q5. [900054] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): For decades, my constituent Jack Taylor has been continuously ignored by previous Governments. He and other nuclear veterans have been denied access to their medical records and compensation. The Prime Minister has rightly said that these national heroes deserve full accountability and justice. Will he therefore consider supporting a special tribunal with statutory powers on this 70-year-long scandal?

The Prime Minister: Can I first express my gratitude to the service personnel who participated in the British nuclear testing programme? It is right that, I think, nearly 5,000 have now got their nuclear test medals in recognition of their service and that the veterans have the right to apply for no-fault compensation under the war pension scheme. I will ensure that a meeting on this issue is arranged for my hon. Friend with the relevant Minister.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): May I again warmly congratulate the Prime Minister on ending Tory rule? In his campaign to do so, he was of course—*[Interruption.]* The Tories are too close for comfort now. In his campaign to do so, he was joined by Gordon Brown. Just five days before the general election, on the front page of the *Daily Record*, Gordon Brown instructed voters in Scotland to vote Labour to end child poverty, yet last night Labour MPs from Scotland were instructed to retain the two-child cap, which forces children into poverty. So, Prime Minister, what changed?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman mentions Gordon Brown, because the last Labour Government lifted millions of children out of poverty, which is something we are very proud of. This Government will approach the question with the same vigour, with our new taskforce. We have already taken steps, including introducing breakfast clubs, abolishing no-fault evictions and reviewing the decent homes standard—

Stephen Flynn *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Props are not allowed—put it down. We do not need any more.

The Prime Minister: We have already set up a taskforce to put that vigour in place, as well as introducing free breakfast clubs in every primary school, abolishing no-fault evictions, reviewing the decent homes standard, adopting Awaab's law and having a plan to make work pay. Before the right hon. Gentleman lectures everyone else, he should explain why, since the SNP came to power, there are 30,000 more children in poverty in Scotland.

Q8. [900057] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I am pleased to see the Government's swift action in officially calling for an immediate ceasefire, the release of all hostages, a rapid increase of humanitarian aid into Gaza and the restoration of funds to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, as well as their commitment to comply with potential International Criminal Court arrest warrants and to recognise a Palestinian state, but too many innocent people are still dying every day. Nowhere in Gaza is safe, so what further pressure can the Prime Minister apply to bring about an urgent ceasefire?

The Prime Minister: Both the Foreign Secretary and I have set out the urgent need for a ceasefire to Prime Minister Netanyahu. We want a pathway to a two-state solution, with a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable, sovereign Palestinian state. I used my first overseas trip as Prime Minister, particularly at NATO, to raise this subject with world leaders. Under a Labour Government, it will be discussed, negotiated on and fought for at the highest levels on the world stage. The alternative is protesting on street corners. Ultimately, only one of those will deliver change.

Q2. [900051] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I congratulate the Prime Minister and welcome him to his place. I am sure he will want to reassure the many parents and teachers in Edinburgh West who have expressed concerns about the implications for our state education system in Scotland of his proposal to levy VAT on independent fees. Edinburgh city council, led by the Labour party, has produced five-year projections that show we do not have capacity in the city to accommodate pupils who may leave the independent sector. Moreover, how will he ensure that the VAT raised from fees in Scotland can be reinvested in Scotland's already hard-pressed education system?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I understand the aspiration that parents who work hard and save hard have for the children they send to private school, but every parent has that aspiration, whichever school their children go to. I am determined that we will have the right teachers in place in our state secondary schools to ensure that every child, wherever they come from and whatever their background, has the same opportunity, and I do not apologise for that.

Q10. [900059] **Sir Mark Hendrick** (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome last week's announcement that the Government will introduce a new publicly owned company, Great British Energy. It will be critical to ensuring this country's energy security while meeting our climate goals and lowering energy bills. Will the Prime Minister assure communities up and down the country that they will benefit from the good, skilled job opportunities that Great British Energy promises to unlock?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that Great British Energy will be owned by and for the British people, to invest in the energy systems of the future. That means cheaper bills as renewables are cheaper, it means security so that Putin cannot put his boot on our throat, and it means the next generation of jobs for years to come.

Q6. [900055] **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The Prime Minister has achieved something that we did not think would be possible in such a short period of time. In fewer than three weeks, he has had a significant rebellion and suspended seven of his Members of Parliament—all for standing up against child poverty. And this from a Labour Government. The headlines are awful for the Prime Minister this morning. Poverty campaigners are furious with him. Is his honeymoon over before it has even begun?

The Prime Minister: The SNP left for the election campaign with a significant number of Members and have come back with a small handful, so I do not think we need these lectures on what the electorate in Scotland are thinking. I am very proud of our Scottish Labour MPs. I simply repeat the point that I made to the SNP leader, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), that perhaps the SNP needs to account for the 30,000 extra children in poverty in Scotland.

Q11. [900060] **Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): The previous Conservative Government cut the funding for the police in London by one third, taking £1 billion out of the budget for London's policing and forcing the closure of both police stations in the Chipping Barnet

constituency. Does the Prime Minister agree with me on the importance of our police stations and on the need to rebuild local policing?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. He is the first ever Labour MP for Chipping Barnet, and I know that he will serve his constituency with pride.

Our guarantee will put 13,000 extra neighbourhood officers and police community support officers back on Britain's streets, and that is a fully funded plan. My hon. Friend is right to say that the last Government absolutely hammered police numbers and he will have seen the impact of that in his constituency. It is telling that the former Justice Secretary said at the weekend that that could perhaps have been done differently. I am glad to see that the people of Chipping Barnet agreed with that assessment and returned my hon. Friend for that constituency.

Q7. [900056] **Rupert Lowe** (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): My constituents in Great Yarmouth have little doubt that uncontrolled legal and illegal immigration since 1997 has damaged and disrupted their community and undermined their public services. Does the Prime Minister agree that importing millions of people with no thought whatever to the brutal consequences has failed our country? I know the good people of Great Yarmouth would much appreciate a yes or no answer to this straightforward question.

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Member's numbers, but I do think that it is serious that the previous Government lost control of our borders. Record numbers have crossed the channel. When the Leader of the Opposition was Prime Minister for 18 months, 50,000 people crossed the channel. It is a serious issue that requires a serious answer, which is why we will set up our border security command to take down the gangs that are running this vile trade. What we will not do is waste further time on a gimmick that cost a fortune and removed just four volunteers.

Q12. [900061] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Liverpool city region has one of the biggest concentrations of offshore wind in the world, and 100,000 homes could be powered by the Mersey tidal project, yet some Opposition Members want to block the jobs, the lower bills and the energy security that come with renewable energy. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to resist the siren voices opposite and support a range of technologies, including the Mersey tidal project, to maximise the benefits of clean energy for our country?

The Prime Minister: Clean energy is at the heart of this mission-driven Government. Boosting home-grown renewable energy is the best way to create new jobs and give us energy independence and lower bills for good. That is why we will change the planning rules to make sure that we can get Britain building again—not just the houses, but everything we need, including prisons, to make sure that we can deal with the mess we have inherited. I am pleased to hear of the viable projects that are being advanced, such as the Mersey tidal project, and we will look at them carefully.

Q9. [900058] **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a privilege to be the first Conservative Back-Bench Member to ask the new Prime Minister a question at PMQs. Can he assure me and my constituents in Broxbourne that they will have not just a say, but a meaningful say, over new development in the green belt in their area?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Member to his place. Let me be clear: we intend to get Britain building. We will change the planning regime in order to do so; it has held us back for far too long. Young people have not been able to own a home until they are way past the age of 35, denying them the basic dream of home ownership. Of course we will work with communities, but we will take the tough decisions that the last Government ran away from.

Q13. [900062] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): We have much to be proud of in Ipswich, from a thriving arts and culture scene to beautiful parks and a stunning waterfront. Unlike our friends over the border in Norfolk, we also now have a premier league football team again; the Prime Minister is very welcome to join us when Arsenal visit next year. Despite all those positives, after the last 14 years, our town centre is really struggling and desperately needs help. Can the Prime Minister set out to this House the steps that he will take to revive town centres like Ipswich's?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and congratulate Ipswich on their promotion. I think it is on Boxing day that they will visit Arsenal. I am going to resist the temptation that he puts in front of me to choose between Ipswich and Norwich, but on town centres, he is right that we need vibrant high streets. We need to make the change that we were voted in to bring about. That is why we will replace the business rates system to level the playing field, and we will absolutely address regional inequality through our local growth plans.

Q14. [900063] **Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth, so I welcome the Government's signal that they are committed to nature recovery. That is critical to humanity's future, as it affects everything from food security to public health and wellbeing. Please could the Prime Minister tell us how he will show leadership personally on this existential issue? In particular, will he attend the 16th biodiversity COP later this year, and will the UK Government be launching a bid to host a future UN nature summit?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to nature recovery; it is a really important issue that this Government will tackle. The hon. Member talks about leadership. I would ask him to show some, because it is extraordinary that having been elected to this House as a Green politician, he is opposing vital clean energy infrastructure in his own constituency. We will put the plans before this House. I ask him to back those plans.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): On Sunday night, at a community event in north Kensington attended by hundreds of people, 15-year-old Rene Graham was shot and killed in a senseless act of violence. My heart goes out to his family and the wider community,

who are feeling anxious, frightened and shocked. Can the Prime Minister ensure that north Kensington gets support from the Government at this difficult time, and can he outline what measures the Government will take to tackle gun violence and prevent young lives like Rene's from being taken in the future?

The Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place, and thank him for raising this awful case. The loss of a teenage boy in west London is shocking, and our thoughts—I am sure I speak for the whole House—are with his family and friends. I urge the public to support the Metropolitan police with any information that could help in their investigation, which is ongoing. Making streets safer is one of the five central missions of this Government, and this is a shocking reminder of just how important that mission is. We have an ambition to drive down this sort of violence in our communities. We do not want interventions like this, as we have had over the last few years. It is shocking to hear of this particular incident.

Q15. [900064] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): The last Government invested massively in Teesside, most recently committing £1 billion to improving transport in our area. That money will protect the future of our iconic transporter bridge, upgrade Thornaby train station, create a new transport hub at Teesside Park, and much, much more. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether we are still getting our £1 billion, or is Labour turning its back on Teesside?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about Labour turning its back; I think he is the sole remaining Tory MP in the north-east or Teesside. I have already taken an early opportunity to make our commitment clear to the plans that we need for economic growth across the country. We will be working with all the mayors who are in place, including those who wear a different rosette. That is the way we will take this forward.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In a week when the National Police Chiefs' Council declared violence against women and girls a national emergency, Sky News has today published appalling accounts of sexual harassment and violence against women paramedics. Can the Prime Minister please update the House on progress towards the mission board to finally tackle this scourge in our society?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this; it is such a serious issue. We have made a commitment—a mission—to halve violence against women and girls. I know from my experience dealing with these cases, as a prosecutor and subsequently, just how hard that will be to achieve. We will have to deliver in a different way; we will have to roll up our sleeves and do difficult things that have not been done in the past. In answer to the specific question, we have already started work on the delivery board, and I look forward to updating my hon. Friend and the House on our progress on this really important issue.

Mr Speaker: Final question: Sir Roger Gale.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Another Freudian slip! The old dog is off the leash.

May I first thank the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for their supportive policies in relation to Ukraine? Their expressions today will have been of great comfort to the thousands of Ukrainian residents in the United Kingdom who simply wish to return to their lawful home.

Further to the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), can the Prime Minister tell the House how his planning reforms, which will smother with houses fields in east Kent that currently yield wheat for bread, are compatible with the desire of his own Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to achieve sustainability?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. We have to get economic growth in this country. We have had failure over the last 14 years

to build the infrastructure, the houses and the prisons we need, and the failure on economic growth has been central to that. There has been failure, and I think the whole House can see the consequences. We have prison overcrowding; emergency measures have had to be taken because the building of prisons has not kept pace with the sentencing of people to prison. We have a housing crisis; for most young people, the dream of home ownership was simply gone under the previous Government. For someone to be over the age of 35 before they can get a secure roof of their own over their head is a huge dashing of dreams. *[Interruption.]* We are not going to listen to the Conservatives. They put their case to the electorate, and the electorate rejected them profoundly. Having stood at the Opposition Dispatch Box for four and a half long years, my advice is that when you get rejected that profoundly by the electorate, it is best not to go back to them and tell them that they were wrong; it is best to reflect, and change your approach and your party.

Point of Order

12.39 pm

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his question to the Prime Minister, the newly elected hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) made what was, I am sure—I am certain—an inadvertent inaccuracy in his claims about the funding of the Metropolitan police, which is the best-funded force, both in absolute terms and per capita. The Mayor of London was offered £62 million with which to fund it, which he failed to use because of lack of recruitment. My broader point is whether advice can be given to new and, indeed, returning Members about how to correct the record when they make an erroneous claim on the Floor of the House.

Mr Speaker: First, the right hon. Gentleman has put on record his views. We are not going to continue the debate, and it is up to individual Members to correct the record if there has been an error in what has been said.

International Immunities and Privileges

12.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): I beg to move,

That the draft Global Combat Air Programme International Government Organisation (Immunities and Privileges) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 23 May, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

It is my pleasure as the Minister responsible for the Indo-Pacific in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to speak on behalf of the Government. In December 2022, the UK, Japan and Italy launched the global combat air programme, known as GCAP, to deliver a next-generation aircraft by 2035. The Prime Minister reaffirmed the Government's commitment to promoting co-operation and collaboration between the UK and Italy on 5 July with the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, and between the UK and Japan on 6 July with the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida. In the call to Japan, our Prime Minister concurred that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific are indivisible.

His Majesty's Government are committed to ensuring the security of the Indo-Pacific, working closely with our allies. For the UK, the aircraft will sit at the heart of a wider system; it will be networked and will collaborate with a range of wider air capabilities, including the F-35, and broader military capabilities. It will use information systems, weapons and uncrewed collaborative combat air platforms to complete the capability. Replacing the capability provided by Typhoon, this system will sustain the UK's operational advantage.

In addition, GCAP will attract investment in research and development on digital design and advanced manufacture processes, providing opportunities for our next generation of highly skilled engineers and technicians.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Catherine West: I will continue, if the right hon. Gentleman allows.

The signing of the convention on the establishment of the GCAP international government organisation, commonly known as the GIGO, by the parties of the UK, Japan and Italy took place in December 2023 and was conducted by the Defence Secretaries of those three nations. The GIGO will function as the executive body, with the legal capacity to place contracts with industrial partners engaged in GCAP. Through the GIGO, the UK will lead on the development of an innovative stealth fighter jet with supersonic capability and equipped with cutting-edge technology, and will facilitate collaboration with key international partners that raise the profile of the UK's combat air industrial capacity.

The GIGO headquarters will be based in the UK, employing personnel from the UK, Italy and Japan. The chief executive and director posts shall be filled by nationals of different parties according to a mechanism that shall preserve a balance between the parties. Given the nature of the GIGO as an international defence organisation, the Ministry of Defence, with support

from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, has been leading on trilateral engagement and negotiations on its establishment. The convention, once in effect, will enable closer collaboration between the parties—the Governments of Japan, Italy and the UK—and support the development of His Majesty's Government's defence capabilities, stimulated by development of the UK-based headquarters. That will enable further collaboration with key industry partners, with the headquarters supporting hundreds of jobs, and working in close partnership with Rolls-Royce, Leonardo UK, MBDA UK, and hundreds of other companies across the UK in the supply chain, to deliver GCAP.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Catherine West: I am coming to an end, and then there are 90 minutes for debate.

This Order in Council is a statutory instrument and forms part of the secondary legislation needed to confer legal capacity and privileges and immunities on the GCAP international government organisation and accords certain privileges and immunities to the organisation's personnel and the representatives of the parties to the convention. The order was laid in draft before Parliament on 23 May 2024—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. To clarify, it is not my decision whether to allow interventions; it is up to the Minister. I would say that normally the shadow Secretary of State would get in, but it is up to the Minister whether she gives way.

Catherine West: If the shadow Secretary of State wants to say something, I would be happy to allow him, following your advice, Mr Speaker.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister. Can she confirm that there will be no delay to the Ministry of Defence's currently planned spending on GCAP this year?

Catherine West: To be clear to Members new and old, this instrument is the legal framework within which the programme will sit. It does not have specific funding recommendations attached to it because it is the scaffolding, or the nest, within which all the work will happen.

This order was laid before Parliament in draft on 23 May 2024. It is subject to the affirmative procedure and will be made by the Privy Council once it is approved by both Houses. Subject to approval and ratification, the treaty will enter into force on the deposit of the last instrument of ratification or acceptance of the parties. That is anticipated to be in autumn 2024 to meet the 2035 in-service date.

This order confers a bespoke set of privileges and immunities to enable the GIGO to operate effectively in the UK. The Government consider those privileges and immunities both necessary and appropriate to deliver on the interests and commitments that the UK has towards the organisation.

Mr Francois: I am not a Minister, but I was for three years. Will the Minister give way?

Catherine West: As the right hon. Gentleman has so much experience on the Defence Committee, I am happy to take his point.

Mr Francois: I thank the Minister for giving way. She is a Foreign Office Minister heading this up, I believe, not a Defence Minister, which is interesting, but it is an international agreement. Can she tell the House whether, because of the threat to the programme from the defence review, she has had any representations from the Japanese Government or the Italian Government, our two other major programme partners, to express their concern about any threat to GCAP?

Catherine West: The right hon. Gentleman asks an important question. I can confirm that this is the legal framework around which the programme will sit. I can also confirm that the Defence Secretary yesterday met with his Japanese counterparts at the show and they were able to have further interesting discussions. The right hon. Gentleman will be able to continue his questioning when he is surely once again a member of the Defence Committee in the autumn.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Many jobs in our constituencies depend on contracts with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is also interested in GCAP. What conversations have been had with Saudi Arabia, particularly in the light of the procrastination by the Prime Minister on this programme—reaffirmed, if I am honest, by the Minister today in her remarks?

Catherine West: The right hon. Member asks an important question, but there has been no procrastination. Within a month of being elected, we have got the legal framework to the House of Commons for a debate, expediting all the important organisational arrangements so that the programme can proceed at pace. He talks of procrastination, and after 14 years, I am sure he is a master of procrastination as part of the last Government.

The privileges and immunities conferred on agency personnel and representatives are not for their personal advantage, but to ensure complete independence in the exercise of their functions in connection with GCAP. To be clear, agency personnel have no personal immunity if they commit a crime and there is a clear carve-out ensuring that they have no immunity in any vehicle incident.

The immunities in respect of the GIGO cover immunity from suit and legal process, inviolability of premises and archives, and appropriate tax exemptions and reliefs in relation to official activities. In respect of representatives of the parties and staff, the provisions cover functional immunity and an immunity waiver. Additionally, the order includes an exemption from the legal suit and process immunity in the case of a motor traffic offence or damage caused by a motor vehicle. That is a standard clause included in statutory instruments and treaties to provide for privileges and immunities.

The support for the GIGO's establishment ensured through the order is a unique opportunity to showcase UK leadership and innovation in the air force defence industry on a global stage. Through the GIGO the UK will lead on the development of an innovative stealth fighter jet with supersonic capability and equipped with cutting-edge technology, and facilitate collaboration with key international partners that raise the profile of the UK's combat air industrial capacity.

Jim Shannon: There is much to be welcomed in the Minister's speech. At the very beginning, she referred to a number of aircraft companies that will be involved across the whole of the United Kingdom. My understanding—maybe she can confirm this—is that Spirit AeroSystems will also be involved. If that is the case, it means that everybody in this great United Kingdom of Great and Britain and Northern Ireland will benefit from the jobs and opportunities.

Catherine West: Obviously the specifics of the supply chain and so on are not really part of the order, but we are aware that that is an important part of our industrial puzzle, and I am sure that there will be some knock-on benefits for Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman is a fierce defender of jobs and opportunities in that wonderful place.

The first duty of Government is to keep the country safe. Under this Government, defence will be central both to the UK's security and to our economic prosperity and growth, including by harnessing the strength of our well-established defence industry. The GIGO is key to GCAP, and the UK Government continues to make positive progress with our partners Japan and Italy. I commend the order to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Defence.

12.51 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I associate the shadow Defence team with the remarks from the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition about the terrible attack on a British soldier in Kent? Our thoughts are with his family.

I can confirm that we support the measures before us and recognise that they are necessary to deliver into law the administrative governance of the global combat air programme. Although this is a Foreign Office measure, the statutory instrument was prepared with strong input from the Ministry of Defence—it certainly crossed my desk when I was Minister for Defence Procurement. May I put on the record that it was a great honour to serve in that role—with significant responsibility in relation to GCAP—alongside the two previous Secretaries of State, Ben Wallace and Grant Shapps.

It was a privilege to engage with our international GCAP partners from Italy and Japan, whom I had the pleasure of hosting last September in Lancaster House for trilateral discussions. This is not just about delivering UK military capability in the crucial area of combat air, but about doing so to the benefit of two great partners, and, in the case of Japan, one that faces the threat of China and Russia right on its doorstep. Since that trilateral, the project has achieved significant goals, not least the signing of the international treaty last December that we are legislating for today. The treaty establishes the legal basis for the formation of a new GCAP international organisation, the GIGO. I am delighted that we are able to agree that the international HQ of the GIGO will be in the UK, but that, in keeping with the spirit of equal partnership that underpins GCAP, the first chief executives of the GCAP agency and joint venture are from Italy and Japan. As such, the SI before us effectively enables this international treaty to enter

into effect, with further important measures on immunity and privileges that are necessary for the effective operation of the GIGO.

All that said, although the SI is necessary to deliver GCAP's governance arrangements, it will not directly deliver a single aircraft. Alongside this SI, we need the Government to back the GCAP programme wholeheartedly by ensuring that it has the funding necessary to deliver our sixth-generation fighter capability. Indeed, it would be quite extraordinary for the Government to ask us as a House to approve the regulations if they were at the same time seriously contemplating scrapping UK involvement in GCAP. Yet that prospect has figured prominently in the press in recent days. While the best of British defence aviation has been gathered at the Royal International Air Tattoo and Farnborough, incredibly the Government have not been able to repeat the wholehearted backing of GCAP that they gave prior to the general election.

In responding to the statement from his predecessor Grant Shapps on 18 December last year, when he confirmed the trilateral agreement for the GCAP treaty, the now Defence Secretary said:

“Developing a sixth-generation fighter will ensure that we can continue to safeguard our UK skies and those of our NATO allies for decades to come. It will inspire innovation, strengthen UK industry and keep Britain at the cutting edge of defence technology.”

I totally agree with his remarks. Yet fast-forward to the present, and, as we have just heard at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister is only able to say that the programme is “important.” Meanwhile, the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who is on the Front Bench and for whom I have great personal respect, said:

“It's not right for me to prejudge what might happen in the defence review”.

He thus implied that the defence review might not continue the UK's commitment to GCAP. We now need clarity from the Government for Parliament, industry and our international partners. We are being asked to approve this SI to deliver a key stepping-stone to the GCAP project, so are the Government still committed to it?

This is my guess about what is currently happening. I would be truly staggered if the Government were to withdraw from a programme that they have previously given such full support—not because theirs is a party that does not know a good U-turn, but because it would bring international ramifications that do not bear thinking about either for the Foreign Office or the Ministry of Defence. Rather, in my view, we need to have in mind another Department—one that I have also had the pleasure of serving in—the Treasury. I suspect that the overall question of whether the Government are committed to GCAP is a red herring. What really matters is whether they are committed to funding it this year, with important spending decisions to be made right now. They will be in the inbox of the Secretary of State, under “Funding decisions on GCAP.” We want the Government to continue that funding in the years beyond, and we want to know whether they are using the review as a chance to shift spending decisions to the right.

It is not unprecedented in the history of the Treasury for it to work in that way under successive Governments, probably. It might offer illusory short-term savings, but

it would cause immediate and lasting pain to the most important conventional defence programme of our time. To be clear—and I mean this—I have the greatest respect for the way the Treasury has to balance the books and be responsible for the nation’s finances. I was delighted that the previous Government proposed moving to 2.5% once it was affordable—we were prepared to make difficult decisions to fund that 2.5% by reducing the size of the civil service to pre-pandemic levels—and once it was sustainable. Far from this Government inheriting what the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has described as the “worst economic inheritance” since world war two, we did what we promised and moved to 2.5% only once the economic conditions allowed—namely, when inflation was back to target, with healthy economic growth and a deficit heading towards a little over 1% over the forecast period. That is our clear pathway to 2.5% versus Labour’s uncertainty and delay, which makes the real difference.

To understand the direct short-term importance of 2.5% and its relevance to GCAP and this statutory instrument, we need only go back to what the Secretary of State said the response to the statement from his predecessor Grant Shapps in December. He said:

“This month, the National Audit Office reported on the MOD’s equipment plan. It exposed a £17 billion black hole in Britain’s defence plans and showed that Ministers have lost control of the defence budget.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 1137.]

It is not so much that we lost control of the defence budget; rather, Putin invaded Ukraine and sent inflation soaring all around the world. In a world that was then in a rush to rearm, that context caused an inevitable hit to the costs of major defence projects and matériel. I have never pretended otherwise.

Bearing in mind that the equipment plan—the MOD’s forward inventory—accounts for over 10 years, the NAO’s assessment of a black hole did not take account of one thing: moving to 2.5% by 2030. As I said in my wind up to the Thursday’s debate on the Gracious Speech, by setting out a fully costed and clearly timetabled pathway to 2.5%, we were able to deal with those funding pressures head on, and ensure that our largest two programmes—the nuclear deterrent and GCAP—would be stabilised, and, as a result, properly funded into the future. I asked the Foreign Office Minister who responded to my to confirm that the Government’s timetable would not put funding of either programme at risk. There was no answer, and we have had no answer today, either. That is the problem. The Government can afford to bring forward this SI and to continue building the administrative apparatus for GCAP, but we fear that they cannot afford to approve the funding requirements for the next stage of building the actual aircraft, because of their vacillation on reaching 2.5%.

We Conservatives are clear that we support the SI on the basis that we are also supporting GCAP as a whole, including by putting in place the funding necessary to deliver its requirements over the urgent timescale that all three member nations require. That is a key point: for all three nations, GCAP is all about pace and timetable. For the UK and Italy, that means replacing the Typhoon before it is withdrawn from service towards 2040; for Japan, with equal urgency, it means replacing the Mitsubishi F-2. That is why any delay or deferment, whether caused by the lack of a clear timetable to 2.5% or otherwise, is so important and critical.

Overall, it is my view that withdrawing from GCAP now would be the equivalent of scrapping the Spitfire programme in the 1930s. It is that serious. However, if such an outcome is seriously under consideration—and we know that there are those in government who are hugely sceptical—I will explain why we are ultimately supporting this SI. It is because we on the Conservative Benches believe that GCAP is a military necessity that will bring enormous economic and strategic benefits to the United Kingdom.

To start with the military capability argument, if there is one key lesson from Ukraine, it is that in the absence of air superiority we face the prospect of terrible attritional warfare with huge casualties, reminiscent of the worst battles of world war two.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know it is thinking very far into the future, but does my hon. Friend accept that one of the lessons from the Ukraine conflict, where we have had to give indirect support, is the importance of maintaining aircraft that we have withdrawn from service—in mothballs, if necessary—so that they can be made available to allies, should they ever face a crisis such as this one? When the happy day comes that we have these great sixth-generation aircraft, can we be certain that we have not unduly disposed of their predecessors, in case someone else needs them in future?

James Cartledge: My right hon. Friend’s question is an interesting one. Whenever I was in front of the Select Committee—it was always a great joy and privilege to be cross-examined, particularly by my colleagues on the Conservative Benches—there was always a debate about when we withdraw platforms and when we bring in their replacements. That will never go away, and I wish the Armed Forces Minister well when he has the unique privilege and experience of going in front of the Committee. What I would say to my right hon. Friend is that we have to accept that, as a matter of avionic reality, the Typhoon will reach the end of its service life, and we as a country have to replace it. GCAP is key to that, with the construction of the new core platform.

While investing in the best combat air capability does not guarantee air superiority in the future, it offers us the chance to deny adversaries such potentially deadly freedom of operation by maintaining technological competitiveness. However, there are those who ask, “Why don’t we simply go off-the-shelf and buy more F-35s?” I noticed similar views being expressed in *The Daily Telegraph* this very day, and there is even a rumour that some Government Departments, such as those I mentioned earlier, may take a view along those lines. We must be clear that the F-35, while a brilliant and highly capable aircraft, is a fifth-generation platform, not a sixth-generation one. It is not optimised for the battle space that is likely to pertain by the late 2030s, and the United States—which, after all, possesses and manufactures the F-35—is itself investing in a sixth-generation programme, as are our adversaries.

Jim Shannon: I commend the shadow Minister for what he is saying: his great focus on the issues of modern technology, our companies and what they are involved with. I know that he has a tremendous interest in Northern Ireland—he visited there regularly in his former role in government. Can he give us some suggestions about the role that aerospace in Northern Ireland could, and will, play in finding a way forward?

James Cartlidge: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is an absolute champion of the defence industry in Northern Ireland. He is right: one of my last visits was to the Thales factory in Belfast, which of course is home to the next-generation light anti-tank weapon, the lightweight multirole missile, and other key munitions. In terms of aerospace, the first small and medium-sized enterprise forum that I held as Defence Procurement Minister was in Larne in Northern Ireland, on Armed Forces Day last year. Spirit was one of the attendees, and I am confident that it has a strong place in the future of British aviation in the defence sector, as long as we put the funding in place and keep with the programmes.

Having said all that, there must obviously be debate when we are spending this amount of money on a capability, and I understand why there are those who question the sums of money involved, the timeframes and so on. To be clear, as a former Defence Procurement Minister, I would not support a programme that was purely about spending such a vast amount of money just on a new core platform to replace Typhoon. That brings us to what GCAP is really about, which the Minister mentioned in her opening remarks, to her credit. On one of my last visits to a land company—a company manufacturing armoured vehicles for this country—the chief executive I spoke to referred to the GCAP of land. The point is that, although the “A” stands for air, when we talk about GCAP in military capability terms, it is equally about how we work with autonomous and uncrewed systems. That is the key to the sixth-generation concept.

I am very passionate about this issue—I was proud to bring forward the first defence drone strategy at the Ministry of Defence—and although there are those who are concerned about the timeframe, I would just make the following points. First, the timescale for delivering GCAP is very ambitious compared with that of Typhoon; secondly, we can gain capability benefits from GCAP on a much shorter timescale. We have heard the Chief of the General Staff talking about the need for the Army to be able to fight a war within three years, and when I was Defence Procurement Minister, I was keen to ensure that all the services were looking at what they could do to boost lethality and survivability in the near term. Surely, the key to that is how we make use of uncrewed systems.

The United Kingdom is incredibly well placed in that regard: we jointly lead the maritime coalition in respect of Ukraine alongside Norway. Of course, Ukraine’s greatest military success has been naval, having pushed back the Russian fleet using what we might describe as innovative weapons rather than traditional naval deployments. Likewise on land, the incredible importance of drones cannot be overstated, including the psychological impact on those who are fighting out there.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I totally agree with what the former Minister is saying about the requirement for and necessity of sixth-generation aircraft, as well as about maintaining sovereign capability. However, does he agree that it seems peculiar that the Americans are developing their own sixth-generation aircraft with Lockheed Martin, the French and the Germans are developing their own sixth-generation aircraft as well, and we have forged this strange partnership with the Italians and the Japanese to develop GCAP? Does the

Minister think that makes sense, in terms of pooling effort and making sure that our allies have at least one good sixth-generation fighter aircraft?

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I do not regard it as a strange partnership. All my experience of dealing with GCAP and meeting my Italian and Japanese counterparts, particularly industry representatives from all three countries, and working so closely together—there is already so much work going on—tells me that this is about developing a brilliant platform that is needed by all three nations. There will always be a multiplicity of platforms from different countries, which I think is perfectly healthy. What is good about the hon. Gentleman’s question is that he has opened up the debate about sovereign capability, which I will come to shortly. I just wanted to finish my point about the uncrewed domain, and what it means to be sixth-generation.

Mr Francois: Before my hon. Friend does so, would he give way very briefly?

James Cartlidge: Of course—it is a pleasure.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend was a very good Defence Procurement Minister, and we on the Committee liked him because, crikey, he actually answered the questions. He will know from that experience that even the Americans, who have a new thing called the next generation air dominance fighter, are struggling to afford it; there have been media reports in the US that they may even cancel that programme, because even the Americans cannot afford to do everything unilaterally anymore. In the light of that, does my hon. Friend believe that a three-way programme represents good value for money?

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend, who not only served on the Committee but was an Armed Forces Minister, makes an excellent point. There are those who argue that we should go beyond 2.5%; I would argue that 2.5% is still a significant jump for this country. We had a funded plan, and that 2.5%—crucially and critically, with the pathway we set out, which became an accumulation of significant additional billions of pounds for the MOD—enabled us to afford GCAP and stabilise that programme.

I want to make one crucial point about the uncrewed domain. To be frank, for the uncrewed side of the Navy, Army and Air Force, those programmes are not funded: hitherto, the funding has come primarily from support for Ukraine. That is entirely logical because, under the defence drone strategy, we were very clear that there is no point in the Army, for example, ordering large-scale drones now; it might order them to train with, but the technology is changing so fast. What we as a country need to build, as I set out in the drone strategy, is the ecosystem to develop those drones, and we are doing that.

I have always said—I said it during my statement on the integrated procurement model—that my most inspiring moment as Defence Procurement Minister was visiting a UK SME that was building a drone for use in Ukraine. It was a highly capable platform, but brilliantly, it was getting feedback and spiralling it—as we call it—the very next day. On GCAP, it should be a technology for

the whole of defence—it should be a pan-defence technology of how we team with uncrewed systems, how the Navy fights with an uncrewed fleet above and below the surface, for the Army and of course for the Air Force.

I have two final points on military capability, as a couple of points have been floating around in the press. The first is that the Army is putting out its opposition to GCAP. I find that idea impossible to believe. Of course, if the Army wants to succeed, it needs the support of the Air Force and so on. That is why an integrated approach to procurement is so important, not single service competition. There has also been the point that we should choose between GCAP and AUKUS, as if, when the next war comes, the Russians will step into our dressing room and ask if we would like to bowl or bat: would we like to fight on land or sea—what is our preference? The fact is that we do not know where the threat will come from, but we know that it is growing, so we should support both GCAP and AUKUS, not least for the enormous economic benefit they bring.

You will be pleased to know, Mr Speaker, that that brings me to the last part of my speech, on the economic benefits of GCAP. There are those who say we should buy off the shelf. We would stress how, in a state of ever greater war readiness, it pays to have operational independence and sovereignty. In particular, investing in the great tradition of UK combat air offers huge economic gains for every part of the country.

In 2020, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that the Tempest programme alone would support an average of 20,000 jobs every year from 2026 until 2050. Those are well-paid jobs in every constituency up and down the country—including many in Lancashire, as you will know, Mr Speaker. Scrapping GCAP would hit our economy hard. Even delaying or deferring GCAP expenditure would undermine our brilliant aerospace industry, which was on display this past week at the Royal International Air Tattoo in Farnborough, and cast doubt over the vast sums of private investment that are waiting, from which hundreds of UK SMEs stand to benefit.

An interesting point was raised by the Leader of the Opposition when asking the Prime Minister about exports and discussions with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is an incredibly important point. I was clear that, in reforming procurement, we have to have exportability at the heart of it because otherwise industrial supply chains wither. It is as simple as that. The demand from this country is not big enough. This has been the French lesson for many years, which is why they have put so much effort into export, and we need to do the same—whether it is GCAP, or any other platforms or capability manufactured by the United Kingdom.

To undermine GCAP is to undermine our economy, our future war-fighting capability and relations with our closest international partners. The Government should instead embrace GCAP wholeheartedly and confirm that they stand by their previous position of steadfast support. Then they should commit to a clear timetable on 2.5%, so that we can turbocharge the programme by investing not only in the core platform, but in the associated technology of autonomous collaboration and a digital system of systems approach, enabling the mass and rapid absorption of battlespace data.

To conclude, the best way to win the next war is to deter it from happening in the first place. Part of our overall deterrence posture is to signal to our adversaries our preparedness to always be ready to out-compete their technology. How can we send that deterrent signal if we have such mixed messages on our largest conventional military programme? We support this statutory instrument, we support GCAP and we support the powerful gains it will give to the United Kingdom's economic and military strength.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I gently say that I welcome the very thorough response from the Opposition, but the shadow Minister did take twice as long as the Minister? I do have other speakers on his own side who also want to get in, so please just work to make sure we can get everybody in.

We now come to a maiden speech—I call Calvin Bailey.

1.13 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank the shadow Minister for his speech.

Mr Speaker, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to speak. It appears that for once my sense of timing has been impeccable. Having completed 24 years and seven months of service in the Royal Air Force, I have arrived on time, uniquely placed as the only person who could sequence their maiden speech in amongst a debate about military aircraft. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) suggested in his riposte to the King's Speech, I will not be wearing a silk smoking jacket.

It is a life of service to this House that also characterises my predecessor's career. A loved politician, John Cryer gave 14 years of service to the constituency of Leyton and Wanstead, and nine years as Member for Hornchurch before that. He is a fine parliamentarian and, more importantly, a fine socialist, like his mother and father before him. His incredible commitment to the parliamentary Labour party as its chair for the past nine years was instrumental in helping us get to where we are today. While he now moves on to the other place, I am certain that his children, and his family's legacy, will follow in his footsteps in years to come.

This sentiment of service is something that resonates deeply with me. Service is fundamental to who I am, and it is fundamental to the Government and to my commitment to the wonderful constituency of Leyton and Wanstead. I am here because my constituents placed their trust in me, a trust for which I am grateful, and which I will repay with service and a commitment to ensuring they are represented in this place to the fullest of my abilities.

At the centre of my constituency is Leytonstone, at the heart of which is our beloved Whipps Cross hospital. Whipps has served our constituency for 121 years, during which time its NHS staff—quiet professionals—have given selflessly for those in need within our community. Yet this hospital is emblematic of 14 years of failed Tory commitments and lack of investment. Its rebuilding is central to my tenure as an MP.

Leytonstone is also a cradle for talent, having been home to notable figures such as my namesake David Bailey and Cartrain, and sports stars Jo Fenn, Andros Townsend and David Beckham. Leytonstone was the

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

home, of RAF pedigree, of Douglas Webb DFM, the front gunner in the famous dam busters raid, and more lately, of James Sjöberg, the officer commanding 47 Squadron. Leveraging this rich heritage to inspire our youth and give them pathways to success is a personal commitment of mine. Opportunities like these were scarce for young people like me. Creating similar pathways for our youth will be central to my service.

Leytonstone is also home to one of the most financially deprived areas in the country, but it is a spirited community that seeks to heal itself. Community leadership from Cann Hall mosque ensures the provision to all local people of a much-needed food bank and a youth group. Similarly, at St Margaret with St Columba, others gather to preserve a sense of community despite their obvious hardships.

Community spirit is also strong in South Woodford and Wanstead. If Whipps is the heart of our constituency, Wanstead park is its lungs and the River Roding its veins. Wanstead park is part of our historic Epping forest, which was saved by campaigners such as Octavia Hill, founder of the National Trust, and the spirit of activism and preservation continues in the Wanstead Community Gardeners, the South Woodford Society and the ever-popular Wanstead fringe festival.

To the south is Leyton, home of Leyton Orient football club. The O's and their trust embody the best of our community. From their sacrifices in the pal regiment in the first world war to their work with Waltham Forest Age UK, they support our vulnerable veterans. The club is also proud to celebrate our diverse communities, epitomised by Laurie Cunningham, the club's first black player. His legacy continues to inspire, as does the leadership of Omar Beckles in improving representation in football. Such leadership is reflective of the club's leadership in the establishment of governance for our footballing world.

Efforts such as these are key to me. Visible role models and leadership are essential for diverse communities. Without these inspirational characters, young black people like me will not see themselves in places of power. I reflect on the very low number of black men in our politics, despite an increase in representation across all ethnic groups. Addressing this is key to fixing the inequalities that face young people, particularly in the area of knife crime.

A pivotal moment in my upbringing was the murder of Stephen Lawrence. While we are aware of the continuing failure to provide justice to my friend Stuart's family, we all know of the institutional failings that have led to this. I want to point all Members to a number of things surrounding this that were formative for me. First, the absence of representation inhibits our ability to hear voices and understand the challenges faced by others like us. I reflected during the campaign that when I was young I carried a knife, not because I wished to attack anyone, but because I was scared and felt that the fate that had befallen my friend's brother could happen to me and others like me. Mistakenly, I assumed that I could look after myself similarly, but sadly, we know that is not the case, and that those who carry knives are more likely to be killed themselves. We need people like me to translate those experiences into policy.

Secondly, and in some ways most importantly, I look back with great upset and anger on how this matter was politicised by extreme groups. Our anger and upset was channelled by populists who manipulated us for their own political ends. Those voices are present in our House and vocal in our politics, and we must challenge them openly to prevent those actors from fostering anger, hate and division within our communities. I fear it is our greatest threat to democracy, and we must be fundamental in our moderation. We must challenge those behaviours without fear, openly, separating them from the underlying issues.

Finally, what saw me through that period in my life, and through a highly decorated flying career in the Royal Air Force, are the two things I value most: first, my friends; and secondly, my family. My mother and father instilled in me the values and virtues of service and humanity; my sisters shaped me and helped me to see the world through the eyes of a woman. My friends shepherded me through school, college and university, and through every difficult challenge in my life. But it is my wife who has supported me steadfastly through a military career and grown our wonderful family. I love her deeply and will never be able to thank her enough.

The reason I am here is my service not just as a Member of this House but to our nation in the RAF. I have chosen to speak in this debate because I recall as a young engineering student learning of the failings of the Duncan Sandys defence review, which did deep and lasting damage to our aerospace industry and industrial base. Already we have heard voices state that our commitment to this programme is a fallacy, but acceptance of that is merely acceptance of a failure to manage defence programmes and the companies contracted to deliver them. It is not GCAP that is a fallacy, but the way we contract and manage such programmes. Our interaction with defence primes must change. We must encourage risk taking, because without it there is no innovation. We must not allow the customer to set the demand for technologies that the customer itself cannot conceive.

We must be a Government who better understand science, and we need an industry that is incentivised with accountability. We have the sixth largest defence budget in the world. We must get our money's worth, and we must make sure that our money leads to our security and not to excess corporate bonuses. For that reason, the remarks by the Minister for the Armed Forces about the sanctity of the defence review are key. We cannot allow defence simply to be bought out of its overspend. This is an exciting programme with two close and valued partners, and the Government's defence review is critical to it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

1.23 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an absolute honour to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey). He has delivered an excellent maiden speech, and it is an example to every new, and old, Member of this House that he should set out his love and affection for the place where he lives and where he has clearly spent many happy years. It is obviously a custom in this House to use the term "honourable and gallant" for somebody who has served, but in the case of the hon. Member it has

particular resonance, because he received an MBE a decade ago in recognition of meritorious, gallant, and distinguished services. He made a tremendous speech, and the whole House will have heard him talk about the importance of a new hospital to his constituency, and about the scourge of knife crime, and his own personal reflections on why young people carry knives. We will all reflect on his thoughts and comments as he makes them in the months and years to come.

I welcome the Minister of State to her place, and congratulate her on her new role at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Given that she shadowed that role for some time, I feel hopeful that she has a good understanding of our partnerships not just in Europe but in east and south-east Asia, and that they are safe with her.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats I welcome the Government's announcement that they remain committed to the global combat air programme. I also welcome the presence in the King's Speech of the strategic defence review. Reflecting on the speech that we have just heard, it is essential that we go through a strategic defence review every time we have a serious change of Government, as we have had after 14 years. It was encouraging to hear that the review will be published soon, within the first half of next year.

Professor Michael Clarke points out that this is the 12th defence review to have taken place since the end of the cold war, and that most have "not been very strategic". He says that most reviews have been cost-cutting exercises, and that only a couple of them could be described as genuinely strategic. He goes on:

"I think this one has an ambition to be more genuinely strategic."

Sir Julian Lewis: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis of past strategic defence reviews, and I particularly remember the 1998 SDR, which was after a Labour landslide. It was strategic and outlined concepts that stood the test of time. One reason for that was that it gave other people the opportunity to contribute to the review. I am hoping that Labour Ministers might pay a little attention to the idea that if they want their strategic defence and security review to do well, they should open up the process so that people on a non-partisan basis can have serious input to it—[*Interruption.*] I am delighted to see my friend the Minister for the Armed Forces nodding his agreement.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for that intervention, and so far I gather that the Government are prepared to listen to external expertise. I was encouraged to hear that Fiona Hill will be very much at the pinnacle of this review, and I know as an example that she has a great deal of insight into matters Europe, and in particular in relation to Russia. The defence review will need to look not only at means, which is what we are discussing today, but at ends and ways, so that it comes to thinking about means only after thinking about ends and ways. The problem with pre-empting a review and leaping straight into talking about particular procurement programmes is that it only serves, at this stage at least, to start to raise questions about what programmes have not been confirmed so far.

In this, the week of the Farnborough airshow, lots of questions have been raised about GCAP, or "Tempest" as the fighter aircraft will be known in the UK. On Saturday, one headline warned:

"RAF jet may never get off the ground"

and on Monday a subheading read

"questions are being asked about whether it should be scrapped to save money."

On Tuesday an opinion column warned:

"The Government's silence over the future of the Tempest fighter is deeply concerning."

Sometimes the question is not as simple as whether to spend, but whether to spend in the near term or the long term, or on procuring equipment today or in the future. There is a trade-off in combat power between the near term and the long term.

I appreciate that the Government will be seeking to confirm to our allies that GCAP will proceed, and they will want to reassure Italy and Japan, as well as offer reassurance to commercial partners. Those of us from the west country need look no further than Yeovil to see what a success Leonardo has been for industry in our region. Defence exports from Yeovil amounted to £1.6 billion in 18 months. This issue clearly does matter a great deal to UK industry, but we must think about what else is happening in the commercial space.

We have heard about the European future combat air system—SCAF—consortium made up of France, Germany and Spain, which is developing a fighter jet in parallel. I urge the Government to consider whether the two systems can be as interoperable as possible. The pyramid open systems architecture that we anticipate will be part of GCAP would do well to be able to speak with whatever the SCAF comes up with.

Aside from GCAP, the strategic defence review should consider the UK's existing capabilities, and existing combat air in particular. Twenty-six tranche 1 Typhoon fighter aircraft are due to be retired from service at the end of next March. The option remains for those tranche 1 aircraft to be brought up to the standard of tranche 2 or tranche 3. BAE systems provided the previous Government with the structural and avionic modifications that would be required, but they chose not to take that up. Instead, they intended to put the 26 tranche 1 aircraft on to a so-called reduce to produce programme to strip them of usable parts for the Typhoon fleet's inventory of spares. I wonder whether consideration also could be given to whether they could become tranche 2 or tranche 3 aircraft instead.

An initial order of 150 F-35 Lightning aircraft has already been scaled back to 138, in part to release funding to GCAP. We can see that there is always a trade-off between thinking about future combat air in 2035 versus what we might need today. Upgrading the 26 tranche 1 fighter aircraft would grow the UK's Typhoon fleet from 107 to 133. Of course, they will not have the latest air-to-ground capabilities of the F-35, and they certainly will not have the range, payload or stealth capabilities that we will expect of GCAP and Tempest, but they would be available soon. In recent months we have seen Typhoon intercept Russian long-range maritime patrol bombers north of the Shetland islands within NATO's northern air policing area. Now does not seem to be the time to cannibalise Typhoon tranche 1 for spare parts.

[Richard Foord]

I recall from my own service the phrase used in the armed forces that we should “deal with the crocodile nearest the boat.” In announcing that GCAP will go ahead, I trust that the defence review will also appraise those near-term risks in our near abroad rather than simply carrying on with existing programmes because they are already in train.

In closing, I will pose three questions to the ministerial team. First, is GCAP still too linked to the assumptions about geopolitics from the 2021 integrated review? Is it taking into full account the integrated review refresh of 2023, and particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Secondly, if there is to be a parallel development of GCAP and SCAF by other European allies, will the Government reassure us that consideration is being given to interoperability such as in relation to open systems architecture? Thirdly, if there is not enough money in the pot to upgrade Typhoon tranche 1, buy more F-35s and develop GCAP, which of those three initiatives is the UK unlikely to do?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): I call Mark Francois.

1.33 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I begin by congratulating you on your election and welcoming you to the Chair? I am sure that you will chair our proceedings excellently. We wish you all good luck.

May I also thank the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) for a fine, fluent and—if I may say so—at times poignant maiden speech? He spoke well on behalf of his constituents. I have it on good authority that when my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) was the procurement Minister, the hon. Member took him on a tour of Brize Norton and helped to brief him on the A400M. My hon. Friend has asked me to pass on his thanks. As a former Army officer, may I say to a former RAF officer what a great pleasure it is to see the RAF turn up on time? There is indeed a first time for everything. [Laughter.]

The purpose of the order is laid out clearly in paragraph 4.1 of the explanatory memorandum, which states that it

“gives effect to the Convention between the Government of the Italian Republic, the Government of Japan and the Government of the United Kingdom...establishing the Global Combat Air Programme International Government Organisation signed on 14 December 2023”.

It points out that

“The Convention was negotiated by the Ministry of Defence.”

My third welcome is to the Minister; it is good to see her in her place. However, as the convention was nominated by the Ministry of Defence, could she explain for clarity why the FCDO and not the MOD is handling this statutory instrument?

The Minister kindly nominated me for a place on the House of Commons Defence Committee. As today appears to be a day for people taking up nominations, I will gladly accept that and announce that I am going to run—for that Committee.

I also point out that in the explanatory memorandum the policy context for the order—this is important—is described as follows:

“In December 2022, the Prime Ministers of UK, Japan and Italy launched GCAP to deliver a next generation aircraft by 2035. The signing of the GCAP Convention between the partners took place in December 2023 and was conducted by the respective Defence Secretaries of the three nations. The GIGO will function as the executive body with the legal capacity to place contracts with industrial partners engaged in the GCAP.”

So far, so good. The debate takes on some additional resonance, however, because we now have a defence review, which some people have interpreted as a sword of Damocles hanging over this important programme. My fourth welcome is to the new Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who represents a military constituency; it is good to see him in his place, too.

A few minutes ago at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister described GCAP as a “really important programme”. It is. It is good that he was able to go to Farnborough, see the mock-up of the aircraft for himself and receive a briefing.

When I served on the Defence Committee in the last Parliament, in March 2024 we travelled to Japan to examine the programme as best we could from the Japanese perspective. We spoke to politicians, civil servants, industrialists and the Japanese air self-defence force—its military. We were going to write what I believe would have been a very positive report, and then someone went and called a general election. We cannot blame the Minister for that, but she and some of her colleagues did somehow appear to benefit from it.

I would like to stress three themes from that trip, which came out strongly. The first was the absolute unanimity of purpose among the Japanese to deliver the programme. As one politician put it to us,

“We live in a tough neighbourhood, including three autocracies with nuclear weapons. We need to strengthen our defences, and this programme is fundamental to that.”

I think that is a very good summary of the Japanese perspective.

Secondly, we were struck by the willingness of the Japanese to consider third party exports of GCAP to make the aircraft affordable by increasing its production run. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk was always hot on that when he was the procurement Minister. For various historical reasons, I do not think that the Japanese would necessarily have taken that view even a few years ago; that is important.

Thirdly, the Japanese have an absolute determination to achieve the in-service date of 2035, which is referred to directly in the memorandum. The Japanese air self-defence force uses a mixture of F-15J Eagle aircraft and the F-2, which is sort of a souped-up version of the American F-16. They are both good and capable aircraft, but they are getting rather long in the tooth. The Japanese have to plan forward against a threat from the Chinese J-20 or the Russian Su-57. The risk is that by the mid-2030s those aircraft will be outmatched by those two powerful new combat aircraft.

Reference has been made to the F-35. It is a fine aircraft, but it is expensive to buy and very expensive to run. The Americans have found that to their cost—the F-35 was nicknamed by the American media

“the plane that ate the Pentagon”.

It might not necessarily be the answer to the Treasury’s dream. Moreover, for the record, deliveries of the F-35 to the United States forces were suspended for nearly a year—they have only just been resumed—because of problems in upgrading the computers and the software. If we are to talk about the realities, the F-35 has been quite a troubled programme and, to some extent, continues to be so.

What would be the implications of cancellation of GCAP? This is an international agreement and, as it says in paragraph 7 of the explanatory memorandum:

“No external consultation was undertaken as the instrument implements provisions of an international agreement to which the United Kingdom will be obliged to give effect as a matter of international law once it enters into force.”

The first implication were we to cancel it is that it would put back Anglo-Japanese relations and Anglo-Italian relations, arguably for decades. I would not want to be the CEO of a British company trying to sell something to the Japanese Government in the aftermath of the cancellation of GCAP. Secondly, given the scale and the prominence of the programme, there would be a serious risk that we in the United Kingdom would achieve a reputation as an unreliable partner in major military collaborative programmes—everything from AUKUS through to collaboration in space. In an era when things such as a sixth-generation combat aircraft are so expensive that, as I intimated earlier, even the Americans are struggling to afford one on their own, the reality for us as a medium power is that we need to collaborate. We would find it very difficult to find future partners if we suddenly cancelled such an important and sizeable programme for financial reasons.

Thirdly, it would make a nonsense of the UK’s so-called tilt to the Pacific, which was inherent to the so-called integrated review and was reinforced when the review was refreshed before the general election. How can we tilt to the Pacific if we then cancel a major collaborative programme with a critical Pacific partner, which faces challenges from Russia and China even more immediately than we do? Bluntly, our name would be mud in that theatre of operations if we were to do that.

Fourthly, there is what one might call the prosperity agenda. As they said in the King’s Speech, the Government are very committed to growth—let us not debate building and the green belt now, but focus on this issue. In the last few years, about 80% of the UK’s defence exports have come from combat air—mainly sales of Typhoon or our 15% workshare on the F-35. That has averaged roughly £6 billion a year. Again, what would be the threat to our exports and our reputation as a reliable supplier if we were to cancel the programme?

What should we do? The GIGO, which this memorandum establishes, will incorporate prominent representatives from all three countries—the UK, Japan and Italy—and it will be headquartered here. If the programme is to survive, which I strongly believe it should, the GIGO has a vital role to play as the management organisation. It will have to be leaner and less bureaucratic than its predecessor organisations, which oversaw the Tornado and Typhoon programmes—two wonderful aircraft with a proud heritage in the Royal Air Force. I think everyone in the industry would admit that those organisations were a bit too bureaucratic.

The GIGO will have to be a lot leaner and meaner to get the job done. The principal industrial partners—BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Leonardo, among others—will have a real challenge. Historically, the answer to such a dilemma might have been, “Look, it’s a very complicated programme. It will take years to achieve, and it all depends on how many countries join, how many aircraft they buy and what configuration they go for. Will the Saudis participate? Will they want it built in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia if they do participate? There are lots of imponderables, so we will come back to you in about five years’ time with a unit price.” That will not wash. I would submit that one of the first tasks of the GIGO, working with those industrial partners and the three Governments, is to come up with at least a realistic pricing envelope for the programme, which the Treasury can look at and, hopefully, take a positive view on. If they do not do that, there can be no blank cheque, even for this.

To conclude, there is no such thing as an uncancellable defence programme—although I still hope for Ajax—but this comes close. To cancel this programme for short-term financial reasons would be a disaster militarily, politically, diplomatically and industrially. If it comes down to GCAP, AUKUS or Ajax, for me, Ajax has to go, and I say that as a former soldier. We need to understand how extremely serious the implications are of cancelling this programme.

I was a soldier, but the Royal Air Force has a proud tradition in the defence of this country and its interests, going back to the Battle of Britain and the first world war—when it grew out of the Army, I hasten to say.

Sir Julian Lewis: And the Navy.

Mr Francois: And the Navy, in which my father served, for completeness. The Royal Air Force needs this aircraft. We need it. The Japanese, the Italians and the west need it. By all means, let us control the costs, but let us keep it. We are not going to scrap the Spitfire of the future.

1.46 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. I look forward to you extending your authority to unruly fourth parties, even if they are new to that role.

I welcome this statutory instrument, which gives effect to the convention on the establishment of GCAP. GCAP is not important but vital to a range of different priorities, to which I urge the new Government to pay very close attention. It is vital to the United Kingdom’s ability to play its role in defending our values against peer or near-peer adversaries and the threats that they present to our way of life. We will not do that in the very near future if we cannot command a sixth-generation capability. It is vital to developing and maintaining sovereign air capability. If we had no legacy of manufacturing complex combat air systems, we could not start it. That enterprise cannot be begun from nothing.

The flipside of that inevitable truth is that if we neglect what we have developed, at great cost to the public purse over the past 100 years, we defeat the legacy of world-leading extraordinary aircraft, civil and

[*Dave Doogan*]

military, that have come out of the United Kingdom over the past 100 years. We also create an extraordinary gap in our ability to defend the realm—the first duty of any Government. The programme is vital for the 600 stakeholders in the UK alone who have been engaged with GCAP to date, and it has not even got up to speed yet. Those are just a few elements of why this is vital. In a geographical sense, it is extraordinarily important to defence manufacturers in the central belt of Scotland and the north-west of England, but I see no reason to disbelieve the claim that it has positive effects for constituencies all across the United Kingdom.

I seek to impress on the Minister for the Armed Forces—who I know gets it, and I am glad that he is here today—that he should challenge any rise in Treasury dogma when it comes to GCAP. It is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to repeat the world-leading performance of Harrier and the Blackburn Buccaneer, the extraordinary capabilities of the Panavia Tornado and the exceptional abilities of the BAE Typhoon. That is what it can do. What it expressly must not do is repeat the incredibly self-defeating cost to the public purse and defence capability of the TSR-2 fiasco in the 1960s. Unfortunately, an incoming Labour Government scrapped that at huge cost to our defence capability and huge cost to the public purse. It was a demonstrable exercise in a Treasury obsessed with the price of everything and myopic about the value of everything. I repeat, in case I sound political, that I know the Minister for the Armed Forces gets it. We trust him to do the right thing.

Mr Francois: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to highlight what happened to TSR-2, which was a generation ahead of its time and a world beater. It was scrapped because the Treasury wanted to buy the F-111 instead, which was an American aircraft, and then it did not end up buying it. There is a lesson from history there too, is there not?

Dave Doogan: If we take, as the United Kingdom has, an extraordinarily complex programme somewhere down the road, then the opportunity cost, much less the financial and operability cost, of turning back on that must be well set out. I am afraid that those are the details the Treasury has a history of not being that interested in. It is more focused on the number at the bottom right-hand side of the balance sheet, but this is far too important to yield to that level of priority.

It is much to be regretted that the future combat air system and GCAP are proceeding in the European theatre in parallel. That is a grossly expensive duplication. I greatly fear that there is nothing we can do about it now. Nevertheless, it is much to be regretted. I am not certain that the partners in the competing French-led FCAS programme will be happy partners throughout, but that remains to be seen. The Minister for the Armed Forces must ensure that the door is left open for any latecomers or laggards who want to get on board with GCAP. I would appreciate his assurance, either today or at a later date, on that willing acceptability and acceptance.

As it is a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister who is leading today, let me say that the one thing the extraordinary aircraft I listed did not enjoy was particularly healthy export success. GCAP

must have exceptional export success because, quite apart from the standard avionics engines and air frames that we have to deal with in conventional traditional aircraft, this aircraft is a breed apart in terms of its electronic warfare capability. It is a combat system, which happens to be in an aircraft, that is extraordinarily expensive. If the price of that is left to the Italians, the UK and the Japanese, we will face no small measure of difficulty.

On the statutory instrument itself, article 34(2) of the convention makes provision for host countries experiencing “serious balance of payment” issues. I draw Members’ attention to the sovereign debt liabilities of both Japan and Italy—and the UK itself, although it would be the third of that list. But the convention merely seeks—to inform the Minister—to “consult” in such circumstances. It would be appreciated if we could know what type of consultation that would involve. Further, article 19(1)(c) clarifies that funding from each party will “be set out in a further arrangement”.

However, the convention does set out that the steering committee will have equal representation from each of the parties. How will the convention decide what the funding will be based on? Will it be based on orders, or on the number of national employees employed in the steering committee? How will that work? It is unclear.

In closing, Leonardo in Edinburgh is the brain and nerve centre of GCAP; it is the central nervous system of this world-leading capability. The system is being designed and finalised in Edinburgh, and it will be built in Edinburgh at Leonardo. That brings me on to the final provision in the SI, which states that the headquarters of GIGO will be established at a later date, but that it will be in the UK. It is really important that wherever it is established, it has close connectivity with the key prime manufacturers of GCAP: Rolls-Royce, Thales, BAE and Leonardo. It must be in a part of this island where an outstanding quality of life can be enjoyed, with access to good schools, good quality of life, transport infrastructure, an international airport and good links with London. That place is Edinburgh.

1.54 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your victory. You will be brilliant and I look forward to serving under your chairmanship in the three or four years ahead.

May I say how very much I support the statutory instrument? I do not support the Prime Minister’s lukewarm words at Farnborough. I think the concerns we have on the Conservative Benches are to do with the hares he set running not by what he said, but by what did not say. My advice to Ministers would be, “For goodness’ sake, up the rhetoric around this.” No Government in their right mind would cancel this project. This project is not only essential to our defence; it is the bridge to the unmanned future of defence that will come by mid-century. Kick away that bridge and we are left with very little: we undermine fundamentally the defence of these islands; we destroy the reputation of this country not just with the Japanese and the Italians, but with practically any partner in defence, present and future, that we can imagine, not least the Saudis; and it means that we will not be able to successfully translate our defence industrial

base to the future, which we all appreciate is largely unmanned in each of the four domains that defence these days has to consider. Words mean what words say, except when they trip from the lips of politicians. Then, it is very often what is not said that influences the conversation, particularly in the media.

My plea, in the very short time available to me, is for Ministers, senior Ministers and the Prime Minister to correct what was said this week and, in particular, to ramp up the rhetoric on our support for this fundamentally important programme that is vital to our defence and our defence base. I appreciate that the Prime Minister has a problem, in that he has failed to commit to 2.5% of GDP within a recognisable timeframe, which is no commitment at all, and he has launched a largely unnecessary defence review, which will be a distraction for at least 12 months. I am confident in the sound good sense of Lord Robertson and Richard Barrons. I cannot imagine that they will be party to the cancellation or delay of this programme.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): I call the Minister to respond.

1.57 pm

Catherine West: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you, on behalf of the Government, on your accession to the throne—not literally, but to the Speaker's Chair, which was actually a gift of the country of Australia to the House of Commons following the 1940s.

I thank my opposite number, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), in particular for his comments regarding the dreadful attack on a soldier outside the Kent barracks this week. I thank him for putting that on the record. I also thank all Members across the House for supporting the SI without a vote.

I will conclude briefly on some of the very important points that have been raised. If I do not cover them all, it is because I will be sending a copy of *Hansard* to those in charge of the review, including the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). All the points that have been raised are crucial in thinking through the next five years of defence spending. As I said at the beginning, this debate is about the international treaty part of the programme, so I will be very brief.

First of all, I thank the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) for his recommendations from his visit to Japan. There is nothing like visiting a country and getting to know the whole team there to give really good feedback, so I will be passing that on. We also had very supportive comments from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). There was a big plea from Edinburgh by the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan), for some defence jobs. That has been heard.

I praise fulsomely the maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey). He has enormously big shoes to fill. Our friend has left the green Benches and will probably go the red Benches at some future point—who knows?—so he has very big shoes to fill. Perhaps his predecessor has already been ennobled. I loved my hon. Friend's description of growing up with the challenges of knife crime and how he came through that. What an excellent role model he is for so many people who are watching our debates today! I also admired his commitment to value for money; that could prove very useful, given his particular area of interest.

A question arose in the debate relating to the role of other partners. The order names the United Kingdom, Japan and Italy because we needed to get on with this. We are the first to deal with this at this level in our parliamentary process. Japan and Italy will then engage in their own processes because of the reciprocity involved, and I am sure that after that, when we are all up to speed, discussions about further partnerships will be ongoing. In granting these privileges and immunities we will be able to bring the GIGO into force, and in doing so, we will be better positioned to support the achievement of GCAP's aims and the fulfilment of the Government's objectives. We will also be better placed to work with international partners and to influence the air combat industry as a result. I hope that the House will support the order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Global Combat Air Programme International Government Organisation (Immunities and Privileges) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 23 May, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

Education and Opportunity

2.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered education and opportunity.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate you on your election.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about the Labour Government's mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. We are bringing change to this nation. However, I know that any change we deliver will be brought about in partnership with our wonderful workforces, so let me take this opportunity, at the end of the academic year, to thank them for all that they do for our children, our young people and our country.

Let me begin by saying two things. First, I welcome my new opposite number, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), to his place. In the previous Government he stood out for his commitment to his brief, his passion and dedication, and the collegiate and effective way in which he worked with colleagues in all parts of the House. We have disagreed on many things, and I am sure that we will go on to disagree on many things, but I hope that whenever we can, we will work together to build a country where children come first.

Secondly, I want to make an announcement, here and now, because our mission is urgent. I am pleased to announce that the Department will undertake a short pause and review of post-16 qualification reform at level 3 and below, concluding before the end of the year. This means that the defunding scheduled for next week will be paused. The coming year will see further developments in the roll-out of new T-levels, which will ensure that young people continue to benefit from high-quality technical qualifications that help them to thrive. I will update the House with more detail tomorrow.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement; I know it will also be welcomed by colleges throughout the country. Teachers in my constituency, like teachers everywhere else, do an extraordinary job in supporting our young people, but it is vital for them to be paid properly for it. Can the Secretary of State update us on the work of the independent pay body and the Government's response to it?

Bridget Phillipson: We take the work of the pay review body extremely seriously, but the previous Government did not act responsibly in that regard. They sat on the report, and then they called an election. I understand the frustrations that school leaders and teachers are experiencing, but as my hon. Friend knows, we are moving as quickly as we can on this important issue, and the Chancellor will set out our position before the end of the month. We understand the importance of getting this right. Let me reiterate, once more, our thanks to our brilliant teachers and support staff for their work during this academic year.

We are putting education back where it belongs, at the heart of change. After years at the margins under the Conservatives, after years of ministerial merry-go-rounds, after years of opportunity for our children being treated as an afterthought, education is back at

the forefront of national life. I know the power of education to transform lives, because I lived it. Standards were my story, and now I want standards to be the story for every child in the country, not just in some of our schools but in all our schools. I want high and rising standards for each and every child, but for 14 long years that has not been the story in our education system.

I think often of children born in the months after the Labour party last won an election, some 19 years ago. They entered school in September 2010, in the first autumn in which Conservative Members served as Ministers. By then the damage had already begun. Labour's ambitious Building Schools for the Future programme had already been cancelled, and that was storing up problems for the decades ahead. As the years went by, those children saw opportunity stripped away. They saw not just resources drained from their childhood, but also hope. They saw the children's centres they had attended being closed by the hundred. They saw falling investment in the school buildings in which they learned, and in the staff who taught and supported them. They saw a change in the support for children with special educational needs—a situation that, in a moment of unusual candour, my predecessor, the former MP for Chichester, described as “lose-lose-lose”, though she did almost nothing about it. A generation of children in social care were falling further and further out of sight.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has mentioned the inequalities experienced by children with special educational needs and disabilities. What is she able to say about what we will do, and the difference that we will make to their lives?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the concern expressed by my hon. Friend, and by Members throughout the House, about that important issue. I will say more about it later in my speech, but let me say now that not for a second do I underestimate the challenge that we face. I give my hon. Friend this commitment: I want to ensure that we deliver a better system for children, families and schools—one that is a long way from the broken and adversarial system that too many people experience at the moment.

Young people in unregistered schools were missing out on not just the education but the childhood that they should have had, and as that generation grew older, the Government response to a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic made it clear to them that they were, quite simply, an afterthought. Pubs were reopening to punters before schools welcomed back children. Examination grading was first a farce and then a fiasco. We had a Government who forgot almost altogether about further education, and saw apprenticeship starts tumble year after year.

Earlier this month, the people of this country turned the page on that Government and that era. They turned to Labour, and to the hope, which drives us and so many who work in education, that tomorrow can be better than today, and that our best days lie not behind us but ahead of us. They turned to Labour in the belief—today a distinctively Labour belief—that the role of Government is not merely to administer, but to transform, and to deliver for all our children the freedom to achieve, thrive, succeed and flourish, which has been withheld from so many of them for so long.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): The Secretary of State has talked about turning a page, and about opportunity. She will be aware that young people today have fewer opportunities than our generation enjoyed, owing to disastrous Tory policies that removed their freedom of movement as well as Erasmus, which included apprenticeships. Will she turn the page on that disastrous Tory policy?

Bridget Phillipson: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I welcomed the opportunity to meet my opposite number in Scotland recently, and I want to find areas on which we can reach agreement constructively and collaboratively. As for his specific question, I am afraid I cannot give him that commitment, but I want to ensure that all young people have the chance to travel, learn and study.

The hope that I want for our young people comes from the opportunity that this Government will deliver. As Members know, opportunity is a journey that lasts a lifetime, and the first steps are in early years education, because the barriers to opportunity appear early in a child's life. We will bring about a sea change in our early years system, beginning right now.

I am fully committed to rolling out the childcare entitlements promised to parents, but I need to be frank with the House: the challenges are considerable, and the last Government did not have a proper plan. The irresponsibility that we inherited was shocking. I acted immediately to get to grips with the task at hand, but I must be honest: the disparities across the country are severe, which means that some parents will, sadly, miss out on their first-choice place. They and their children deserve better, and I am determined to get this right. We will create 3,000 nurseries in primary schools to better connect early years with our wider education system. By the time we are done, we will have thriving children, strong families, and parents who are able to work the hours they want.

The foundations for a love of learning are laid early, in primary school, but child poverty puts up barriers at every turn. It is a scar on our society. The need to eradicate child poverty is why I came into politics, and it is why the Prime Minister has appointed me and the Work and Pensions Secretary to jointly lead the new child poverty taskforce. Together, we will set out an ambitious child poverty strategy, and I will introduce free breakfast clubs in every primary school. They are about more than just breakfast; they are important for driving up standards, improving behaviour, increasing attendance and boosting achievement.

What children are taught once they are in the classroom matters, too. We must start early with maths, and inspire a love of numbers in our youngest learners, and this Government are committed to fully evidence-based early language interventions in primary schools, so that all children can find their voice.

I want high and rising standards across all our schools and for all our children, but I mean that in the broadest and most ambitious of terms. We should be growing a love of learning, and encouraging children to explore the world around them, to be bold, to dream and to discover their power. Our curriculum must reflect that. That is why I have announced the Government's expert-led review of the curriculum and assessment at all key stages, in order to support our children and young people, so that they succeed tomorrow and thrive today.

By working with teachers, parents and employers, we will deliver a framework for learning that is innovative, inclusive, supportive and challenging, that drives up standards in our schools, and ensures that every child has access to a broad and rich curriculum.

However, any curriculum is only as strong as the teachers who teach it. Today, those teachers are leaving the classroom, not in dribs and drabs but in their droves—and too often, opportunity follows them out the door. I am working tirelessly to turn that around. We will back our teachers and support staff, and we will partner with the profession to ensure that workloads are manageable. We have already begun recruiting 6,500 more expert teachers. Together, we will restore teaching as the career of choice for our very best graduates, and we will invest in our schools and services by ending the tax breaks that private schools enjoy.

Accountability is vital and non-negotiable, but Ofsted must change, and change it will. Our reform will start with ending one-word judgments. We will bring in a new report card system. That is part of our plan to support schools and challenge them when needed in order to deliver high and rising standards for every child.

I have spoken to colleagues from across the House about their concerns about how the system is failing learners with special educational needs and disabilities. I share those concerns; the system is broken. I am delighted to see on the Government Benches my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), with whom I worked so closely on this issue in opposition, and who shares entirely my focus and concern. All families want the best for their children, but parents of children with special educational needs often face a slow struggle to get the right support. They are bogged down by bureaucracy and an adversarial system, and entangled by complexity. It is not good enough, and we will work relentlessly to put that right. We are committed to taking a community-wide approach in which we improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, as well as ensure that special schools cater to those with the most complex needs. I have already restructured my Department to start delivering on this commitment. There can be no goal more important and more urgent than extending opportunities to our most vulnerable children, which also means reforming children's social care.

Young people and adults deserve high-quality routes to building the skills that they need to seize opportunity, and businesses need staff with the skills to help them grow. Those are two sides of the same coin, and the key to our future prosperity and growth. We need a skills system fit for the future, but we have a fragmented system that frustrates businesses, lets down learners and grinds growth into the ground. It is time for a comprehensive strategy, and for our country to take skills seriously, so this week, alongside the Prime Minister, I announced Skills England, a new body that will unify the fractured landscape. It will bring together central Government, combined authorities, businesses, training providers, unions and experts. Businesses have told us that they need more flexibility to deliver the training that works for them, so we will introduce a new growth and skills levy to replace the failing apprenticeship levy.

Post-16 education is all about giving learners the power to make choices that are right for them. For many, that choice will be university, and I am immensely

[Bridget Phillipson]

proud of our world-leading universities. They are shining lights of learning, but their future has been left in darkness for too long. This must and will change. There will be no more talking down our country's strongest exports. Under this Government, universities will be valued as a public good, not treated as a political battleground. We will move decisively to establish certainty and sustainability, securing our universities as engines of growth, excellence and opportunity.

This Government will break the link between background and success. We will create opportunities for children and learners to succeed. We will give them the freedom to chase their ambitions, and the freedom to hope. This Labour Government are returning hope to our country after 14 long years, and there can be no greater work than building a country where background is no barrier to opportunity. That work of change has already begun.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.16 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I first welcome you to the big Chair on behalf of the Opposition? It is great to see you there, and may you have much success. We will no doubt all enjoy serving under you.

May I also welcome the Secretary of State and her entire team to their places? They have among the most important jobs in government and, without doubt, the best jobs in government. While their colleagues will be out visiting wind turbines and distribution sheds, they will be spending time with children and the inspirational adults who teach them, which is a much better way to spend a day. Although we have our differences, we do not for a moment doubt the ministerial team's commitment to this crucial endeavour, and our exchanges across the Dispatch Boxes will always be in the spirit of seeking the very best for children, and for our society and country. We want the Government to succeed, because the success of the British Government is the success of Britain. That is true in every discipline, but it is especially true in education, where the effects of what happens are felt for many years to come and over the course of multiple changes of Government. We will scrutinise and hold them to account, as they know, but we will also support them where they look to build on what has been achieved.

Listening to the Secretary of State, I was wondering from which country or era she was drawing her material, because what has been achieved is that we now have nine in 10 schools in this country rated good or outstanding—up from just over two thirds when there was last a change of Government—with 27,000 more teachers, 60,000 more teaching assistants, a major upgrade in technical and vocational education through T-levels, higher-level technicals and reformed apprenticeships with employer-set standards, minimum lengths weeks and minimum off-the-job training time. We have also been rising up the international results table. At secondary school, England's young people have risen from 27th in the world to 11th in mathematics, and from 25th to 13th in reading. At primary school, England's children are the best readers in the western world.

Debbie Abrahams: Does the shadow Education Secretary accept the Institute for Fiscal Studies' recent report? It says that although we have seen an improvement in average attainment, there remain educational inequalities, particularly for children on free school meals, children from ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled children. We have not seen any improvements, and the educational inequalities are stark

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady, as ever, makes important points. It was the mission of Conservative Governments from 2010 onwards always to pursue two goals: first, to raise attainment overall and, secondly, to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor—between the advantaged and the disadvantaged or those with particular needs. Although those gaps are still too big, there was a decade of progress, as she knows. I think the IFS report that she mentions will almost certainly have said that there was a decade of progress right up until covid. I am afraid that covid struck a blow—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members may shake their heads, but believe me, covid struck a blow to education right throughout the world, including in our country, and there is yet more—[*Interruption.*] I think my point stands. There is yet more work to do.

The point I was making before the hon. Lady made her important intervention was that a great deal has been achieved but there are still challenges. In the aftermath of covid, we know that there are particular challenges on the attainment gap and attendance—by the way, those two things are related—but a great deal has been achieved. So my ask of the Government is that, while we acknowledge that they have just won the election with a big majority, we nevertheless ask them to be mindful and careful not to change things just because they can.

Of course, Ministers do not educate children. It is the teachers who educate children, and those great achievements are their achievements, but teachers exist within a framework and a system. There are dedicated teachers not just in England but in Scotland and Wales, but in those two countries we have not seen the same advances that we have seen in England. Indeed, in Wales, with a Labour Administration running education, we have seen declines. We have long had dedicated teachers in England, too, but the fact is that in the Labour years before 2010, England's results actually declined relative to other countries, even though—some Labour Members may remember this—in new Labour's target-rich but I am afraid highly gameable environment, it was made to look like the results were all getting better.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): First, may I congratulate you on your appointment, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Further to the point that the right hon. Gentleman has just made, I think it is fair to boast that Scottish education used to be the envy of the world, yet we now have so many staff vacancies in four of our highland secondary schools—Ullapool, Kinlochbervie, Farr and Gairloch—that the kids simply are not being taught what they ought to be taught and are having to rely in some cases on online learning, which is scarcely satisfactory. That is why the parents have banded together to form the Save our Rural Schools campaign. Is that not a damning comment on the Scottish Government's delivery of education north of the border?

Damian Hinds: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes an important point incisively and speaks up powerfully for rural communities—he was here the other night talking about rural health services and the challenges that they face—but this is already going to be a wide-ranging debate and I think I might try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, if we moved into a debate about the Scottish education system and the SNP Administration, much as he and I would relish that opportunity. However, he is quite right to say that Scottish education has had massive historical strengths but has been let down by the SNP Administration.

When politicians on the left talk about a progressive agenda in education, I understand how that can sound beguiling and benign, but we must not forget that the legacy of the last Labour Government was for England to be the only country in the developed world where the generation approaching retirement was more literate and numerate than the youngest adults just entering the workforce and those who had just gone through their education under new Labour. But that is the past, and this team and this Government will be assessed and judged on the present and the future.

Stephen Gethins: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Hinds: At the risk of widening the debate, I will very briefly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Gethins: I hope the right hon. Gentleman will welcome the Scottish success in having more children and students going on to positive destinations after school. Does he also acknowledge the damage that has been done by years and years of Tory austerity and by removing the rights and opportunities we had through freedom of movement following our withdrawal from the EU, which, according to Labour figures, has cost £140 billion? He should have some reflection on his own record.

Damian Hinds: I admire the hon. Gentleman's ability to turn everything into a discussion about Europe, but I have to tell him there are other things at play. If I were an SNP politician, I would not come to the Floor of this House boasting about the record of the SNP Government given their woeful performance on behalf of underprivileged children in Scotland. Nor, by the way, would I be complaining about the finances, when the Scottish Government are well financed for the things that they should and must do. Until recently it was us sitting on the Government Benches making these points, but now it will be Labour Members.

This is a debate about opportunity, and the point of greatest leverage in spreading opportunity is what happens in the very earliest years, as the Secretary of State said. Since 2010, we have had five major extensions in early years and childcare entitlements, and a sixth is now on its way. I think I heard the Secretary of State say that she was committing fully to our plan in each of its phases. Unless she corrects me now, that is certainly how I will interpret it. She then went on to say there were some difficulties and so on—[*Interruption.*] I can assure the Secretary of State, who speaks from a sedentary position, that there was indeed such a plan, and we look now to the Government to see that plan through. I would

also like to hear from her colleague the Minister of State, Department for Education, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), when she sums up, about the 3,000 nurseries to be established in primary schools. It is important for us to know what proportion of those she expects to be full-time, year-round nurseries as opposed to term-time only.

We know that however much time young children spend in nursery or in childcare, they will spend more time at home, and the social mobility literature is clear that what happens at home makes a big difference to opportunity later in life. This is a difficult area for Governments and requires great care, but I hope that this new Government will look to build on the home learning environment programme—Hungry Little Minds—that we put in place and then reprised during covid, and do so in a supportive and non-invasive way.

I also hope that the Government will continue with the family hubs, recognising that while they are vital for the 0 to 2 age group, many issues go on right through childhood and adolescence. The supporting families programme is actually a cross-party story because it was brought in during the Cameron Government from 2012 following a pilot under the previous Labour Government. With its key worker approach it has so much potential, and it now covers 300,000 families, not the original 120,000. Bringing it into the Department for Education presents a great opportunity for the Secretary of State, and I hope she will make the most of it.

In schools, the success story we have been discussing, which can be seen in the results in the programme for international student assessment, the progress in international reading literacy study and other studies, has been based on three legs of a stool. The first is school autonomy, with transparency and accountability. The second is a knowledge-rich curriculum and proven learning methods such as phonics and maths mastery, with the Education Endowment Foundation evaluating and accrediting programmes. The third is the spreading of good practice through academy trusts and through schools learning laterally from other schools, with teachers learning from teachers rather than things being imposed top down, through a nationwide network of hubs in key subjects and in key areas such as behaviour. It is not yet clear exactly what the new Government's plans are in each of those three areas, but if they seek to undo what has worked and what does work, we will argue the counter case robustly.

The Government have, as the Secretary of State said, announced a review of the curriculum, as of course they can, and as we did in the past. But again, I would urge them to reflect on what has worked and what does work, and in particular not to see a conflict between skills and knowledge. Clearly, when children are growing up, developing and being educated, they need both, but it is through having a depth of knowledge that they best develop skills. As to what knowledge, I hope the review will also acknowledge that a strength of our national curriculum is that, unlike what a lot of people think, it is not in fact a detailed specification of everything a pupil will learn in history or literature. Rather, it is a framework. That guards against political interference, and that is a principle that absolutely must be maintained. I hope that Labour did learn the lesson of the literacy hour and the numeracy hour—that seeking to set out to

[Damian Hinds]

schools in 10 or 15-minute segments exactly what should be taught to children is a Bad Idea, with a capital B and a capital I.

On behaviour, a calm and ordered environment is a basic requirement for learning, and that is what children tell us they want. Of course, no one wants pupils to be suspended, still less expelled, but that option needs to be available as a last resort. Yes, we must think of the child's wellbeing, but we also need to think of the wellbeing and life chances of the other 27 children in the class.

Having school leaders in the driving seat is essential, but that also brings a need for transparency so we can see whether children in some areas are not getting as strong an education as children in others. Progress 8, which we brought in, measures the progress of all children equally and is far better than the blunt and much-gamed approach of measuring how many children got over the five-plus C-plus at GCSE hurdle. It is also materially better than the old contextual value added measure, which effectively lowered expectations for entire groups of children.

We also need a threshold to trigger intervention, so that underperforming schools can be moved into a strong trust that can better support them. That is standing up for parents and children, who will get only one shot at schooling.

There are challenges to address and, as I said to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), high on that list post covid is attendance. It is much better than it was, but there is further to go. I hope the Government will keep and build on the measures that we put in place, together with schools and the wider education family.

We always need to strive to do more to support children with special educational needs and disabilities and enable them to maximise opportunity. I was encouraged by what the Secretary of State said. I call on her and the Government to keep and grow our capital programme for more special school places, as well as, as she rightly said, to strive to support inclusion in mainstream education, where that is possible and beneficial.

Today there is a greater prevalence of mental ill health in young people. Crucially, this issue is not specific to this country. We see it in most comparable countries, or at least those where there is data we can look at; we see a similar trend there. The Labour manifesto spoke about having mental health professionals in schools. When we were in government, with the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS, we were already rolling out mental health support teams to clusters of schools and I urge the Government to look at that.

Of course, we and other countries must also ask why there is this increased prevalence of mental ill health in young people. Because it is international in nature, some of the ready answers that might otherwise be thrown about cannot be correct. We will work constructively with the Government as they work to build on the landmark Online Safety Act 2023, for example, and ensure its most effective implementation.

Schools are all about teachers and we welcome the Government's plan to recruit 6,500 more. Of course, 6,500 is a large number, but it is not quite so large in the

context of the total number of teachers, which is 468,000, and it should be noted that the increase in the number of teachers over the last Parliament was considerably more than 6,500—in fact, it was more like 15,000. However, it is true that it has been tough to recruit for some subjects, such as computer science, physics and modern foreign languages, and I welcome the Secretary of State's focus on that area.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Member will forgive me, I had better press on, as I might be stretching Madam Deputy Speaker's patience. Early in my time facing her in the Chair, I do not want to get off to a bad start.

We will be looking to see exactly what the 6,500 target covers, by when and, crucially, how it will be achieved.

The one subject in education that got a lot of coverage in the media and elsewhere during the election campaign was the taxation of independent schools. We recognise that that was in the Labour manifesto, but it is still wrong-headed. It will not hit the famous big-name schools, but it will hit small-town schools, families of children with special educational needs and certain religious faiths. Most of all, in the biggest way, it will hit state schools. We do not know how big the displacement effect will be of families who can no longer afford to send their children to their independent school, and we cannot know because there is no precedent, but we know that it will be a material number.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: I will, with apologies.

Mark Garnier: One thing that has not been discussed in this debate about extra taxation on private schools is that they generate £1 billion a year in export wins: this could have an effect on the country's current account deficit.

Damian Hinds: We must not get into a long debate on this, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that export earnings is part it, as is multinationals' choice of this country to site their headquarters. All these things are considerations, including the Ministry of Defence.

I inadvertently skipped over the hon. Member, so I give way to him now.

Chris Vince: I thank the right hon. Member for taking my question. His figures on teacher numbers are very interesting. Does he not recognise that, over the last Parliament, the teacher retention rate was at an all-time low, with a third of teachers leaving within five years of going into the profession?

Damian Hinds: Again, I must not get into too lengthy a debate on this—[*Interruption.*] But I can. In the last couple of years, we actually found that retention was better than had been anticipated. We want teachers to stay longer in the profession, which is one of the reasons why, during my first spell in the Department for Education, we brought in the early career framework specifically to address that issue. The Secretary of State has said that the Government will continue to evolve that, which I welcome too, but the fact of the matter is that we have

468,000 teachers in the profession. Part of that is to do with retention, and part of it is to do with people returning to the profession, which at times has been better than anticipated. It is also to do with the significant programme to get people into teaching in the first place through bursaries and scholarships.

Returning to taxation and independent education, I ask the Minister of State, Department for Education, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), at the very least today when she sums up, to confirm that the Government will not bring the measure further forward so that we end up with in-year disruption for families, and for state schools trying to cope with a potential influx of large numbers of children. Can she also guarantee that the large number of spending programmes that have been linked to this taxation income stream, including the 6,500 teachers, are protected, regardless of what happens on that VAT income?

I am close to the end. We set about a major upgrade in technical and vocational education. The Secretary of State said something important and, I think, new about what was going to happen. I hope the Government will see through T-levels and the reform of technical and vocational education on the blueprint—we always did this in government: we took a cross-party approach—of Lord Sainsbury. The Secretary of State mentioned that she will update the House tomorrow. Will the Minister of State confirm in summing up that that will be an oral statement, giving hon. and right hon. Members a chance to question the Minister on exactly what is proposed?

We will also scrutinise the Government's proposed changes to apprenticeships and the levy. I understand that businesses want more flexibility on what they can do with levy money, but the two crucial things about the apprenticeship levy is that, first, it dealt with what economists call the "free rider problem," under which some businesses historically invested strongly in training their staff, while others did not, but benefited when staff left those businesses to join them after two or three years. Secondly, the levy ensured that human capital investment went into incremental training; it did not just rebadge training that would have happened anyway. In whatever reform the Government undertake, those two things will have to be delivered.

On Skills England, we just need to know what it is. We understand the desire of a Labour Government to say, "In an emergency, break glass, reach for quango" but what will it do that is different from what is done today by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, by local skills improvement plans and by the Unit for Future Skills?

I am proud that disadvantaged youngsters are now much more likely to go on to higher education than they were—despite of course predictions of the opposite at the time the student financing system was brought in. I remember very well that, when in opposition, Labour Members of Parliament said repeatedly that fees should never go as high as £9,000, or £9,250, and we will be watching for consistency in their approach in the months and years ahead.

We need to ensure high-quality provision for students. It does no favours to a young person to go to university if it is for a course where we know a high proportion of students do not even complete the course. We spoke during the election campaign of our plan to build on

our foundation of the Office for Students to ensure that, in whatever subject it might be, students could be confident that their course was of high quality. The new Government need to set out how they, in their way, will ensure that that quality is guaranteed.

To conclude—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hooray."] Come on. It is often said—it was said earlier this afternoon—that the first duty of Government is to defend our country and our national security and to keep people safe. It is the most fundamental function of Government to have sound management of the economy and the finances. The noblest drive in government is to strive to spread opportunity as far and as equitably as possible. Ultimately, education is the key to almost everything. We wish the new Government and this team of Ministers well. We will work positively and constructively with them. We will scrutinise what they say, monitor what they do and hold them to account for what they deliver.

2.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): May I start by congratulating you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your election, and say what a great pleasure it is to see you in your place? I also congratulate the Secretary of State on her appointment. I know how deep her commitment is to increasing opportunity and adjusting disadvantage for children across our country.

Education from the early years through school and on to further and higher education is arguably the most important tool in the Government's box for addressing disadvantage. I am therefore delighted to see that breaking down the barriers to opportunity at every stage is one of the core missions of this Labour Government.

Labour has always recognised the importance of education as a route to addressing poverty, disadvantage and inequality, as well as to driving economic growth. It is at the heart of what we believe in and at the heart of what we have always delivered in government—from comprehensive schools to the Open University, from Sure Start to the London Challenge for school improvement.

This new Labour Government will continue in that proud tradition of delivering for our children and young people with free breakfast clubs in every primary school; new nursery places across the country; open access mental health support in schools and communities; more teachers in our schools; a new fit-for-purpose curriculum; a further education sector to deliver the skills that young people need to thrive and our economy needs to grow; and new support to protect young people from serious violence.

I wish to highlight today, as we discuss the commitment of this new Government and also the mess that they have inherited after 14 years of Conservative cuts to children's services, some of the issues that are most pressing in my constituency. Services are now really stretched to the limit as they seek to support children, young people and their families.

The first issue is the funding crisis facing maintained nursery schools, which often provide a gold standard of early years education. Some 64% of them are located in areas with the greatest deprivation. I have two in my constituency: Effra nursery school and children's centre and Dulwich Wood nursery school. They are constituted as schools, and therefore have the additional expertise—and also the additional costs—of fully qualified headteachers

[Helen Hayes]

and teaching staff. The number of maintained nurseries has already dropped dramatically and only 400 now remain, many of which face severe financial difficulties. I therefore urge the Government to bring forward measures in the Budget to ensure that the depth of knowledge, expertise and quality in our maintained nursery schools is not lost, and that they are put on a sustainable financial footing.

The second issue is special educational needs and disabilities support. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for mentioning the work that I did in this regard when we were in opposition. In the context of the decimation of local authority funding since 2010 and with increasing presentation of additional needs across the country, local councils and schools are simply buckling under the pressure of resources that they do not have and needs that they cannot meet, while families are suffering the consequences.

At a recent visit to an outstanding school in my constituency, the headteacher broke down as she described the conflict of seeking to be an inclusive school with the reality of simply not having the funding that she needed to deliver for children with additional needs. Increasingly, local authorities are being driven to the edge of financial viability by the costs of SEND support and SEND transport. I really welcome this Government's focus on the inclusivity of mainstream schools, but they will need to work very closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that there is a sustainable approach to funding SEND support, which schools cannot deliver in isolation.

Thirdly, the outcomes for care-experienced people after 14 years of Conservative Government are utterly disgraceful. The system is so broken that frequently the state takes the decision to remove a child from their family because they are not considered to be safe, and places them in an environment in which they are even less safe and secure. Care-experienced people are so over-represented in both the criminal justice system and the homeless population because they are being so badly failed. If the Government are serious about tackling these challenges, they must turn their attention to delivering better support and better outcomes for care-experienced people.

One way that this situation could be turned around is through the development of a new care experience covenant, placed on a statutory footing, requiring every part of the public sector to take the responsibilities of corporate parenting seriously, supported by a national care leaver offer. I wonder whether the Minister is able to make any commitments in that regard today.

Finally, the Conservative Government changed the schools funding formula to remove the disadvantage weighting. That had the effect of proactively funnelling funding away from schools in constituencies such as mine with high levels of deprivation to more affluent areas of the country, and my local schools are really feeling the impact as they seek to provide an excellent education for every child.

Will the Minister give an undertaking to look at the schools funding formula, to ensure both that schools in the most disadvantaged areas of the country have the resources they need to deliver for every child, and that

the formula itself is no longer pitting different areas of the country against each other, but represents a genuine levelling up of the resources for our schools?

I know that this Government will transform the life chances of children and young people across our country and make sure that no child is left behind. I look forward to seeing further plans come to fruition, as children, young people and their life chances are once again placed where they should be—at the centre of our national life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): As we have many maiden speeches to enjoy and Back-Bench contributions, may I ask those on the Front Bench to keep their speeches short? I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.48 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I warmly welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? It is a pleasure to see you. I also warmly welcome the Education Secretary and all her Ministers to their posts. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, they absolutely have the best jobs in Government. I am very jealous indeed, but I am looking forward to working with them constructively over the course of this Parliament to deliver the best possible start for children and young people. I am delighted to be speaking today on behalf of the third party in the House from the vastly expanded Liberal Democrat Benches.

I am grateful for the Government making time today for a dedicated debate on education and opportunity. Over the past few years, children and young people's education has frankly been sidelined in the political agenda. It was no surprise to me that His Majesty's loyal Opposition did not seek to allocate specific time for this area during the King's Speech debates, instead bundling all public services, welfare and the economy into a single evening's debate. Today's debate is therefore very welcome indeed. Education is the greatest investment that we can make to ensure that every child, no matter their background, has the opportunity to flourish to their full potential. As a result, it is also the greatest investment that we can make for our economy and our society.

The King's Speech and Government announcements in the past three weeks have included some encouraging measures that the Liberal Democrats welcome. On that note, I very much welcome the Education Secretary's announcement on the level 3 qualifications review. The Liberal Democrats have long been saying that BTecs should not be funded until T-levels have properly bedded in. Actually, T-levels are squeezing so many young people out of the system and leaving them without options that we need a good range of options, so the review is very welcome. I also welcome the curriculum review that she announced. The devil, of course, in all the announcements so far will be in the detail. I hope that Ministers will work collaboratively, cross-party, on the areas where we are in agreement, though there are areas where we are not in agreement.

One area where we are in violent agreement is the state in which the Conservative Government left our schools and colleges. Shortly before the election, I spoke

to a school governor in my constituency who told me that their school is at rock bottom. Their school budget has been so squeezed that they are reliant on Amazon wish lists from which parents are asked to provide basic essentials such as whiteboard pens and glue sticks. That has become the reality for so many schools up and down the country. Not only are schools struggling to afford basic supplies, but they lack the resources to maintain their buildings. It is now well documented that the Leader of the Opposition, when he was Chancellor, repeatedly refused to fund the investment in school buildings that the Department for Education made clear was needed. The result? Children are being taught in classrooms with leaky windows, broken heating and crumbling concrete.

Where even to start with special educational needs? We heard about this issue from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I suspect that every Member across this House, new and returning, has a bulging inbox of SEND casework. The system is in crisis. Local authorities are stretched to the limit and our most vulnerable children are struggling, with their parents stuck in an adversarial system, fighting day in and day out to ensure that their children can get an education and the support that they deserve to thrive. Inadequate support for SEND children in mainstream schools, coupled with a lack of specialist provision, means that too many children are languishing at home without proper access to education, or travelling huge distances at great cost to overstretched local authorities because there just is not enough local provision.

The lack of provision is having an impact on not only our pupils but our teachers. Many are being driven out of the profession because of the pressures that they face. They often tell me that they are acting as the fourth emergency service, because all the support services outside our schools are crumbling. Not enough new teachers are entering our classrooms, despite the figures that the shadow Secretary of State gave. The previous Conservative Government missed their own secondary schoolteacher training targets for 10 out of 11 years. That means not only that many children are not being taught by a specialist in their subject but that existing teachers are having to take on inordinate workloads due to the lack of staff. A study conducted this year found that 86% of teachers believe that their job has negatively impacted their mental health, with an increased workload being the main cause of stress. Over the past nine years, the Conservatives neglected our education system, and our children and young people are now paying the price. For the sake of our future generations, we must prioritise fixing it. *[Interruption.]* I will mention the coalition shortly, just to cheer up the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra).

The Liberal Democrats welcomed the announcement in the King's Speech of a children's wellbeing Bill. We have long argued that wellbeing should be at the heart of our policymaking for children and young people. Hungry children struggling with their mental health will not be able to achieve their potential, either academically or socially. We know that poverty and mental ill health are significant contributors to the staggering numbers of children missing from school. We welcome the long-awaited introduction of the children-not-in-school register, a measure that has had cross-party support for several years and featured in the Liberal Democrat manifesto. This is particularly important given that last autumn

term there were 33,000 children missing from education, with vulnerable children slipping under the radar. The change is long overdue, and I hope that the Government implement it without delay.

That register is very important for safeguarding, but we must address the underlying causes of school absence. We have seen an explosion of mental ill health among children and young people in recent years. It is estimated that one in five children have a probable mental health disorder—that is six in every classroom. A lack of available mental health support means that many children are left languishing at home, missing out on key learning time. It also has much more serious consequences. The day after the election was called, I spoke to a local secondary headteacher in my constituency; several children in recent months had ended up in A&E after attempted suicide. A broken mother, whose teenage daughter had tragically been successful in taking her own life earlier this year, approached me in a local park and spoke to me about how local services had let her daughter down.

Prevention is better than cure. The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's commitment to introducing a mental health practitioner in every secondary school, but we must start at a younger age. That is why the Liberal Democrats have long called for the introduction of mental health practitioners in every primary and secondary school. I recognise the mental health support teams introduced by the previous Government, but they are shared across far too many schools. The average primary school gets half a day a week, and the average secondary school gets maybe one or two days a week. Those schools need full-time dedicated support, given the level of need in schools. We know that 50% of all lifetime mental health disorders develop by the age of 14. Putting mental health practitioners in every primary school would allow us to address those issues before they become permanent, ultimately saving our health services money in the long term.

Another underlying cause of absence from school, and pressure on school staff, is the growing number of children living in poverty. It is disappointing that the Government continue to refuse to lift the two-child cap on benefits. The Liberal Democrats will continue to campaign for that cruel policy to be removed, which would immediately lift 300,000 children out of poverty. Children up and down the country cannot afford to eat, with some children being forced to pretend to eat out of empty lunchboxes, or reportedly even eating rubbers out of desperation. In a country as wealthy as ours, no child should be going hungry at school. That is why I am immensely proud that it was the Liberal Democrats in Government who introduced free school meals for every infant schoolchild. *[Interruption.]* It was a Liberal Democrat policy that we had to fight for in Government. The benefits of free school meals are immense. They save parents time and money, help children to eat more healthily, and have even been proven to boost educational outcomes.

Although Labour has proposed free breakfast clubs for children in primary school, which will be beneficial, often the children most in need are those living very far from school in temporary accommodation, who have extremely long journeys and simply cannot get to school in time for breakfast. Free school meals guarantee that those children have access to a hot, healthy meal in the middle of each school day to give them the energy that

[Munira Wilson]

they need to learn. Most importantly, hunger does not stop at the age of 11. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, an estimated 900,000 children in poverty miss out on free school meals, and many of them are in secondary school. That is why the Liberal Democrats are committed to rolling out free school meals to every child in poverty, whether they are primary or secondary school age, in line with Henry Dimbleby's recommendations to the previous Conservative Government, which they completely ignored.

Sadly, research shows that the inequalities within our education system are deepening. As we have heard, according to data published by the Education Policy Institute just last week, by the time students from a disadvantaged background leave secondary school they are 19.2 months behind their peers. That is the highest attainment gap in over 10 years. Established by the Liberal Democrats in Government, the pupil premium was once a vital fund to support disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, we have seen that value erode by some 14% in real terms since the Tories were left to their own devices in 2015. One proven method to tackle the attainment gap is tutoring in small groups and one to one. In fact, research conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation shows that over the course of a year an average four months of additional progress is made because of tutoring. Although flawed in its delivery, the national tutoring programme, which was introduced during covid, and the 16 to 19 tuition fund had a transformational impact for many pupils. Talking about his experience of tutoring, Aiden from London South East Colleges said that he was aiming only for a 4 the third time he retook his English GCSE—he just wanted to get it over and done with—but he now has a 6, and it is all thanks to his tutor. He is going on to do higher-level qualifications, and he hopes to go to university and become a paramedic.

It was not just Aiden whose grades improved; there were 62,000 additional passes in GCSE English and maths over the two years that Government-funded tutoring was in existence. Sadly, at the last Budget, the Conservative Government refused to continue funding for the national tutoring programme or the 16 to 19 tuition fund. The funding runs out today, pretty much, because it is the end of the academic year. Given the new Secretary of State's stated commitment to extending opportunity to all and narrowing the attainment gap, will she look at the programme urgently and ensure that tutoring funding continues?

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Will my right hon. Friend allow an intervention?

Munira Wilson: I am not right honourable just yet, but I give way to my hon. Friend.

Susan Murray: Apologies. Given what my hon. Friend is talking about, it is important to note that applying VAT to independent schools will have a significant effect on their affordability for parents who make that choice. In my Mid Dunbartonshire constituency, not all parents will be able to afford the extra 20% per child. We hear about the pressure that the state is already

under. Does she agree that there will be significant additional costs to the state in Scotland, as well as in England and Wales—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): Order.

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for her important intervention. She pre-empts what I was about to say about the issue of VAT on private school fees and the pressures that it will create for some families and schools.

I have set out a range of targeted measures that I think would help tackle the disadvantage gap. They were part of an ambitious package that the Liberal Democrats put forward at the election to ensure that our education system enables every child to thrive and that the local state school is the school of choice for every family in this country. But as liberals, we champion choice, and it is important that parents can choose the best and most appropriate option for their children. Importantly, and fundamentally, we believe in the principle that education—whether we are talking about private schools, music tuition, private tutoring or childcare—should not be taxed, so we oppose the Labour Government's policy to introduce VAT on independent school fees.

I do not think the policy will do much at all to boost our state schools. In fact, it risks reducing the brilliant partnership work—the sharing of staff time and facilities, for example—that we see between so many private schools and their local state schools. I have seen that vividly, with Hampton school and Lady Eleanor Holles school in my constituency working with the Reach academy in Feltham, in a very deprived area. They have really helped to boost the life chances of many of those children in Feltham, including by helping with coaching for university and medical school interviews.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that in many local authority areas, such as mine in Buckinghamshire, schools are already oversubscribed, so the places in the state sector simply do not exist for independent school parents who find they can no longer afford the fees?

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I hear repeatedly that there are areas across the country where schools are full and parents are wondering where on earth they will be able to send their children to school. It is simply not true that it is just the ultra-wealthy who send their kids to private school. I am particularly concerned about those parents who, for whatever reason, feel that the local state school is not best suited to their child's needs. That particularly applies to the 100,000 children in the independent sector with special educational needs who do not qualify for an education, health and care plan and will not be exempted under the Government's proposed policy.

I have heard too often from parents, on the doorstep and in my inbox, "I really want to send my child to the local state school, and we tried it, but it just couldn't meet my child's needs, so we are now making all sorts of sacrifices to send them to a much smaller, more pastoral independent school, where they have been transformed." It is those families, who will be penalised under this policy, that I am particularly worried about. The vast

majority of independent schools are small, with fewer than 400 pupils, and a number will struggle to survive as parents are priced out, putting pressure on state schools, as we have heard.

Today's debate is focused on education and opportunity. As Liberal Democrats, we recognise that education is the ultimate creator of opportunity and empowers every person to build a better future for themselves and contribute to our economy and society, yet our young people have been let down for far too long. I desperately hope that, with a new Government, that will change, and I look forward to working constructively with them wherever possible on meaningful action to ensure that it does.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): We come to our first maiden speech this afternoon—I call Darren Paffey.

3.5 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I begin by congratulating you and wishing you well as you take the Chair? I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on her new position. People in my constituency—parents, teachers, pupils and professionals alike—will be heartened by the vision she set out for how this Labour Government will build opportunity once again.

As I stand here as a new MP—I have to keep saying it to believe it—I want to thank the people of Southampton Itchen for the incredible privilege that they have given me. In fact, this feels like a moment heavy with lots of privileges. One is the privilege to be in the Chamber as many of my colleagues make their maiden speeches, and I congratulate them in advance on the excellent speeches we are going to hear this afternoon. Another privilege is to be one of only three Darrens ever elected to this place. Since the summoning of the first Parliament over 750 years ago, there had been no MPs called Darren, but, like buses, three of us have turned up in the last few years.

The biggest privilege of all is to make my very first speech as the Member of Parliament for Southampton Itchen in this debate about education and opportunity, because, like my right hon. Friend, that is my story. As a former university lecturer married to a secondary school teacher, with children in secondary school, primary school and preschool, I feel like I have some skin in this game. None of the privileges that I feel at the moment is anyone's birthright; they are privileges for which I and many other people—my team and activists—have worked very hard, so I do not take them for granted.

In addition to being part of the small crack squad of Darrens, I find myself in an equally small cohort of only a few MPs known to have grown up in foster care and to have been adopted. The public services that we are talking about today, and that this Government will rebuild, are the services that made me who I am—the NHS staff, the social workers and the inspiring teachers.

When I was made cabinet member for children's services in Southampton, it felt like life had come full circle, and it really did so again just a few weeks ago during the campaign when Peter, who was the social worker for the first 10 years of my life, got in touch to wish me well. It was excellent to hear that he is a lifelong Labour supporter. As a cabinet member, I worked to get

better support for our care-experienced young people, because too many do not get the start they deserve or the help they need, and we must do more to fight for them. I look forward to working with, among others, my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who has done excellent work on the need to review social care. I know that he will continue to be a great champion for care-experienced children.

In the Gracious Speech, His Majesty set out the Labour Government's mission to

“break down barriers to opportunity”

and to “promote children's wellbeing”. The Secretary of State has said:

“I will help working-class children defy the odds to succeed—just as I did.”

As someone who grew up as a working-class foster kid, I will do everything I can to back that mission, especially for my constituents. If I achieve just one thing as an MP—obviously, I intend to work hard and achieve more than that—I hope it will be to say to those whose backgrounds look anything like mine, “Let those challenging times and that stigma that often comes with social care never ever hold you back, but instead forge in yourself a steely determination to achieve your fullest potential.” I would not be here without some measure of that. I certainly would not be here without my wonderful wife, children and siblings, who have supported and often tolerated my journey to Parliament, or my parents, who are no longer with us to share this moment, but whom I thank for the values they instilled in me and the opportunities they provided me with in life.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Royston Smith. Before he was an MP, Royston was the Conservative leader of Southampton city council, and it was as council leader that he visited HMS Astute when it was in port. A dreadful and fatal gun attack broke out, and Royston showed enormous bravery by tackling and disarming the gunman, preventing further bloodshed. For this, he was rightly awarded the George Medal by Her late Majesty. Royston fought in Parliament for those constituents affected by the cladding scandal over the years, and I hope to carry on his important work. Party politics aside, I was touched to receive a gracious letter from him, congratulating me and offering some wise words of advice. I think that that is a measure of the man.

There is another accolade for Royston, as he was only the second Conservative to beat Labour in Southampton Itchen since the wars. He succeeded the right hon. John Denham, my Labour predecessor, who served our city for 23 years and attained high office in Cabinet. John has been a role model, mentor and friend to me.

Turning to my wonderful constituency, it sits on the near-tropical south coast of England. The River Itchen, which gives my constituency its name, has shaped our landscape and communities since the establishment of Saxon Hamwic and Roman Clausentum. We are a port city and the cruise capital of northern Europe, but we are also a bustling hub of culture, commerce, and maritime heritage. From the medieval Bargate and city walls to the groundbreaking Ocean Infinity, Starling bank, and the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton is a place where history and innovation walk hand in hand. We are an outward-looking city; we

[Darren Paffey]

are the gateway to the world, as we have often been called. The pilgrim fathers sailed from Southampton, as did our brave D-day troops. Spitfires and military ships were manufactured on the shores of the Itchen in Woolston.

We have two world-leading and civic-focused universities, and marine and green tech enterprises abound. Southampton is a place where public servants and labourers, stevedores and students, entrepreneurs and artists all contribute to the rich mosaic of daily life. Our people are resilient, diverse, welcoming and warm. Our city faces challenges, like many others, including health inequalities, and child poverty levels are far too high. Many compare us demographically to a large northern seat, but one that happens to be in the south. We are also a microcosm of the country's broader ambitions and a beacon of the potential still to be unleashed. Indeed, our vision is to be a city of opportunity.

We are a premier league football city, after a short interlude in the championship, and I congratulate the team on winning promotion in May. When the Saints went marching in to Wembley to win the play-offs, I was proud to be in that number watching their victory. Commiserations to any Leeds fans in the Chamber. It was fantastic to see the Leader of the Opposition, a fellow Saints fan, also in that number, cheering on a victory for the red team—something that keeps happening this year.

In closing, I return to my starting point. It is a phenomenal privilege to be here. Many see this Chamber from the outside and think of combative Punch and Judy politics, but as I join these Benches, I look over at the plaque remembering our colleague Jo Cox and recall her words that

“we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

To every constituent, whether they voted for me or not, Jo's inspiring words are the spirit in which I intend to work hard for them, together with colleagues across the House, for as long as I enjoy the privilege to serve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): As a former maritime Minister, I visited tropical Southampton Itchen very often. I call Sarah Dyke.

3.15 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome you to the Chamber, as I do the Secretary of State and her team. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on his maiden speech. He joins two other Darrens. I am one of many Sarahs in the House; until recently, we formed nearly 30% of the Liberal Democrats. I am happy to say that we are now more diverse in our names.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about education and opportunity, but the sad reality is that many children across Glastonbury and Somerton are missing out on the opportunity to have an education, as they have additional requirements that their schools are simply unable to accommodate. After the Conservative Government's cuts to school and council budgets, education, health and care plans have become the only avenue for families seeking to access support. They face a postcode

lottery and are forced to wait months to get the support that they need. Demand for EHCPs has tripled since covid, and local authorities are struggling to meet demand. Only half of EHCPs are issued within the statutory 20-week timeframe. At this point I must declare an interest as a serving Somerset councillor.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Today, North Yorkshire council has moved to restrict the services that it offers for home-to-school transport, which will have a disproportionate impact on rural schools and families. The Conservatives have been swept from power in Parliament, but they are still having a damaging impact on local government in areas such as mine in North Yorkshire. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should provide rural families and schools with more support, not less, to tackle the challenges that they face?

Sarah Dyke: My hon. Friend makes a really powerful point. Likewise, Somerset council is forecast to spend £140 million this year on children and family services, including on special educational needs and disabilities provision—a 14% increase on last year. The increase in EHCPs has also increased the cost of home-to-school transport. The high costs are further exacerbated in Somerset because it is such a large, rural county, like Yorkshire. The average cost to Somerset council of travel for one passenger with SEND is over £7,000 a year.

Cumulatively, the local authority high-needs budget deficit is estimated to be £2.3 billion, and the figure is ever increasing; the latest estimate is that the deficit will increase to £3.6 billion by 2025. There are many local authorities working with the Department for Education through interventions such as the safety valve programme. Those programmes demonstrate that local authorities, despite employing best practice, are still struggling to cover the deficit, and any savings made are likely to be lost through inflation.

The Liberal Democrats want to end the SEND postcode lottery that families face by giving local authorities extra funding to reduce the amount that schools pay towards children's EHCPs. This is urgent, because children are suffering. They are unhappy, they are missing their friends, and they are missing their education—and as a result, their families are suffering, too.

I spoke recently to the parents of a child in Wincanton who had an EHCP that needed an urgent review. It did not happen, and the child's school could not meet their needs. That resulted in them being absent from school and missing months of crucial education. I have also been working with a group of parents of children with SEND, and one mother from Curry Mallet told me that she believes our education system will see a rise in attendance problems and adverse mental health, and an increased need for SEND support, due to the inflexibility of the system and its inadequacy for meeting the needs of young people in modern times.

It is a total disgrace for any child to be left without an education, because—if I may return to the title of this debate—it strips them of opportunity. Children with SEND will continue to suffer as a result of the lack of places at special schools. Government statistics from earlier this year revealed that around two thirds of special schools are full or over capacity, with Department

for Education data showing that there are around 4,000 more pupils on roll in special schools than there is reported capacity. In Glastonbury and Somerton there are two special schools, and I hope that a third will be ready to open near Ash for the start of the new school year, providing much needed extra provision.

Children and their families across the country face a crisis caused by the lack of specialist provision, and it will not go away. Cuts to council budgets under the Conservatives have made the situation intolerable, and we must act urgently to reverse them. Liberal Democrats will work with the Government to ensure that all children can access the tailored learning and support that they need. I believe that we must set up a dedicated national body for SEND, to act as a champion for children with complex needs and ensure that they receive tailored support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for what she has said. She is right to focus on SEND. In the press last week, it was indicated that if children who have autism have early diagnosis and treatment, and an education system put in place, the autism, no matter how severe, can be reduced to a level that means that the child can have an education and a job. If we get it right early, we prepare that child for the future.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important and valid point.

I briefly shift my focus towards the forthcoming curriculum and assessment review. I have been speaking to the principle of Strode college in Street, which has around 550 students on BTec courses that will be de-funded following that review. I know that the Government's policy is to pause and delay the defunding of applied general qualifications; I encourage the Secretary of State, who is no longer in her place, to ensure that that remains the case, to prevent any unnecessary interruption to students' education.

I believe that every child, no matter their background, can achieve great things, and we must give them the opportunity to do so.

3.23 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Congratulations on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker, and on taking your place. It is wonderful to see you here. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on his maiden speech. It was very moving, informative and funny, exactly as maiden speeches as ought to be, and I hope that he has a successful time in this place.

I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on children with special educational needs, but I want to raise an issue that has already been mentioned a number of times: the lack of available school spaces for children with special educational needs. I want to talk about two schools in my Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency, Cambridge Park academy and Humberston Park school. The parents of children there with special educational needs are very concerned about their education, because the schools lack capacity and the places to meet the needs of the area. The parents also have concerns that if their children cannot go to local schools, they will have to go out of area. That adds pressure to children, who will perhaps have to move away from friendship groups,

and to families, because there would be additional travel time, and they would be further away if issues arose with the child in that out-of-area placement. That is incredibly difficult for families.

We should also mention the problems when children with special educational needs or disabilities reach the 16-plus point in education. They can become trapped in a never-ending cycle of trying to achieve level 1 or level 2 qualifications in maths and English—qualifications that sometimes they are just not going to achieve. That just sets them up repeatedly for failure. I urge the new Secretary of State and her team to take a look at that and perhaps consider being more flexible. We should view education in the light of supporting young people to achieve their maximum potential, and not focus on that very narrow academic path.

I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on state-maintained nurseries. We have the state-maintained Great Coates village nursery in my constituency, and Scartho nursery school sits just outside my constituency, but services children within it. Both face an increasingly challenging environment. During my previous time in Parliament, I championed those nursery schools and secured additional funding for them, but that was only temporary; again, our local Conservative council is seeking to reduce the number of state-maintained nurseries, due to a funding shortage. I ask that that be looked at as a matter of urgency.

As has just been mentioned, the Conservative Government had started the process of scrapping BTecs—a decision that the Protect Student Choice campaign has described as “reckless”. It will be welcomed across the sector that this new Labour Government have decided to pause and review that decision. BTec qualification are well understood by employers. Applied general qualifications lend themselves well to young people who are not sure about their career path but have an interest in a particular sector or industry. I talked about young people with SEND whom the cycle of repeating maths and English does not suit; BTecs may be the right route for them. They are flexible, they sit well alongside other academic qualifications such as A-levels and apprenticeships, and they can be studied as stand-alone courses.

When we in Labour talk about opportunity, surely flexibility and a range of options to support young people through their learning and education must feature. The Secretary of State speaks of breaking the class ceiling, and BTecs enable that very thing. For those for whom the strictures of the current school system have not captured their skills or energies, BTecs allow for broad exploration of a working area and provide another route into university or employment.

Franklin sixth form college in my constituency—which was my college—has had great success. Its BTec students have gone on to work as paramedics, in nursing and in engineering. I take this opportunity to commend the outgoing principal, Peter Kennedy, on his excellent work during his time at the college, when it has gone from “requires improvement” to “outstanding” in its Ofsted inspections. I know that he would want me to recognise the excellent support that he has had from his governors and staff, who have supported his vision for the growth and improvement of the college. They have done amazing work and provided an outstanding education

[Melanie Onn]

establishment for a growing number of young people. I wish him well in his retirement. I welcome the incoming principal, Wendy Ellis, who I am confident will continue that excellent work and—like Peter—will never lose her enthusiasm for young people.

It is imperative for the young people of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes that a plan for BTecs is put in place swiftly to ensure that there is sufficient time for colleges to advertise courses and for students to know what is available in time for the 2025 terms. I was going to ask how long the review process would take, but the Secretary of State took the wind right out of my sails by saying that it will be complete by the end of the year. That is excellent and welcome news, and I congratulate the team on taking that process seriously and putting a set of measures in place swiftly. As part of that review, the Government could consider allowing students to enrol on all 134 existing applied general qualifications—the AGQs that have been mentioned—up to and including the 2026-27 academic year. If it helps the Government make a decision, that would cost nothing because funding was not due to be withdrawn until 1 August 2025, and it would avoid the concern about young people disengaging entirely from education without options such as BTecs being available.

I ask the House to give me a little leeway to talk specifically about academisation. I would not ordinarily rise to speak in favour of academies as a broad-brush educational principle, but that is the landscape that we currently find ourselves in—one that Franklin college would like to explore as an empty multi-academy trust. It would be a local, substantial system-led MAT for northern and coastal Lincolnshire. That status has been applied for via a very exceptional route, as I understand it, but the application is currently sitting with regional directors of the DFE, despite the proposal being widely supported by local stakeholders.

The principle behind the move towards academisation is to build on the college's strong track record of support for local schools and academies, and engagement with employers and other organisations on initiatives to materially change young people's lives. The change in status would allow the college to support the area's schools and employers to meet future need for highly educated, highly skilled young people. For growing local industries, such as clean energy, that is absolutely necessary. Perhaps the Secretary of State or her team could write to advise me on how that process can be moved along to the next stage. That would give confidence and clarity to the college and potential future partners, and would be of benefit to the whole of northern Lincolnshire and beyond.

The future of young people in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes is a concern not just for me but for the local authority and the wider community. There is a strong desire across the constituency not just for available and plentiful opportunities for children and students, but for the provision to get them into those opportunities easily. The young people of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes have all the same ambition and talent as young people anywhere else in the country, and I want that ambition and talent to be nurtured, with the right structures in place to enable and lift every single one of them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Ghani): I call Aphra Brandreth to make her maiden speech.

3.33 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) on his maiden speech. This is my maiden speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I must tell you that I arrive in this place fired with enthusiasm—so much so that my Whip has warned me that I need to be careful that that is not how I end up leaving this place: fired, with enthusiasm.

I am a new woman representing a new constituency: Chester South and Eddisbury. It is without doubt one of the most beautiful, extraordinary and inspiring parts of the United Kingdom, encompassing the southern wards of the great city of Chester, those below the River Dee, and many and varied villages in the heart of Cheshire. Audlem, Bunbury, Wybunbury, Wrenbury, Weaverham, Lache, Handbridge, Christleton and Huntington, Tarporley, Tattenhall, Tarvin, Kelsall, Cuddington, Farndon, Malpas—those are just some of the very special places with which you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and this House are going to become quite familiar in the coming years, I hope.

Much of my constituency is rural, which is one reason why I found the King's Speech so disappointing. This Government profess an ambition for growth; if so, it is simply extraordinary that there was no mention of the contribution of farming to our national economy. Food is fundamental: the contribution of the countryside to our country is incalculable, and a Government who are so metropolitan in their outlook that they fail to understand that and reflect it in their agenda are, to use the context of today's debate, both missing an opportunity and in need of an education. My constituency is both urban and rural, as is our country. Understanding the importance of both, and the necessary balance between the two, is key to our country's future economic and societal success.

The joy of my constituency is that it includes a rich range of dynamic village communities and a swathe of one of the greatest historic cities in Europe, the matchless city of Chester. It is a business and tourism hub that faces challenges, of course—from basic connectivity to burdensome business rates—yet boasts many successes, among them the major employers in the Chester business park and the University of Chester, whose business school falls within my constituency and at which no fewer than 27 Commonwealth countries are represented among its staff and students. In the 2023 international barometer survey, the university was named in the top 10 nationally in 20 categories, including a top three placing and four top five category placings. Chester's potential is unlimited, and I shall seek to ensure that this Government give it the fullest chance to bloom.

There are also fantastic schools in Chester South and Eddisbury, some of which I have already had the pleasure of visiting and many more that I look forward to going to over the coming months. Alongside our excellent state schools, we have two independent schools educating over 1,600 pupils, including nearly 400 students with SEND support who do not have education, health and care plans. Those students will face VAT under the Government's current plans—plans that will reduce

choice for parents and increase pressure on the state school system, with no clear benefit to any of our young people.

Chester South and Eddisbury has much to offer, from the glories of Delamere forest—which welcomes more than 750,000 visitors each year—to the excitement of Oulton Park racetrack and Peckforton castle, the home of civil weddings in England. I say that advisedly, because it was the then owner of Peckforton castle who inspired a former Member of Parliament for the City of Chester to introduce a private Member's Bill that became the Marriage Act 1994. For the first time, that Act allowed civil weddings in this country to take place in venues other than registry offices, including castles, historic houses, hotels and Chester zoo. Some might argue that that single piece of legislation has contributed more to happiness in England than any other legislation of its type.

The former Member who introduced that legislation, who I know quite well—in fact, I have known him since I was born—reminds me regularly that his 1994 Act illustrates how, in this place, an ordinary Back Bencher can make a difference. I hope to make a difference in the years to come, not only by badgering the Government about delivering local bus services and improving mobile phone and broadband connectivity, and demanding that they back our farmers and ensure the investment and infrastructure our villages and city need to thrive, but perhaps by introducing legislation of my own in the fullness of time.

I draw inspiration from my constituency and from my predecessors: not only my father, who was the Member for City of Chester in the 1990s—Mr Speaker will know both how marvellous and, sometimes, how irritating it can be to have a parent who was themselves a Member—but the newly elected hon. Member for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), who sits on the Government Benches and who previously represented the City of Chester. I look forward to working with her on matters of mutual benefit to our constituents. I particularly share with my predecessor in Eddisbury, Edward Timpson, his inspiring passion for education and his concern for the care and development of young people.

Another of my distinguished predecessors from whom I have learned is Stephen O'Brien. In his maiden speech a quarter of a century ago, he said something that I, as someone who served in the civil service for more than a decade and went on to run a small business, can wholeheartedly echo as I visit the many small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency:

“The prosperity of those businesses is primarily dependent on less government, less tax, less interference and, above all, a release from the stranglehold of regulations, choking as they do a business's ability to compete and an entrepreneur's incentive to take the risk”.—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 1159.]

With such a constituency and such predecessors, I know that I stand on the shoulders of giants, with much to do and prove.

The House of Commons Library, which I have to say I am already finding invaluable, has advised me that I am the first Member of Parliament in its entire history to have the forename Aphra. I am named after Aphra Behn, the 17th-century playwright, poet and author,

who was the first British woman to earn her living as a writer. The great 20th-century novelist Virginia Woolf said of her:

“All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn...for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.”

What a privilege it is to be in this place, in the 21st century, able to speak my mind on behalf of my constituents across Chester South and Eddisbury.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Catherine Atkinson to make her maiden speech.

3.41 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your new position, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) on her first speech. I begin mine by paying tribute to my predecessor, Amanda Solloway, who was a committed advocate for those struggling with their mental health, and part of the generation of parliamentarians who have helped to make it acceptable to talk about. I also want to pay tribute to a woman who has been an incredible inspiration to me for her work representing our city and as the first woman leader of the Labour party and the first woman Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Dame Margaret Beckett. I am very pleased that we will continue to benefit from her wisdom in the other place.

Looking out from the top of the Derby cathedral tower, to the north you can see the River Derwent, which wends its way to Darley Abbey and the magnificent mills in the Derwent valley, the birthplace of the industrial revolution. You can see the communities of Mackworth, New Zealand, Mickleover, Littleover, Stockbrook, California, Chaddesden, Breadsall Hilltop, Normanton, Oakwood and Darley, each with their own distinctive character and with a wonderful diversity of faiths and backgrounds. My own background, a mix of Lancastrian and Mexican American, is perhaps an unusual one, but I have never felt out of place—many communities, but one Derby.

You can also see the Royal Derby hospital and the medical school that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has visited, which will benefit from the doubling of medical school places. You can see some of the sites where building work is regenerating the city, including the new Derby University business school. If you look over to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), you can see some of the industries in which many Derby North constituents work. Rolls-Royce, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor rightly called

“the very model of a great British business”

when she was there a few weeks ago, is one of the businesses in Derby championing new technologies, excellence and expertise, and it is at the frontline in the fight against climate change. You can see Pride Park stadium, home of Derby County, back in the Championship, ready to bounce back like our city and our country. It is one of this country's true community clubs that I hope will be protected for the future by the Football Governance Bill.

[Catherine Atkinson]

Why have I described Derby North and its surroundings as if standing on top of the cathedral tower? Because I have been there. My nine-year-old son and I abseiled down it a year ago for the children's hospice charity Rainbows. The reward was that awe-inspiring view, but the feeling was very similar to the fear I am experiencing now. People might assume that, after 17 years as a barrister, speaking in this place would be easy. They would be wrong. Speaking here for the first time, there is a very special sense of responsibility and humility, and neither role would have been possible without the good state education that I had. Wanting to give back is why I used to be a chair of governors at a nursery school and children's centre. It is why I helped to lead the successful campaign to stop the closure of Ashgate nursery school. It is why I am committed to championing all the nurseries, schools and colleges and the university in Derby North. It is why I am so excited about the children's wellbeing Bill that will break down barriers to opportunity for all our children and young people.

The legendary Derby County manager Brian Clough summed it up:

"I think everyone should have a book. I think everyone should have a nice classroom to go to. I think everyone should have the same opportunities... The chance to have a few bob and get on."

Who could disagree? Derby has a deep Labour tradition, returning the first Labour MP in England. Now Labour represents every corner of Derbyshire, and I feel that the voters have sent me not as an individual, but as part of a team.

There is also a proud tradition of rail manufacturing that I will champion too. Two centuries of train building in Derby ground to a halt this year. Jobs were lost and, at the train manufacturer Alstom, nearly 1,000 years of welding experience walked out the door in a single day. Workers, their representatives and many others, not least my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, called for action. There is now a new order for trains for the Elizabeth line. The Mayor of London called my lobbying for new trains "a little intense." I am afraid that is something this House may have to get used to.

In Derby, Great British Railways will bring rail back into public ownership and help create the conditions for rail to thrive again. With its headquarters in Derby, Derby will be the rail capital of Britain. It is clear that we need an industrial strategy that commits to the Midlands. The economy that was broken in Whitehall can only be rebuilt in the regions. The actor Robert Lindsay, who has supported me since I was a candidate in his home town of Ilkeston, is one of many who I need to thank for their enduring support. He congratulated me on my election using the words of his character Wolfie in "Citizen Smith"—"Power to the people." There is no greater power that you can give to people than through education. It is a power that could ensure that everyone in Derby North fulfils their potential, so it is with pride that I support the Government's strong emphasis on education, skills and opportunity. That is what will bring real power to the people. I hope to play my part in bringing about the change that Derby North and this country voted for.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Al Pinkerton to make his maiden speech.

3.50 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you for allowing me the opportunity to intervene in this important debate and, in so doing, to give my maiden speech. I also congratulate you on both of your recent election successes and welcome you to the Chair.

It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson). I was delighted in particular to hear about her recent abseiling exploits. I wondered whether she was giving a maiden speech or making a pitch to be the next Lib Dem party leader, but it was wonderful to hear her rich and powerful evocation of Derby North—I thank her very much. I also pay tribute to the other maiden speakers today and last week. The quality of speeches and the intellectual energy of those new Members suggest that this Parliament will be enhanced by a new generation of thinkers and doers who will serve this place and their constituents well.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am especially grateful to you for allowing me to catch your eye on an occasion when education is placed in the parliamentary spotlight. I have dedicated my working life to teaching and researching in higher education, most recently as a Professor of Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London, where I worked with generations of incredible students who have gone on to incredible things in the public, private and charitable sectors. I am proud to say that three of my former students were candidates in the recent general election, at least two are current heads of office or special advisers to senior Members of the House, and one is a rising star of the lobby press. I take no credit for what they do—what they have achieved, they have achieved themselves—but I hope that they will forgive me if I feel some pride in what they do and the contributions they make, even if those contributions are all too often disproportionately favoured towards the Conservative party.

Surrey Heath is blessed with an extraordinary state and independent school system within and local to our constituency. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work that teachers and senior leaderships do in supporting generations of young people, providing them with knowledge and the critical and practical skills that are vital preparation for further learning and successful careers. As was reinforced in the recent general election campaign, Surrey Heath's state schools achieve all of that while edging ever closer to financial crisis.

I welcome and will support any initiative put before the House that will raise educational standards and drive opportunity. Education, after all, is the engine of social mobility and our country's future economic prosperity. I sincerely hope that, with this change of Government, the hostility that has been directed towards the UK's genuinely world-leading universities will end. The new Government now have an opportunity to walk the sector back from the brink of financial crisis—indeed catastrophe, as I saw in the newspapers this week—and to recognise again the intrinsic value of higher education, and the role of our universities as powerful instruments of local economic growth and the foundation of our national success in research, innovation and skills.

Surrey Heath is a wonderful place to live. We are blessed with striking and historic landscapes. As the name of the constituency suggests, we are defined by

ancient lowland heaths: lasting remnants of prehistoric woodland cleared over the centuries and kept clear by grazing, burning and cutting. Although not strictly natural, these heaths are the preserve of unique ecosystems and biodiversity.

Chobham common is one of the finest remaining examples of lowland heath left anywhere in the world. Wildfires are common—increasingly so—as we are gripped by the climate crisis. We are grateful to the brave men and women of Surrey Fire and Rescue, who battle the toughest of conditions to keep residents and their property safe. They deserve our fullest support, especially now as they go into battle again, facing another round of cuts to that vital-to-life service.

Surrey Heath is a borough and a constituency with a long and proud military tradition, from the development of Chobham armour in the 1960s to the present-day home of ATC Pirbright—a place that any new recruit to the British Army will come to know all too well. Surrey Heath is also home to Gordon's school, founded in 1885, which is both an award-winning state boarding school and a national monument to General Gordon of Khartoum. The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where British Army officers are trained, straddles the boundaries of Surrey Heath and nearby Bracknell Forest—although most of the RMA's buildings are technically in Berkshire, I will claim them a little for Surrey Heath today.

There can be no doubt of the connection between Sandhurst and Surrey Heath's main market town of Camberley. Camberley is a product of the Royal Military College, which was formed in Sandhurst in 1812. In the years that followed, settlements formed at the margins of the college, including the planned community of Cambridge Town, named after the Duke of Cambridge, the head of the British army at the time. As the town grew, so did confusion between Cambridge Town and Cambridge, its much less well known and less distinguished namesake somewhere in the midlands—apologies to hon. Members representing Cambridge. This problem was especially felt by users of the postal service, whose letters would frequently find themselves long delayed and hundreds of miles from their intended destinations—150 years has gone by, and little has changed.

Royal Mail requested a name change, and it was the newer upstart Cambridge Town that relented, changing its identity in 1877 to Camberley: a portmanteau referencing the River Cam, which still runs underneath the town; “Amber”, in reference to nearby Amber Hill; and “ley”, which is the Anglo-Saxon for a forest clearing and commonly used as a suffix in nearby placenames such as Frimley and Bisley, also in Surrey Heath.

Surrey Heath has a rich musical and artistic tradition. Camberley was the childhood home of Sir Arthur Sullivan and Bros—rich musical tradition—and today is home to musician, astrophysicist and animal welfare activist Dr Brian May. Daphne du Maurier wrote “Jamaica Inn” while living in Frimley, and we are hopeful that a blue plaque may soon mark that spot as Surrey Heath's contribution to British literary history. We are home to extraordinary local, national and international businesses too numerous to mention, as well as a vibrant charitable and voluntary sector and a community of multiple faith traditions, ethnicities and nationalities, including a large and historic Gurkha community.

During the pandemic, residents self-organised into a remarkable community-wide response to covid-19. Surrey Heath Prepared delivered essential food parcels and thousands of prescriptions to the isolating and vulnerable—an expression of community resilience and solidarity when it was most needed. I hope that contributions by the likes of Surrey Heath Prepared and mutual aid groups will not be forgotten in the inquiry under way into how the UK responded to the pandemic.

Following the recent boundary review that brought the beautiful villages of Normandy and Pirbright into the constituency, Surrey Heath is officially the resting place of at least two significant figures of empire. Sir Henry Morton Stanley is buried in Pirbright, near the home he created for himself after his return from Africa. Perhaps worthy of greater celebration is John Pennycuik, an extraordinary engineer and colonial administrator with the vision and skill to construct the Mullaperiyar dam. Since its construction in 1895, the dam has been credited with saving tens of thousands of lives by protecting communities from seasonal flooding, and for bringing nearly a quarter of a million acres of land into crop-bearing productivity. Today, Pennycuik is revered in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu—children are given his name in his honour—yet he is almost unknown here in the UK. I hope that his mention in this House today may be a small contribution to addressing that historical absence.

Today, drivers on the M3 motorway slip quickly and efficiently—when it is not clogged up—through Surrey Heath as they travel between London and the south-west, often without even realising that they are passing through this fine constituency. On the other hand, Surrey Heath road users may be more aware of the less smooth and much less efficient point of entry on to the M3, at the junction with the A322. My predecessor Michael Gove—more on him in a moment—spent many an hour at that particular road junction over the past few years, but even his formidable talents could not resolve this serious, shared, local frustration. I hope I can make some headway on that issue in the months and years to come.

In Restoration England of the 1600s, hold-ups on the highways of what is now Surrey Heath were of a rather different kind. The Great West Road, known less prosaically today as the A30, was the main connecting route between London and the great port cities of the south coast. It was a lucrative prospect for highwaymen and opportunistic cutpurses, especially on the long, isolated stretches around Bagshot Heath. William Davis, the so-called Golden Farmer, and Claude Duval were two of the most notorious and noteworthy of the 17th century land pirates. Duval is recalled as a “gentleman of the road”. Gracious to the point of obsequiousness, he would relieve you of your jewels while dancing with your wife and complimenting you on the finery of your apparel. An abhorrer of physical violence, the history books recall him as a master of politeness, smiling pleasantly to your face while metaphorically sticking the knife in.

Now, the sharp-eared among you may recognise a passing—one might even say limited and specific—similarity between Duval and another more recent gentleman of Surrey Heath's roads. I refer, of course, to the former Member for Surrey Heath, my predecessor, Michael Gove, who served the constituency and this House with considerable distinction and flair for just shy of 20 years.

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

Both were men possessed of a singular vision, noted for their grace and observance of the highest courtesies and manners. Unlike Duval, there is no evidence to suggest that Michael's outings to the A322 involved any public displays of dancing. Those, as far as we can tell, he saved for the nightclubs of old Aberdeen. Conservative Members to my right may go further, but for my part I am certain that that is where any similarities end.

Michael Gove will rightly be remembered as a transformative Minister, even by teachers—this is a debate on education—who will consider him transformative, but not necessarily beneficially so. He was a talented parliamentarian. His oratorical skills marked him out as a once-in-a-generation performer at the Dispatch Box. He will be greatly missed in this House by both his friends and his opponents, and I am sure they will want to join me in wishing him well in whatever his future has in store.

Personally, I am hugely indebted to the people of Surrey Heath for electing me to be the first non-Conservative MP for our constituency in 118 years. This was a vote to be taken seriously again—one for a local MP who will work in this place to further the cause of a great community. And we need that now more than ever. Surrey Heath's roads and rail infrastructure require significant investment. It cannot be right that it takes longer to travel between Camberley and London in 2024 than it did a century ago. We need to end the postcode lottery of health, and to address the deep inequalities in life expectancy and life opportunities that scar and divide our communities. I welcome the commitment of the Secretary of State for Health to prioritising the rebuilding of RAAC-affected hospitals, such as Frimley Park hospital in my constituency, but we need reassurance that the new Frimley Park will be the right hospital providing the right services and sited in the most appropriate location, accessible by road, rail and bus, and that it does not come at the expense of losing vital green or amenity space. We also need a fair deal for our young people, with genuinely affordable homes, and new educational and training opportunities. We urgently need to fix Surrey's broken special educational needs provision. In the spirit that there is always more that unites us than divides us, I look forward to working with Members across the House to achieve those things for Surrey Heath and in support of communities across the UK.

Finally, our families all too often pay a high price—indeed, the highest price—to enable us to do what we do in this House, and to participate in the long and stressful campaigns that go before and which, soon enough, will come again. In closing, I express my love and thanks to my wife, Philippa, and to my children, Jamie and Will, for putting up with me, for their limitless support, and for being the best team anyone could ever hope to be part of.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, Members may have noticed that this debate is very oversubscribed. Due to time constraints and to get as many people in as possible, I am now imposing a six-minute time limit on all Back Benchers who are not making their maiden speech.

4.4 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): It is great to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker—a strong Yorkshirewoman, no less, which is exactly what we need in the Chair.

I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for his excellent maiden speech. He has done his constituents proud, and it was great to hear from him, and, indeed, from all who have made maiden speeches today.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned the literacy hour. As a child, I was locked out of education. I had dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyspraxia, and a host of different medical needs that make it very difficult and challenging to lead a normal life. I remember not being able to read or write legibly—some may say that I still do not write legibly—and I remember the great influence that the literacy hour had on me when I was seven and eight years old. The changing model of education, involving 15 minutes of carrying out different tasks, suited me to a T, and gave me a lifelong love of literature. It meant that by the time I took my GCSEs, instead of failing and being locked out of education, I got an A in English literature. I am still proud of that today, because it happened against all the odds.

I have been chairing the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities because I think it important for us to give young people that opportunity. The narrowing of the curriculum that we have seen over the last 14 years horrifies me. I am a scientist, and I loved drama and art at school. They unlocked creativity, which allowed me to go on to become the scientist who is creative, thinks outside the box and does great things. I want all children who are experiencing the struggles that I have faced to have the opportunities that I had, under a Labour Government—but I am going on about myself too much, because what we are here to talk about are the opportunities for our young people and our communities.

It may sound like a cliché, but it is still true to say that education is one of the main ways to create opportunity in our communities, so it is excellent that we are having this debate so early in the new Parliament, and it is good to hear from my colleagues on the Government Front Bench about the positive steps that they are taking to create an education system that is fit for all. I want to focus my comments on provision for special educational needs and disabilities, and on how we can create opportunities for everyone in the education system.

It is no secret that the new Government have inherited a SEND system in crisis, underfunded, under-resourced and understaffed. Estimates from f40 suggest that the total level of underfunding in the last Parliament was £4.6 billion, with the last Government promising only a fraction of the expenditure needed to bridge the gap. When that is combined with the chronic underfunding of local authorities, it is easy to see why there are so many stories about authorities that have been unable to meet their statutory obligations.

It is also no wonder that parents who rightly want to fight for what is best for their child have ended up going to tribunals, and more often than not they win. In only 1.7% of cases has a tribunal found in a local authority's favour. That is a damning statistic, in two senses. First,

it demonstrates the tenacity that parents need in order to secure the basic right to education for their children. It was not me but the former Education Secretary who was mentioned by the Secretary of State earlier who said that the system was “lose, lose, lose” for families, and she was right. A tribunal decision in your favour is a bitter victory when all you ask is that your child has the same opportunities as everyone else. Secondly, the extent of the skew in the tribunal figures shows that the problems are endemic and need a systemic response. Unfortunately, that was not the approach taken by the last Government: too often we saw a massaging of statistics, rather than a serious approach to tackling the underlying realities facing too many young people.

We saw the same with the target to cut the number of education, health and care plans, which was rather skirted around. It is right that we aim to reduce the reliance on EHCPs. All children should have the opportunities that they need, whether or not they have a formal diagnosis, and we also need action to ensure that people do receive the diagnoses that are so important, especially for young girls and women who often have to wait, as I did, until their late 20s or 30s, or in some cases their 50s or 60s, to receive a diagnosis to explain why they have been struggling throughout their lives.

A key task for the new Government will be to rebuild the infrastructure for early years intervention that we lost over the last 14 years. The cuts to Sure Start have been dramatic, but we also need more health visitors out in the community. The Institute of Health Visiting estimates that there is a shortfall of 5,000 in England, with 48% of health visitors saying they will leave the profession in the next five years. Shockingly, over a quarter of those surveyed said that they were servicing the needs of 750 children—three times the recommended ratio for health visitors. It is simply not good enough.

Early interventions are so important, because they can change the life course of a child. They can open opportunities that can be cut off if the right support is not in place. Early years staff with the right training can be the passionate people who spot something in a child that no others have noticed.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I really appreciate the hon. Member’s remarks. Indeed, I am thinking about young children, possibly with a SEND diagnosis, who struggle post 19. One of the things I have learned from the Northern Ireland Assembly, where I sat, is that a much more holistic model, which combines health and education, helps young people post 19. Does the hon. Member agree that we need such a model throughout the UK, and that post-19 careers advice should be done in a holistic way?

Olivia Blake: I completely agree that we need a more holistic approach. I recently visited Whirlow Hall farm in my constituency, which provides alternative provision, but also further education, in an agricultural setting. It is great to see the opportunities for the young people who go there, especially those with emotional distress and similar issues. It is really important that we see all of this in the round and make sure that there is quality in all our services—whether that is AP, education in a local mainstream school or getting access to diagnoses, which are so important for so many young people. I must not forget SALTs, or speech and language therapists; otherwise, I will get in trouble with them.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I am pleased to see the good signals and directions that we have had so far. The new approach will treat people as people, and start from the premise that whatever their need or disability, they are entitled to the same quality of education and opportunities as everyone else. I look forward to hearing from the Government what further plans they will be bringing forward to make that a reality.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Neil Shastri-Hurst to make his maiden speech.

4.12 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by congratulating you on your election, and on taking up the Chair today? May I also congratulate those on the Government Front Bench on taking up the burden of ministerial office? I wish them the best of success with that.

It is with no little pride and a great sense of honour that I rise to give my maiden speech in this House. I am indebted to my constituents for sending me to this place, and I will do my utmost to ensure that I repay the faith that they have put in me. It is a particular pleasure to follow so many excellent maiden speeches over the last few days. I would like to commend the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for his magnificent speech. His constituency is a place that I hold dear, having trained at the Royal Military Academy, and I wish him well in his stewardship of it. I think he will make a great contribution to this House.

My constituency is Solihull West and Shirley. Like many others, it was newly created following the boundary review. While it is very much based on the old Solihull seat, the wards of Silhill and Elmdon have moved into the new Meriden and Solihull East constituency. In return, Blythe ward has moved into mine, joining Olton, Lyndon, St Alphege and Shirleys West, South and East. Therefore, I have not one but, technically, two predecessors. As I have alluded to, Blythe ward was represented in the last Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti). I am delighted to join him in this place, and I thank him for his support and help over the last few weeks.

Julian Knight served as the Member of Parliament for Solihull for nine years. He gave particular service as Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I am sure that hon. Members on all sides of the House will join me in wishing the whole Knight family the very best for the future.

I also pay tribute to Julian’s predecessors in this place. Lorely Burt is still held in great affection by residents, who remember her as a proactive constituency Member of Parliament. The late John Taylor, an avuncular man, was Solihull through and through, and he is fondly remembered for his dedication to public service. His widow, Ann, is still a stalwart of the local community. Before John came a fellow member of the Bar, Percy Grieve QC. Famously, Percy once had the campaign slogan “Grieve for Solihull”. I am delighted to tell the House that there is no need to grieve for Solihull any longer.

For those hon. and right hon. Members who have not had the good fortune of visiting Solihull West and Shirley, we may be compact, being a mere 40 sq km

[*Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst*]

in area, but we pack a good punch. We are a diverse community, welcoming to all. We benefit from our confluence of cultures, which serve to create a greater societal bond. Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. I am particularly proud that several thousand Hong Kong British nationals overseas have chosen to make the area their home.

The land now forming Solihull West and Shirley was once covered by the ancient forest of Arden on the banks of the River Blythe. The earliest settlement in the area can be dated back to the iron age. The density of the forest of Arden was such that even the Romans found it impenetrable, for throughout the Roman occupation of these isles it was held that no Roman roads passed through it. By the time of the Anglo-Saxons, the forest of Arden was part of the kingdom of Mercia. A clearing in the woods was established, and the settlement of the manor of Ulverlei was founded. It is here that the town of Shirley now sits, the name Shirley meaning a bright clearing. The town of Solihull is thought to take its name from the site of the stunning Arden church of Saint Alphege, which can be dated back to the 13th century and was built on a mound of marl. This soily hill gave rise to the name Solihull.

Of course, over the years the two towns have changed somewhat. They are a bustling centre for business and enterprise. We are the home of the Touchwood Centre, we have fantastic businesses such as Gymshark, and nearby Jaguar Land Rover remains a significant employer for many of my constituents, and a major economic driver for the local area. We are blessed with good and outstanding schools, providing our young people with the skills and opportunities to succeed in life. Through the enterprise and leadership of the local council and the former West Midlands mayor, Andy Street, there has been an ambitious brownfield-first housing policy, delivering sustainable homes for the future while protecting the green belt. However, while many will associate Solihull West and Shirley with prosperity, there are pockets of deprivation, and I will therefore work tirelessly to ensure that those parts of the constituency have the investment and opportunities to shine in the years to come.

When you first enter this place, it is impossible not to be struck by the history that comes before you. It makes you reflect upon your own place in the annals of time. There have been many doctors who have entered this House before. There are several of us in this new intake alone. There have been a number of soldiers who have stood up and served again—indeed, there is almost a platoon of us entering the House for the first time. And as for lawyers—well, frankly, we could be an extension of the Inns of Court. However, it struck me the first time I entered this place that there was a chance that I might be the first Member to have done all three. And that rather flatters the ego. Well, how wrong could I have been? Like the bubbles burst in the back garden by my young son George, my illusions were quickly burst. A former Member for Wimbledon, Charles Goodson-Wickes, had done all this before, and he added being chairman of the Countryside Alliance to boot. So, alas, my place in the history books will have to wait, for the time being.

I do hope, however, that my professional experiences will allow me to contribute effectively to this place on behalf of the people of Solihull West and Shirley—by being a critical friend on the issue of health and social care, so

that we improve patient outcomes; by protecting the rule of law and ensuring access to justice; and by upholding the military covenant, and continuing the commendable work of the former member for Plymouth, Moor View, who is sadly no longer in this place, and others to ensure that Britain is the best place in the world to be a veteran.

I am painfully aware of the good fortune and opportunities I have had in life. I have benefited from a loving family and been provided with the opportunities to fulfil my potential. Sadly, that is not the case for all, so during the course of my time in this House I will seek to champion the early years agenda, so that we give young people the best chance in life. I will also seek to work with Members from across the House to improve SEND provision in this country, so that we can move the conversation away from the level of disability and focus instead on the level of intervention, and ensure that every child can access the curriculum and achieve their potential, irrespective of the hurdles they face, because it is only by investing in our young people that we invest in our society.

Those of us who choose to enter the political arena have a duty to conduct ourselves with tolerance, dignity and respect. These are the values that the public rightly expect of us, and in this, my maiden speech, I make a promise to my constituents that these are the values that I will uphold for as long as they are gracious enough to send me to this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Chris Vince to make his maiden speech.

4.20 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) for his excellent and very emotive maiden speech.

I welcome you to your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate.

Above all, I thank the people of Harlow. It is a diverse constituency that includes not only Harlow but the villages of Roydon, Nazeing, Sheering and, following the recent boundary review, Hatfield Heath, Hatfield Broad Oak and too many others to name. I thank everybody for giving me the incredible opportunity to serve as their Member of Parliament.

The new Prime Minister used the word “service” throughout the election campaign, and he has used it in this Chamber. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition even used it in his opening remarks on the Humble Address. Harlow is a constituency that demands and deserves the utmost service from its Members of Parliament, and in my direct predecessor, Robert Halfon, it had an MP who constantly championed and worked hard for the constituency. I genuinely thank him for his service. Likewise, his predecessor, Bill Rammell, who is a good friend and a mentor of mine, is still remembered fondly on the doorstep by residents he has supported. Both of them have shown how to persevere in the face of obstacles and beat the odds. Although my story is far less inspiring, I hope I can live up to the high expectations that they have both set. I also thank Bill’s predecessor, Jerry Hayes, who believed in the importance of public scrutiny.

Finally, I pay tribute to the late Stan Newens. I got to know Stan quite well in his later years, because all our Co-operative party meetings were held at his house. If anyone enjoys a trip back in time through literature, I would recommend a visit. At the end of every Co-op meeting, Stan would come over to me and whisper into my ear, “You’ll be an MP one day.” Stan, I did not believe it at the time, but it turns out that you were right.

My background is one of service. I spent 15 years as a secondary school maths teacher, and more recently I worked for a charity in Harlow called Streets2Homes, which supports homeless people, and for Action for Family Carers, which supports unpaid carers, particularly those who are young. A while ago, I had a conversation with the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), about his excellent contribution to the report on young carers. I also pay tribute to Razed Roof, a wonderful charity of which I am a trustee. It is an inclusive theatre company, and I have to say a big hello to Simon.

Like many Members, my experiences have shaped my politics and my interest in politics, but my priorities are also shaped by the constituency of Harlow. Many Members will know that Harlow is a post-war new town, designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd. Sir Frederick designed Harlow to be a place of community; every community has its own shopping area, playground and green spaces. A local historian described Harlow as being designed—excuse me for this, Madam Deputy Speaker—on socialist principles. It is a place where people can see a Barbara Hepworth or a Rodin while just walking down the street.

That sense of community was put to the test during the pandemic, when we saw dark times not only in this country but across the entire world. I am proud to report to everybody in this House that during those dark times, Harlow’s community stepped up; they passed the test. They supported the most vulnerable people across our town and community. Perhaps that is no surprise, given that our town invented the fibre optic cable, and is the home of Harlow college and the birthplace of Rupert Grint—I have no idea why I put those things in that order. Apparently, Harlow has the lowest density of pubs per head of population. That is okay, though, because there is one five minutes’ staggering distance from my house.

It is the convention to talk about a non-controversial issue in one’s maiden speech. That is tricky when you find yourself in a room with people with opposing views. I thought that I might talk about football, but I am a Leeds supporter, and my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), and for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), went before me, so I think I shall leave the subject alone, but I am sure this House will join me in congratulating the mighty Harlow Town on their league cup victory last season—let us not worry about what league it was.

Instead, I decided to talk about young carers, a subject very close to my heart. As I have said, I was a secondary school maths teacher for 15 years. In one school, I had a boy in my form—I shall call him George, but that is not his real name. He was a lovely lad. Every Friday, it was my job to check that pupils had got their homework planner signed by their parents, so that we knew that the pupils were doing their homework and recording it properly, but George never got his planner signed.

Anyone who knew me as a teacher would say that I was a bit of a softie, so I let it go, but over time, I had to keep him back at break time and lunch time because his planner was not getting signed. He never argued. He just turned up, did his five-minute detention and went on his way. It was only at parents’ evening that I found out that both George’s parents were severely physically disabled, and that George and his sister were young carers. I felt terrible. It was probably that experience that inspired me to become more involved in supporting young carers.

The solution to George’s issue was really easy. George, like many young carers, did not want to be treated differently. What we did was say, “Your sister can sign your planner for you. As long as your sister gets it signed, there is no problem.” Lo and behold, he got it signed by his sister—he got a detention if he did not. He was happy with that. I am pleased to say that that story is about 10 years old. I think we have progressed quite well in our recognition and understanding of young carers. I thank Members from across the House, the leader of the Liberal Democrats and my own Prime Minister for bringing their experiences to this House.

In a recent school census, 72% of schools said that they did not have any young carers. I can tell Members that, from my experience of supporting young carers, that cannot be correct. It is predicted that there are more than 10,000 young carers in Essex alone. Essex county council has identified roughly 3,700 of them, so there is a huge number of young carers whom we have not identified, let alone got the resource in place for.

I would like to end my maiden speech on a positive: I ask the House to join me in thanking all the young carers I have worked with, and all young carers across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for the incredible job that they do. Many of them do not even think of themselves as being young carers because it is just what they do—they help a loved one—but I want to put it on record that, to me, they are absolute heroes.

4.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on being elevated to the position of First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. Those of us who know you are very pleased to see you in that position. I believe that you will be impartial and fair to everyone, as you always are. I look forward to you calling me to speak and intervene in debates on many occasions.

What a pleasure it is to see the Ministers in their place. The Secretary of State was here earlier, and the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), is here now; I look forward to her summing up. The contribution of the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), was also excellent.

We have had wonderful maiden speeches today from Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour Members. The House has been enriched by the combination of contributions, including the intervention of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), who will make her maiden speech at a later stage, as other Members from Northern Ireland have. I especially thank the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), whose story about young carers resonated with me in particular,

[*Jim Shannon*]

as I have had an interest in this area over the years. I think it resonated with everyone, to be truthful, but it resonated with me because I know young carers in my constituency. Perhaps they were not the best students, but they had reasons for it. The story that he told may be 10 years old, but it is still relevant today, and I thank him for it.

It is so important that we have debates on education. I have said in this place so many times that our young people truly are the future. To ensure that they have the tools needed to succeed, we have to make difficult decisions. Education is devolved in Northern Ireland, so Ministers here do not have to respond on it. They do not have to take any notice, and they do not need to say to themselves, "I must reply to the hon. Member." They might wish to say something, but they do not have any responsibility for our education. However, I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective, as I always do, and make two points.

There are so many opportunities out there for young people. Some may know what route they want to take in life, and for those who do not, there are other options. Education may not be everybody's option, as the hon. Member for Harlow said, but there are other things that we need to do through education as well. Ministers will no doubt take that on board. Whether in employment, further education or apprenticeships, there are opportunities for people to avail themselves of. Furthermore, I am a big supporter of work experience and the prospects that it can bring for young people, especially in their education and future employment. It can give young people a taste for work and the possibilities that it can lead them to. I try to offer it every year in my office, as I did when I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly and when I had my own business.

Two of my youngest staff members, one aged 29 and one aged 24, both did their work experience in my office, one back in 2012 and the other in 2017. We never realised that they would one day end up working for me. They went and did another job in between, but ended up coming back to me. Whether they thought I was a soft touch, or what it was, I am not quite sure. I am sure that they did not think that—the fact is that they loved what we do in the office. Like others elected to this House, my whole life has been about helping people and making their lives better. That is our job. It does not matter what political party we are in; we have to try to do that in every part of life. Years later, an opportunity came up for new staff, and knowing the skillset that those two people were able to bring through their work experience, they were able to come into the job like they had always been there. That sticks in my mind.

Whether it be in aerospace; healthcare; science, technology, engineering and maths; government; law; media; trades such as mechanics or plumbing, and so on—the list is endless—it is no secret that more needs to be done on funding for the devolved nations. It was revealed last year that Northern Ireland student numbers were reduced with funding cuts. Indeed, it has been indicated that the teaching grant for Northern Ireland's universities will be reduced by 10% to save around £14 million. It was also planned that funding for further education colleges would be cut by 4% to save an additional £9 million.

In the limited time that I have left, I want briefly to discuss the opportunities that apprenticeships provide for young people. I mentioned earlier that not every person can have a civil service job or be in university or another form of education, but they can have opportunities out there in society. Our universities are incredible, but there are young people out there who do not see university as a path for them to go down. The number of people aged 16 to 24 pursuing an apprenticeship has been increasing consistently since 2013, showcasing how the world of work can provide opportunities for young people who perhaps do not want to go to university. Apprenticeships are provided in so many industries; there is always something that can be found to give young people the best start on their employment path.

The issues always lie with funding, and that is why it is so important that these issues are represented. Northern Ireland has suffered for too long from ill thought-out budgets and lack of funding. It is time for our words to be listened to and for budgets to be reconsidered for the betterment of young people and their futures. I believe, as everybody participating in this debate does, that our young people are the future, and I want them to get many more opportunities than I got. We are responsible for ensuring that education and employment opportunities are available to all young people across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are always better together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Catherine Fookes to make her maiden speech.

4.36 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and *llongyfarchiadau*, as we say in Wales. It is wonderful to have you presiding over my maiden speech. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); it is a pleasure to follow him. I congratulate Members on the amazing maiden speeches we have heard this afternoon. I particularly enjoyed the story of such an inspirational maths teacher from my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince).

I am really pleased to speak in this debate about education, which is so important. I was a governor at my son's primary school in Monmouthshire, Cross Ash, as well as at his secondary school. It is so important, as we come to the end of term, to say thank you to all the governors, teachers and headteachers at all the schools in Monmouthshire.

I think I am the first of the new Welsh MPs to make their maiden speech, so I hope I do our country proud. I want to give one more congratulation, to Eluned Morgan MS, who has just been announced as our new Welsh Labour leader—another strong woman leading us in the Labour party.

I have the honour to represent the beautiful, glorious county of Monmouthshire, and I am its first ever woman MP. As former chief executive of the Women's Equality Network Wales, where I campaigned to get more women into politics, I can finally boast that I am practising what I preached.

I would like to pay tribute not to one predecessor or to two, but to three. David T. C. Davies, the former Monmouth constituency MP, served in four Parliaments. Despite our fundamental political differences, we have one thing in common: our children went to the same

fabulous school, Monmouth comprehensive. I say diolch yn fawr iawn to David for his dedication to public service and to his constituents.

With the redrawn boundaries, Monmouthshire has inherited parts of the Newport East constituency: Caldicot, Magor, Rogiet and Undy. That means that I owe a huge debt of thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for her legacy of service to those communities, and for the exceptional generosity and support that she and her team have given me, both during the campaign and as I start my journey in this place. She is a brilliant MP, and if I become half the MP she is, I know I will be doing exceptionally well.

Technically, I have a third predecessor, because Monmouthshire was a constituency many years ago, and its last MP was John Rolls, a local man who took his seat in 1880. My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) mentioned Rolls-Royce earlier, and I will mention it too. Rolls was father not only to Charles Rolls of Rolls-Royce fame, but to Eleanor Shelley-Rolls, a founder of the Women's Engineering Society, an early campaigner for the electrification of Britain, and founder, 100 years ago, of the Atlanta Company, an engineering business with a real difference—it only employed women. That combination of the technological cutting edge and socially progressive views still represents some of the best of Monmouthshire today.

Monmouthshire, particularly the Magor technology corridor, is in many ways a 21st-century economy. We are also proud of our agricultural and farming traditions. Some 80% of the land in Monmouthshire is dedicated to farming, much of it carried out on small family farms. As a smallholder and a farmer's daughter, I know the joys and the huge challenges of rural life, as well as the vital role played in food production and environmental stewardship by our skilled farming families.

Monmouthshire is also a haven for tourists, home to the renowned Abergavenny food festival, the Wye valley national landscape, parts of the Bannau Brycheiniog national park, and the Offa's Dyke long-distance path, not to mention our incredible historic border castles. I say to Members: please come and visit in the summer holidays. We have Raglan castle, Grosmont castle and many more.

Monmouthshire has a proud history of fighting for democracy, as home to the Chartist movement of the 1830s. The Chartists made shocking and radical demands—how very dare they demand universal suffrage, secret ballots, salaries for MPs?—so that ordinary people, not just the super-rich, could enter Parliament. Those are now the pillars on which our democracy is based. The same spirit is alive and kicking in a constituency where, in 2024, I am proud to say turnout was 30% higher than the UK average.

As a border county, Monmouthshire is instinctively a place of welcome. One of the early actions in 2022 of our incoming Labour-run county council, on which I have been proud to serve, was a formal application to become a county of sanctuary, welcoming and celebrating the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers. Perhaps it is not entirely a coincidence that many of our leaders in Monmouthshire are women, from our inspirational council leader—another female first—to the three women who bring such tenacity and passion to running our chambers of commerce in Monmouth, Chepstow and Abergavenny.

Despite its great strengths, Monmouthshire is, I am sorry to say, one of the most unequal counties in Wales, with great wealth and great poverty existing side by side. As its MP, my first priority will be to support the Government's drive for economic growth and keeping household bills down so that we reduce that inequality.

Talking of the drive for equality, I am only here because of the incredible women who came before me and because of the support I have had from far too many individual women to mention. I must shout out about the work of mentoring programmes such as the Fabian Women's Network mentoring programme, the Labour Women's Network, and organisations such as Elect Her and 50:50 Parliament. It is thanks to them that we now have a House in which 40% of MPs are women. We still have a long way to get to 50% and true equality, so I pledge, as my second priority, to continue my work to ensure that we do get an equal Parliament. I will work with every single relevant Secretary of State and every parliamentarian across the House to ensure that we reduce all the inequalities that women face, from ending the gender pay gap, to halving violence against women and pushing forward the menopause mandate campaign.

I will, of course, do all that I can to support Monmouthshire's fantastic charities and community groups, from Cyfannol, a charity working to support those experiencing violence against women, to Reach Out, a group supporting those with addiction.

As a keen environmentalist, I will do everything I can to ensure we champion our environment and our rivers, including the River Wye and the River Usk, which flow through our beautiful county. The people of Monmouthshire have made it clear that they expect me to work cross-border and cross-party, with all the regulators, campaigners and action groups, to bring our rivers back to full health.

Monmouthshire is back on the Westminster map for the first time in a century and a half. My determination is to make sure that the legacy of this Government for Monmouthshire is a more equal, more prosperous and greener future.

4.44 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): It is great to see another former Leeds city councillor in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The value that sports and arts have in people's lives cannot be overstated and, in this speech, I want to talk about their importance in education. The sad reality is there are significantly fewer access points for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who have a disability or who are black or from other minority groups in to sports and the arts.

My constituency is home to a very special organisation called MAP, which stands for Music & Arts Production. It is an alternative provision offering access to creative subjects for young people aged 11 to 16. Students gain qualifications in art, design and music as well as in functional skills, and are welcomed into a creative community. They can see that they could make a career from pursuing something creative and are introduced to a range of role models relevant to their lives, who they would not have met without attending MAP.

[Alex Sobel]

For young people who are struggling to fit in with our mainstream education system, that can be life changing and the effects on society overall are immense. If we can reduce school exclusion rates by providing meaningful creative alternatives, we will be able to reduce youth violence, young people will be less involved in crime, and some of the strains on child and adolescent mental health services and other mental health services will be lessened.

When I visited MAP, staff told me of the confidence that attending provision such as MAP can instil in students. Having access to arts subjects allows people to develop a strong sense of identity and transferable social skills, and to build a strong base of friendship and community. Children who have been pushed to the fringes are celebrated rather than punished.

I am so pleased that Labour plans to commission an urgent, expert-led review into curriculum and assessment, and I hope that will mean a broader, more inclusive curriculum. MAP is mainly funded by commercial activities, which is not sustainable; we must ensure that alternative provision that focuses on creative education receives funding similar to mainstream provision. I invite the Minister and the Secretary of State to visit MAP with me in Leeds.

The issues around provision are not limited to 11 to 16-year-olds. By September, 2,500 more 16 to 19 places will be needed in Leeds. Leeds will have enough A-level places, but there is a huge shortage of places for alternative qualifications. That is causing a number of problems for our young people, who, through no fault of their own, are on waiting lists for technical, level 1 and level 2 courses and are therefore officially not in education, employment or training. That is adding to our skills gap and undermining the Government's growth target.

My view is that the greatest single challenge for our growth and energy missions is not investment or tax, but skills. I look forward not only to the new growth and skills levy, but to a strategy for creating the post-16 vocational places that we so desperately need.

Sport is also crucial to the health of our nation and saves the NHS £1 billion a year by preventing disease and improving wellbeing through participation in community sport. We are seeing a crisis in the number of people who have active lifestyles, and that starts with schools and education. I am heartened to know that the Secretary of State understands that and is protecting sport time. I hope that will mean that we can reach the target of 60 minutes of physical activity a day for all young people.

I welcome the approach my right hon. Friend is taking. We cannot just tell young people about the benefits of sport and celebrate successful athletes, although I love the Olympics and professional sports. We also need to reimagine—as Labour is doing—the role that sport plays in people's lives and have it at the heart of decision making. I hope we can see new funding for community coaching and equipment, especially in sports that are widely played at grassroots, but less so at elite level in the UK, such as basketball.

Music education is also a vital area. We know how much music enriches people's lives, but if they do not have the means to buy the equipment and to get music

tuition, it is impossible to access music, to progress and to enjoy all that musical entertainment and education provides. We need to offer that in our schools and give that additional enrichment. Therefore, I hope to see an uplift in provision of music teaching, improving access so that families can afford the high costs of many instruments.

Science, technology, engineering and maths subjects are really important—I am a former community scientist—but we cannot neglect the issues around creative education, I am pleased that we will carry on with the creative GCSE, and I hope that we will see a huge uplift in the uptake of arts, sports and creative subjects in our schools and around the education system. That is my hope for enriching our country and our curriculum.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Baggy Shanker to make his maiden speech.

4.49 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your new role. A number of us on the Labour Benches know what it is like to be on your first day at work.

I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) on her excellent maiden speech. She raised the important issue of equality, and I am sure that she will continue to press on such matters. I thank the many House staff and officials for making our start here so welcoming and informative. I also thank my colleagues, family and friends, and the residents of Derby South, for their incredible support during the campaign to get me to this place.

I am immensely proud to represent the people of my home city as a Labour and Co-op MP. It means so much that the residents of Derby South placed their confidence and trust in me, and it is the honour of my life to amplify their voices in this place. I was born and raised in the constituency that I now represent, where my parents settled in the 1950s to help rebuild the country after the devastation of the second world war. My father exchanged his simple farming tools, on which he relied to feed his family in the Punjab, for overalls in a local engineering foundry. Just one generation later, I stand here delivering this speech in this place. It still feels a little surreal.

Alongside honour, I must confess that I also feel the weight of history in taking this seat—I am only the fourth person ever to do so. Derby has a proud political history and has been home to many significant political figures. Derby elected England's first ever Labour Member of Parliament, Richard Bell. However, so as not to alienate any of my Welsh colleagues so early on, it pains me to make it clear he was not the first Labour Member of Parliament in Britain.

After the creation of the Derby South constituency in 1950, it was won for Labour by Philip Noel-Baker, who is the only person to have been awarded an Olympic gold medal and a Nobel prize. He was followed in 1970 by staunch trade unionist Walter Johnson, who served the constituency for 13 years, after which a woman who has made history several times over won the seat for Labour. Her name? The right hon. Dame Margaret Beckett—hon. Members may have heard of her.

As we have already heard, Margaret was the first female leader of the Labour party, the first female Foreign Secretary, and Britain's longest-serving female Member of Parliament, to name just a few of her achievements. Among her many firsts, Margaret was the first to encourage me to seek selection for this seat. She has been a political mentor and a friend to me for many years, and I will always appreciate her unwavering support. Her dedication and duty to our city over the 40-plus years that she represented Derby South are unmatched, and she continues to inspire many generations of political activists. As we have heard, we are fortunate to be able to continue drawing upon the wisdom that she will offer from the red Benches in the other place. It would be remiss of me not to mention a man who many new and returning Members across the House will have known, and who could always be found by Margaret's side: the extraordinary late Leo Beckett. We will always miss him dearly.

From the leafy surroundings of Britain's first public park, the Arboretum, to the best high-tech aero engine testbed facilities and the places where small modular reactors are being designed as I speak, Derby South is a place where tradition and tomorrow meet. The history of our city is rich, vibrant and steeped in engineering excellence: it is widely thought that Derby's historic silk mill, located on the River Derwent, was the first fully mechanised factory in the world. Derby folk have always led the way with their industrious and hard-working nature, but they also appreciate fairness and co-operation, values that extend to the rest of our county and are reflected in the return of Labour Members of Parliament in every one of Derbyshire's 11 seats.

I was delighted to hear in the King's Speech confirmation that legislation will be brought forward to establish Great British Railways, an outcome that I and my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby)—yes, I said Derbyshire Dales—have campaigned for in earnest. I am thrilled that we now have a Government who are committed to delivering its headquarters in Derby. We also campaigned to save the train maker Alstom, which employs so many highly skilled workers in my constituency. The closure of Alstom's historic Litchurch Lane site would have left the UK as the only G7 nation without essential design, manufacturing and testing facilities for rail, an outcome that we simply could not countenance. Marketing Derby, our city's award-winning inward investment agency, and our local *Derby Telegraph* were integral in securing the support of hundreds of businesses around Derby in the campaign to save that train manufacturing plant. I would not have the time to name in my speech everybody who helped.

Thankfully, we did retain so many of those jobs, and now we must build on our significant rail heritage for future generations. We must harness the industriousness of places such as Derby and couple it with bold and ambitious legislation to build a Britain that works for working people once again. Nowhere is that vision more needed than in my home city and many other cities across the UK. We have significant challenges with social mobility in Derby, and unfortunately those divides have widened over the past 14 years, in terms not just of income but of life expectancy. Recent information suggests that people living in Derby city centre have the lowest life expectancy anywhere in Derbyshire, a statistic

that we must change. Access to decent homes, good education and secure jobs are key drivers of health equality, and I will be fighting for those things for the people of my city.

I began an engineering apprenticeship at the age of 16, leading to a rewarding career, and recently spent over a decade at the iconic Rolls-Royce. I want Derby's young people to have access to similar opportunities, not just in engineering but in other sectors, including the expert design and manufacture of sporting apparel by companies such as HUUB in Derby; architecture, design and construction with companies such as Wavensmere Homes; and the cultural and entertainment sector at places such as QUAD, Déda and Derby theatre.

In addition to the growth ambitions outlined in His Majesty's Speech, Derby people will be particularly pleased to hear that the Government are taking forward plans to introduce an independent football regulator. That regulator will promote the financial sustainability of football clubs, ensuring that they make prudent financial decisions. When our beloved Derby County—a founder member of the Football League—ran into financial difficulties, it was saved from administration by a local man and fan, David Clowes, preserving the club for its supporters. The new regulator will significantly reduce the risk of Derby County or any other club being faced with a similar prospect, and our cherished clubs will be saved.

Derby has so much to be proud of in what we have given the world and what the world has given Derby. As I have said, I am so excited about what we can achieve in Derby with a thriving public and private sector partnership, now a Labour council, a Labour police and crime commissioner, a Labour East Midlands Mayor and a Labour Government. We must work together to retain what is best about cities such as Derby and to develop what is needed. The contents of the King's Speech are just the start of that journey. Once again, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Tony Vaughan to make his maiden speech.

5 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech today. May I congratulate you on your election? It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker). He spoke about his constituency with eloquence and passion, and I congratulate him on his speech.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Damian Collins, who served as the Member of Parliament for Folkestone and Hythe for the last 14 years. He worked tirelessly here in Parliament, most notably as the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which he led for several years up to 2019. He spearheaded several significant inquiries into pressing issues, including doping in sports, football governance, combating homophobia in sports, tackling online disinformation and examining addictive technologies. As a father of two boys, I am well aware of the parenting challenges that are posed by online gaming and social media, so I know that the work Damian did to hold tech companies to account performed a vital public service, for which we are all grateful. Recognising his expertise and contribution in this area, Damian was

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appointed the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for tech and the digital economy in 2022, and that appointment followed two Parliamentary Private Secretary roles in the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing Damian all the best for his future endeavours.

I would also like to acknowledge my second predecessor, Michael Howard—Lord Howard—who represented the constituency for some 27 years. He remains a much respected figure locally, and many voters talked of him fondly on the doorsteps during the short campaign.

It is the honour of my life to be elected as Folkestone and Hythe's Member of Parliament. I thank the members and volunteers of Folkestone and Hythe Labour party who moved heaven and earth to get me elected. Without their efforts, I simply would not be here. I also want to thank my wife and my family, who have been behind me all the way.

I have the privilege of being the first Labour MP ever to have represented the constituency since its creation in 1950. Before that, the constituency covering its approximate area, Hythe, had returned Conservative MPs continuously since 1895. As a further piece of history, such was the strategic importance of Hythe and the town of New Romney—two ports that were among the original Cinque ports on the south coast—that they have been represented continuously ever since the Simon de Montfort Parliament of 1265, which is usually regarded as the first Parliament in England.

I first visited Folkestone and Hythe in 2007 as a baby barrister sent to Folkestone magistrates court, apparently drawing the short straw. The fee was not much more than the train fare to get there, and the two-hour journey down was bumpy and slow. The upside was that I got fish and chips for lunch, a sea view and a breath of sea air. By the time I moved to Folkestone in 2014, the high-speed line HS1 had cut the journey time to 53 minutes, and as hon. Members can imagine, the dream of seaside living was no longer a distant thought for many.

Folkestone and Hythe today is a cultural hub. We have arts festivals, comedy, theatre, open studios, open gardens, the Folkestone Music Town initiative and live music to suit every taste. The Royal Gurkha regiment is based in the constituency, and we have one of the largest Nepalese communities in the UK. It is hard to beat a Nepalese curry from Folkstone. The constituency has around 20 miles of beautiful coastline, from the border with Dover down to the Kent-Sussex border near Camber. It is little wonder that Folkstone and Hythe is a tourist hotspot, a creative and digital magnet, and a place to find solitude and peace. We also have a large windfarm in Romney Marsh, which was opened by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), in 2009. It was a privilege to visit it with him earlier this month, following his announcement about dropping the ban on onshore wind.

What I love most about Folkstone and Hythe is the strong community spirit, and the drive of so many to make the area the best that it can be. There is Romney Marsh community hub, where the elderly can socialise and access services, and Hythe youth centre supports young people in the area. The New Folkestone Society and the Sandgate Society are safeguarding the heritage

of the area, and Napier Friends welcomes, integrates and assimilates refugees who come to our area from all over the world.

Sadly, however, far too many people in Folkstone and Hythe are being left behind. Some of the most deprived areas in Kent are in my constituency, and the system has been holding communities back. Opportunities are spread unevenly, sewage pollutes our seas, unaffordable mortgage rates and rents are faced by everyone, and public services just do not work as they are supposed to. Having lived on Folkstone and Hythe's coastline, like many residents I have seen overloaded small boats arriving on our shores—boats organised by organised criminal networks that trade and commodify human beings. On too many occasions than I care to remember, I have joined local residents to remember lives lost in the channel. Indeed, as the Home Secretary reminded us, 90 lives have been lost so far this year.

I am proud to be a Labour MP supporting this transformative Labour Government who will pass the laws we need to turn Britain around and break down barriers to opportunity. The 35 Bills in the King's Speech are just the start of that. As a barrister of 17 years' standing, I particularly welcome the Government's reinstatement of the rule of law, which is the foundation of our constitution and democracy. The Government's decision to treat human smuggling and trafficking as a national security issue is long overdue. I have represented many victims of those criminal gangs, and I know that such are their sophistication and resources, that nothing short of the full force of our national security expertise will do. We must never forget that the victims themselves need justice. I am the son of one of the first Filipinos who migrated to the UK. My mum came here in the 1970s and worked in the NHS, which I think makes me the first person of Filipino heritage to stand in this Chamber. I understand how easy it is for vulnerable people to be exploited by powerful others—Filipinos around the world know that all too well—and we can, and must, break the business model of these sophisticated criminals.

For a corner of east Kent that often feels left out and a long way from Westminster, Labour's devolution plans represent a rare opportunity. Coastal communities, including those all along the south coast, face similar challenges. East Kent has the second highest level of economic output of Kent's five regions, and devolution would open the door to greater powers, and with them a strategy for regional economic growth and solutions to the problems that my constituents face every day with housing, buses, health, skills and work.

The strength of Folkestone and Hythe lies in its people. Every person I spoke to during the general election campaign reinforced my belief that there is so much untapped talent and so much that people have to give, and that with an extra helping hand from the Government the potential of every person can finally be realised. To everyone in Folkstone and Hythe, I say this: I stand here ready to help you, whether you voted for me or not, and I promise to use all the energy, expertise and dedication to be your advocate and your voice, wherever it is needed. My parents' values of compassion and public service run through everything I do, and those are the values that will today, and every day, guide my actions, my decisions and my work in and across this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jim Dickson for his maiden speech.

5.9 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I welcome you to your place. I commend the brilliant speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan). We envy his sea views, but it is great that he and I are part of a group of 12 Kent Labour MPs—up from one before the election—and I am delighted that my speech is likely to be followed shortly by that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), who is also one of our number; it is brilliant to see her here as well. It has been said that when Labour is strong in Kent, we are strong in the country, and I think we are proving that with our presence in Parliament.

I very much welcome the new team of Education Ministers, and particularly their promise of new investment and additional teachers for Kent and Dartford schools. I welcome the priority given to education under this new Government. Investment cannot come soon enough, particularly at a time when Kent county council is looking at reducing the rights of parents of special educational needs pupils. Again, the arrival of a Labour Government could not come soon enough.

I would like to say a very warm thank you to the electors of Dartford for placing their trust in me to represent them. It is truly an honour for me that they have done so. They do not change their Member of Parliament often—there have been as few as eight since 1945—and, needless to say, returning the same MP for many years is a tradition that I strongly approve of and hope to see continue long into the future.

That prompts me to remember the contribution of two of my immediate predecessors as Member of Parliament for Dartford. Gareth Johnson, who represented the constituency for 14 years until the recent election, is a former Dartford grammar school pupil whose commitment to the constituency and its residents cannot be questioned. To his great credit, he has already provided assistance to me as I start in this role. I really do wish him well. I first came to Dartford more than 20 years ago to knock on doors for the constituency's last Labour MP, local GP Howard Stoate, a Member whose commitment to public service above all else is still warmly remembered by residents and whose example I will do my very best to emulate.

Among other things, I have spent many years both as a council leader and more recently as a cabinet member for health in the south-east London local authority of Lambeth, so I stand here as a passionate advocate for better public health and for central and local government action to prevent ill health for all our population. That is why, in addition to the really welcome steps that the new Government are taking to restore the NHS, I am particularly supportive of their decision to retain the Bill proposed by the last Government to prevent all those born after 2009 from starting smoking. In Dartford, nearly 10,000 people—almost 12% of the population—smoke, with resulting health and care costs of more than £24 million a year according to Action on Smoking and Health, and of course, tragically, many early deaths. When it comes to smoking, it is vital that we stop the start.

It has been rightly observed that Dartford has at this election continued another tradition, which is the longest in the country: that of electing an MP of the same party as the Government. I know that Dartford residents are rightly proud of the caniness and common sense that that reveals in their outlook. It is a place where strong values co-exist alongside, thankfully, an openness to change.

It is worth noting that it is nearly 63 years since two former pupils of Wentworth primary school in Dartford bumped into each other on platform 2 of Dartford station and began discussing their shared interest in black American blues music. The sequel to that chance meeting of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards is one of national and global success. It is pleasing to note that, even as we speak, they are touring the United States. So Dartford remains a bellwether constituency and the Rolling Stones are still playing live—you could say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that those are two reasons why we can be confident that the sun will go down tonight and come up tomorrow morning. Their story, and that of Dartford, is not just one of continuity, but one that is very much about embracing new cultures and change.

Dartford is a historic market town that, alongside its beautiful surrounding villages of Darenth, Longfield, New Barn, Joyden's Wood, Greenhithe, Swanscombe, Bean, Stone, Ebbsfleet and Southfleet—I think I got them all in—has an unquestionable place in the story of our country. It is where Henry VIII kept a grand residence, later provided as a home to Anne of Cleves, the wife who I think we can all agree had the good sense to get out early. It is also the location for much of the life's work of Richard Trevithick, father of the steam engine, which powered the UK's 19th-century industrial might; his presence is still commemorated in the Royal Victoria and Bull pub in Dartford. Even in the digital age, paper produced in Dartford, as it has been over the centuries, still sends vital information across the UK and around the world.

Dartford and its people are a true marker of our past and our history. It is also the fastest growing town in the UK, with new residents arriving all the time from a multitude of places, making Dartford more diverse and bringing fresh energy and new ways of thinking to our town. We have a growing and much cherished Hindu community joining our Sikh and Muslim populations, an increasing African-Caribbean population, and a Nigerian and west African heritage community emerging impressively quickly. Many residents have recently arrived from Southwark, Lewisham, Greenwich and across the river in east London, seeking homes that they and their families can just about afford, and bringing their strong cultural influence to bear.

However, action is sorely needed to make the new homes being built in the constituency more affordable and accessible to all. I strongly welcome the Government's plans to address that issue. If the Government can help us set in place the infrastructure in new communities such as Ebbsfleet, including new hospital and GP capacity—our wonderful Darenth Valley hospital is overrun—investment in schools and the better transport that these communities need, as well as addressing the stubborn inequalities still felt by our long-term less affluent residents, Dartford can be a model—the kind of multicultural community that demonstrates just how our country can succeed.

[*Jim Dickson*]

Regrettably, Dartford's roads are frequently gridlocked. A new Thames crossing is needed to cope with the volume of traffic using the Dartford crossing, and to meet the requirements of the growing north Kent economy. Our station at Ebbsfleet must be given back its status as Ebbsfleet International, and cross-channel services should stop there once more. Residents of Swanscombe need action to restore the A226 Galley Hill Road, which is partially collapsed, and to end the nightmare of large vehicles diverting down its narrow streets. For the new communities living on estates run by management companies, reform of leasehold law and stronger regulation of management companies cannot come soon enough.

To complete the picture, we also need Dartford and its Princes Park stadium back in national league south, and looking upwards to where they belong, following last season's relegation to the Isthmian league. I fully appreciate that that may be beyond even your powers, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Darts—alongside Dartford cricket club, one of the oldest in the country, built and started in 1727 and about to have its 300th anniversary, and Dartford Valley community rugby club—are anchors of our community in Dartford, alongside our Orchard theatre, which is suffering from reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and is currently closed, but which we hope to see reopened as soon as possible.

Notwithstanding the need for those improvements, I look forward to being a strong voice in this place for Dartford, and to being a champion for the town, our villages and all our residents.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Steve Witherden to make his maiden speech.

5.19 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I congratulate you on your election to your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulate Eluned Morgan on becoming First Minister of Wales, echoing the sentiment expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) for his speech. It is lovely to listen to someone who is so knowledgeable and passionate about their constituency.

As this is my first time speaking, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessors. I say "predecessors" as my constituency is a 35%-65% split between two former constituencies. First, I pay tribute to Craig Williams for all his excellent work representing the people of Montgomeryshire. Craig was always affable, gentlemanly and respectful towards me and my wife on every occasion we met. On polling day at the count, he conducted himself with decency and dignity at what must have been an extremely difficult time for him and his family. He was a credit to both himself and his family, and that needs to be acknowledged. Secondly, I pay tribute to Simon Baynes, the last ever MP for Clwyd South, which was partitioned four ways. The largest piece, Glyndŵr, and all of south and west Wrexham went into my constituency. I salute Simon's work in bringing Llwyneinion Woods near Rhosllanerchrugog into community ownership.

I grew up in Glyndŵr, but four miles outside the constituency, the pre-1996 Glyndŵr not having identical borders with the current incarnation. I have lived in the

constituency for 15 years, having long put down roots there. Glyndŵr has an incredibly rich industrial heritage. Until relatively recently, Air Products and Monsanto, which straddled the villages of Acrefair and Cefn Mawr, dominated the landscape, the famous Ruabon red-brick dominating many towns and villages within and beyond the boundaries of the constituency. Going back further, I would argue that Chirk is second only to Bournville in the history of chocolate production in the UK. Bersham colliery was the final coalmine to close in north Wales, in 1986. It was also in Bersham, on the River Clywedog, that British ironmaking began in 1670 and smelting iron ore with coke began in 1721.

Montgomeryshire makes up the larger part of the constituency and also has a fantastic history. It was here that Robert Owen, the pre-Marxist socialist, was born in 1771 and died in 1858, in Y Drenewydd, the largest town in my constituency. Montgomeryshire has been at the forefront of environmental and green initiatives. It is the home of the Centre for Alternative Technology, of which my father was a founder member in the 1970s. To this day, Montgomeryshire produces approximately 96% of the power it uses through renewable energy sources. That takes me on to what has to be one of my objectives, and one of the priorities for this Government: the creation of Great British Energy, a publicly owned energy company which will see a vast increase in renewables. What else are my objectives? Until earlier this month, I was a national executive member of the NASUWT teachers' union, so our new deal for working people is incredibly close to my heart. The banning of fire and rehire, and even more so the abolition of zero-hours contracts, are things that this country desperately needs. We will bring them about in the first 100 days of Government.

As a teacher since 2005, and having been a community governor, a parent governor and a teacher governor at multiple schools, plus having held an array of elected teacher trade union roles since 2009, I feel that I am qualified to speak on matters pertaining to education. Our education system is in crisis. The number of teacher vacancies, especially in key subject specialisms, and the number of teachers leaving the profession, is alarming. I thoroughly welcome the Government's proposal to recruit thousands of new teachers, but retention of them once they have qualified is of equal importance, if statistics on teachers leaving the profession within five years of qualifying are anything to go on. The underfunding of schools, especially secondary schools, is a ticking time bomb.

My own experiences made me want to become a teacher. I was statemented dyslexic and dyscalculic at a time when a lot of people did not believe in such terms. I was completely illiterate until the age of 11, and was placed in bottom sets at school for many years and written off by many. I joined the profession to not write off anyone, and to fight for children to believe in themselves and realise their potential. That has gradually become more and more difficult for even the most dedicated teachers, as hungry children cannot realise their potential. This House needs to do everything in its power to ensure that there are no hungry children in the sixth-richest country in the world.

Finally, I thank the House, all the staff and all the political parties for the kindness and support that I have received since the death of my mother a fortnight ago

today. I think that in the final weeks of the short campaign, my mother perhaps did not tell me how ill she was. Even when she was deathly ill, she may have used her unforgettable influence—a three-line Whip of her own—to try to persuade my sisters and father not to tell me just how ill she was. I would have done the same had our roles been reversed. I thought we had weeks, but on 9 July, after Black Rod's summons and during the Speaker's speech, I was called out of the Chamber and told that we had hours. Thanks to the efficiency of the staff in this building, to whom I am eternally grateful, I was able to get straight on a train back to Wales in time, and thanks to the exemplary care of Dr McAndrew, Nurse Kathryn and their colleagues at Wrexham Maelor hospital, I was able to see my mother before she died, not suffering or in distress, to tell her I loved her, and to hold her hand while she passed away.

When nearly everyone thought that Montgomeryshire would remain the only seat in Wales never to have a Labour MP, my mother believed that I would win it. She never gave up on me, just as she never gave up believing, when I was a boy, that I would be able to read one day and to make something of myself. I am glad that she got to see me elected, because I know that it made her very happy—and if it is permissible, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to dedicate this maiden speech to my mother. *Diolch yn fawr.*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Laura Kyrke-Smith to make her maiden speech.

5.27 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to address the House, and I congratulate you on your election to the Chair. I am sure that the House will want to join me in extending our deepest sympathies to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden). I am very sorry and sad to learn of the death of his mother. I congratulate him on a wonderful maiden speech, and on speaking with such passion about our children and the potential of the next generation.

I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, Rob Butler, who I know has great affection for Aylesbury, and who served the constituency with great loyalty and good will. It is a true honour to be here as the new Member of Parliament for Aylesbury. Given that my constituency houses the county town of Buckinghamshire and has returned a long line of Conservative Members to Parliament, as might be expected from that county, I am particularly proud to be here as Aylesbury's first ever Labour MP, and its first female MP.

My constituency is very diverse geographically; it covers the rapidly growing town of Aylesbury, many lovely villages, such as Whitchurch, Wing, Cheddington and Edlesborough, historic woodlands and farmlands, and the Chiltern hills. It also has very diverse communities, with people of Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other faiths, and people of Asian, African and Eastern European heritage, living alongside elderly residents and young people whose families have called my constituency home for many generations. We are an historic constituency, too. Britain's oldest road, the Ridgeway, crosses through to Ivinghoe Beacon; the remains of an iron-age hill fort lie beneath Aylesbury town; and an Aylesbury constituency has existed in some form since 1554. It was from Aylesbury

that John Hampden defended Parliament against Charles I in 1642, and his statue overlooking Market Square in the town centre still celebrates the parliamentary freedom that he championed. Perhaps I will not dwell for too long on our Conservative-leaning political history from then onwards, but I want to highlight three other ways in which history shapes my brilliant constituency today.

First, there is our vibrant culture. Roald Dahl made Buckinghamshire his home, and today we host the Roald Dahl children's gallery at Discover Bucks museum. We are the birthplace of the Paralympic movement, and hosted the first competition for people with spinal injuries in Stoke Mandeville back in 1948. For decades, Aylesbury was home to the iconic Friars nightclub, where acts like Queen and U2 performed. David Bowie's first performance of "Ziggy Stardust" there is now marked in the town by a bronze sculpture, which bursts into song, catching visitors by surprise.

Secondly, my constituency has a history of offering a friendly welcome, including to many evacuees from London in world war two and the exiled Czech Government, who operated out of Old Manor House, between Wingrave and Aston Abbots. You can still see the bus shelter that the Czech President instructed to be built on that road, having taken pity on the local schoolchildren waiting in the rain. We have seen the same welcome to many people who have moved into the constituency in recent decades, and particularly into the many new housing developments in the area.

Thirdly, I want to highlight the inequalities in income and wealth that exist in the constituency. Members of this House may be surprised to hear that Aylesbury has high levels of deprivation. In fact, one in eight children in the town live in poverty, and we have always had a history of people struggling to get by on a low wage in the print and car factories, or as agricultural labourers. I pay tribute to the local food banks and to fantastic charities such as Youth Concern and Aylesbury Homeless Action Group, which make life more manageable for those who are struggling most today, but they should not have to exist.

That takes me to the four points that I will prioritise as the Member for Aylesbury, and to the reason why I wanted to speak in today's debate on education and opportunity. Above all, I want my constituents to feel a sense of opportunity and optimism again. First, I will focus on the desperate need to improve healthcare. We are home to Stoke Mandeville hospital, where my son was born, and its internationally renowned spinal injuries unit. I have the deepest respect for everyone who works in the healthcare sector across the constituency, but we have to make it possible for people to get basic healthcare and to see their GP again, and we have to tackle the awful and pervasive mental health crisis in my constituency and across the country. One of my most brilliant and best friends, Sophie Middlemiss, is not here to witness this moment of great change and opportunity for our country, because she took her own life when her little girl was 10 weeks old. I do not want anyone to suffer from post-natal depression and anxiety in the way that she did, and I will fight to get better help for people in her situation.

Secondly, I will focus on education for our children, and I will fight to ensure that all children, whatever their background and circumstances, get the opportunities that they deserve in life. I am particularly concerned

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

about SEND children—I am pleased to have heard a lot about that in the House today—and their parents, families, carers and teachers, who are not getting anything like the support they deserve. That has to change.

Thirdly, I will help our businesses to thrive. I will support the small businesses that I hope will be part of a revival of Aylesbury town centre. We have to make it a safe and attractive place to spend time again, and we have to make it possible to get in, across and out of town without spending hours in traffic. I will also support the farming businesses in the rural parts of our constituency, within a wider, careful approach to protecting and managing our nature-rich and agricultural lands.

Finally, I come to this job conscious not just of the challenges and the opportunities for my constituency and my country, but of the very challenging moment that we are in globally. Before coming to Parliament I was leading a humanitarian aid agency, and I will continue to be a voice for, and do right by, the most vulnerable people around the world. There are record numbers of people caught up in conflict and crisis, at a time when geopolitical rivalry is on the rise and the global institutions set up after world war two no longer offer the protections that they used to. A strong and principled Britain can make a real difference in the world, and I know this matters to my constituents, most pressingly in their concerns about the awful suffering in Gaza and the suffering of the Israeli hostages and their families.

Let me conclude with one final point. I mentioned that Aylesbury is home to the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery, so I will end with some inspiration from Matilda, perhaps Roald Dahl's finest character—certainly that is my daughter's view. Matilda said:

“Having power is not nearly as important as what you choose to do with it.”

Every day, in this place of power, we all make choices. I will know if I have made the right choices if people in crisis around the world and, most importantly, people struggling in my constituency tell me that I have played my part in making a positive difference to their lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Emily Darlington to make her maiden speech.

5.34 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I welcome you to your role. Can I also say how fantastic it is to have an all-women Deputy Speaker team? Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate on education and opportunity. In it, I would like to pay tribute to my great-grandmother, Emily Jones, who married Thomas Thomas and made sure that her seven children could read. This started our family's journey from the mines of the Welsh valleys to her namesake standing here in the Chamber today. Malala Yousafzai told us:

“One child...one book and one pen can change the world.”

I pay tribute to the other Members who have made their maiden speeches here in the House today. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), it is great that you have Great British Railways, but if you come after Network Rail in Milton Keynes, we will have words.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) that I know what it is like to have those strong Welsh women role models. I give him my condolences, but I am sure his mother would be so proud of him here today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith), one of five Labour MPs now representing Buckinghamshire, shares with me a passion for international development. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) can count me in on her ambition to get 50% of women into this place and I suggest that we have our first meeting in Usk, where I was married.

I am the first MP for the new constituency of Milton Keynes Central. It encompasses half of Milton Keynes North and half of Milton Keynes South, and I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) and for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) will pay tribute to their predecessors, but I would like to wish Ben and Iain luck in their future and thank them for the collegiate way we have always interacted over the years. I would also like to pay tribute to the late Brian White and to Phyllis Starkey, fantastic former Labour MPs for Milton Keynes, and to the late Kevin Wilson, the best MP Milton Keynes never had.

Another former MP for my seat is Robert Maxwell. I have very little in common with him, except that in his maiden speech in 1964 he pleaded against the closure of the Oxford-Bletchley-Cambridge line, which we now know as East West Rail. He was right. He also argued that science, research and technology would be how the UK would become an economic success and how we would improve our NHS. He recognised the challenge of translating those discoveries into products and services, and that challenge remains today. I wonder what he would think of the new town of Milton Keynes, which embraces innovation.

We have robots that deliver our groceries. We are at the forefront of driverless technology. We are at the heart of AI, and of regulation, with the British Standards Institution based in my constituency. We are the home of the Open University, the vision of Harold Wilson and delivered by the fantastic Jennie Lee. It was the first university to do distance learning, with learning and opportunity for all at its heart—a true Labour institution. Milton Keynes college delivers opportunities for young people, but hon. Members might not be aware that it also delivers the biggest education to prisons across our country.

It is innovation that has led to our economic success, but we have also been innovative in our approach to building our city. We are all pioneers. We have all chosen to live in Milton Keynes. We have moved from across the UK or from across the world to build a better life for our families and ourselves. As Members may have realised from my mid-Atlantic accent, I too have moved around many times. I was born just across the river at St Thomas's, then my father and I emigrated to Canada when I was young due to a lack of science funding in the UK. My summers were spent in south Wales, learning about my heritage and learning from the strong women in my family. I moved back 24 years ago to care for my gran, and she would be proud that I am here. I now call Milton Keynes my home with my husband and two children.

Perhaps it is the lack of history in Milton Keynes that allows us to embrace change. We are different by design. We are building a new kind of city and, as we deliver our manifesto commitment to build new towns, we from Milton Keynes have this advice: it is not just about homes, roundabouts, hospitals and schools. It is about communities and green spaces. It is about places of spirituality and worship. It is about places to gather to celebrate and commemorate. It is about places to explore and exercise, and places to reflect and heal. From Campbell Park to the Milton Keynes Rose and the country's first ecumenical church, which hosts the community iftar, Milton Keynes values these spaces.

The cohesion of a city is based on its community, its culture and its people, and it is done by design, not by happenstance. In Milton Keynes, we work hard to celebrate our city by celebrating our diversity. In just the past few weeks, I have had the pleasure to attend the African diaspora festival; Nelson Mandela Day; Art in the Park, organised by Islamic Arts and Culture; MK India Day, which 15,000 people attended; the midsummer festival, celebrating our pagan past; and the Tamil sports day. These events are open to all, in that Milton Keynes spirit, bringing together people from all backgrounds to bind us as Milton Keynes citizens, to learn about the plurality of our ancestry and to celebrate the diversity of our patina, but bound by our British values, which encompass the ideals of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and, most of all, tolerance.

A society is judged by how we treat our most vulnerable, including our children in care—my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) spoke so passionately about his experience—our children with SEND and the growing issue of mental ill health, our refugees, our rough sleepers, our carers, our elderly, our young people at risk of knife crime and all those who suffer from sexual violence and domestic abuse. The previous Government presented these crises as consequences outside their control, but if that were true, why are we here? I am here because I have worked on all these issues in Milton Keynes with colleagues from the amazing city council, which is the only local authority to reduce rough sleeping in the past few years—no one has to sleep rough in Milton Keynes.

Milton Keynes is the first city to state its ambition to become a white ribbon city. There is more youth support to prevent knife crime. Communities, parish councils and groups are delivering food parcels, and we are supporting our children in care with housing and employment. There is new support for unpaid carers, who are our heroes. People have the right to have end-of-life care in their own home, and there is the biggest retrofitting and building of council housing in a generation.

But there are limits to what can be done locally, so I have made my way to Parliament to get the change that Milton Keynes both needs and deserves. On my journey here, I have found that the reputation of this place is at an all-time low. Even worse, it is a place that causes fear for some people because of the divisive language used both here and on the campaign trail.

When a country is divided, it makes it weaker. When arguments lead to violence, it makes our citizens scared. When the rights of one are played against the rights of others, it weakens all of our rights. When we focus on what divides us rather than what we have in common,

we lose good MPs like David Amess and my friend Jo Cox. Let all of us who seek to unite our country focus on the “United” in United Kingdom and the “Great” in Great Britain.

I am only the second Emily ever to be elected to this House and, like the first, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), I will speak my mind. I end my speech with another Emily, Emily Davison, who was never elected but did find herself in a closet in this House. We will be judged by the British people for our deeds, not our words.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Sam Carling to make his maiden speech.

5.44 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to make my first speech in this place today and in a debate on education, a subject that is very important to me. As this is my first contribution, I ought to start by thanking the people of North West Cambridgeshire for electing me to represent them in this House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) on her maiden speech, as well as all the others we have heard today, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), whose speech was very moving; I am sorry to hear of his loss.

I have thoroughly enjoyed hearing maiden speeches from Members on all sides of the House over the past few days, and I am honoured to be part of a clearly very eloquent and passionate intake of new MPs. I look forward to the debates that we will have over the coming years.

My constituency of North West Cambridgeshire has not had a new Member of Parliament in many years, as my predecessor, Shailesh Vara, was elected to represent it in 2005, when I was only three years old. Over that time, he made significant contributions to the work of this House, for example, through campaigning to broaden the age of routine breast cancer screening and, on a local level, fighting for new infrastructure to support residents as new developments continue to come forward across the constituency. He was very kind to me over the election campaign, which was fought fairly and cleanly, and I wish him well for the future.

North West Cambridgeshire is a constituency with an enormous variation of different communities. It has a large urban section in those parts of Peterborough south of the River Nene, such as Fletton, Woodston and Stanground, as well as new areas, such as the Hamptons, which continue to develop. That urban section also contains the former villages of Orton Waterville and Orton Longueville, which grew into one another and expanded when Peterborough was designated as a new town. Despite that growth, the village atmosphere of those areas has been beautifully retained.

My constituency also has a number of semi-urban towns, with Yaxley being the largest and joined by others such as Ramsey. And it has a large number of smaller villages—far too many for me to name now—but I look forward to holding constituency surgeries in as many as possible and engaging with their rich histories as I work to represent and support their communities.

[*Sam Carling*]

North West Cambridgeshire has a very strong military tradition, with one in 20 of my constituents reporting in the 2021 census as having previously served in the armed forces. I am proud to have within my constituency the grounds of RAF Wittering, a station that was extremely active during the battle of Britain in the second world war. I look forward to playing my part to support the causes of those personnel actively serving, as well as the veterans I now represent.

Continuing on the theme of the communities across North West Cambridgeshire, it would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the large farming community that I now represent. I was pleased to meet representatives of that community during the campaign and am thoroughly looking forward to continuing that engagement now. A large proportion of the land in my constituency is used for farming and that plays a significant role in providing food for our country. Our farmers face numerous challenges, from the impact of rural crime to the effects of climate change on crops and livestock, and I am committed to advocating for farmers' needs and supporting sustainable practices. I will be taking part in the National Farmers' Union's new fellowship programme for Members of Parliament to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of the farming industry and the problems it faces, and would strongly encourage other colleagues to do so too.

Now, if I may turn to the subject of today's debate, as I am the youngest Member of this Parliament—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thank Members—it will not surprise many Members to hear that I have not been out of the education system for that long. Indeed, I was in the first cohort of students whose A-level exams were cancelled during the pandemic. In many ways, it was that experience that politicised me.

I grew up in a deprived rural area and was concerned from a young age to see a progressive decline in local high streets, alongside growing problems in public services, notably within schools. When I was in my final year at a rural school, budget cuts forced the closure of its sixth form, leaving me and many others having to find alternative provision at short notice, which was not easy for many, who faced very long journeys indeed to the nearest alternatives. The closure not only disrupted education but fragmented the community, as students were scattered to different institutions, but I never connected those issues to politics and the decisions being made in this place until I saw the direct impact of those decisions on schools during the pandemic. The response to the crisis, the decisions about exams, and the support, or lack thereof, provided to students made it clear to a great many previously disengaged young people that political choices have real and immediate consequences.

We have to work across this House to improve engagement with our democracy, and a large part of that must revolve around rebuilding trust in politics, and getting to a position where we disagree respectfully and work together to make life better for the people we represent. My background is in science—biology in particular—and that has instilled in me the importance of having solid evidence behind the decisions that we make here. We saw during the pandemic that communicating the rationale behind decisions taken by the Government was very

difficult, which highlights why there is such a need to improve how we teach science in schools, and I will champion that.

I intend to use my direct experience of the problems in our schools to contribute to the Government's agenda to revitalise them. Going further, we must deliver a robust skills system as part of facilitating lifelong learning as we seek to break down the barriers to opportunity, as our manifesto outlined. On that front, I pay heed to Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough. While just outside the boundaries of my constituency, it is delivering a huge amount for residents in the communities I represent, as, prior to its delivery, Peterborough was the largest city in our country that lacked a university, as I understand it. I am proud that a Labour combined authority has made expansion and development of that university a real priority, and I look forward to championing that cause in this place. That is a real example of how devolution works. Having served as a councillor and council cabinet member, I hope to be an ally and champion of local government and the insight that councillors and other locally elected representatives have into local communities.

I have highlighted just some of the issues that my constituents in North West Cambridgeshire face, but of course there are so many more that I do not have time to go into. A lack of affordable housing. Insufficient and unreliable public transport. The dental desert that we face in Peterborough, with no adult dental clinics accepting new patients, and people having to travel as far as Stevenage and Kettering. The list goes on, but I will end this speech by reaffirming my commitment to doing all that I can to address these issues, both in my constituency and more broadly, through delivering with colleagues the change that we were elected to bring.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Johanna Baxter to make her maiden speech.

5.52 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on taking your place. I also congratulate all the Members who have made such eloquent maiden speeches this afternoon, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) and for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden)—please accept my sincere condolences for the loss of your mother.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is an honour to stand here as the new representative for Paisley and Renfrewshire South. I thank every person who put their faith in me at the election. The people of Paisley and Renfrewshire South have voted decisively for real change and a Government in their service, and that is what we will deliver. I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the staff of this House for the professionalism and kindness that they have shown to every one of us who is a new MP.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mhairi Black. It cannot have been easy for Mhairi to enter this House as the youngest MP of her time, with the country's press hanging on her every word. I followed her career with interest and, while we disagree profoundly on how we

get there, I have no doubt at all that her desire has always been for a fairer and more equitable country. I wish her well in all her new endeavours, particularly her upcoming debut at the Edinburgh Fringe—though she may need to encourage her colleagues in the Scottish Government to settle their now annual pay dispute with the local government workforce if she is to avoid stepping over the city's rubbish to get there.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lothian East (Mr Alexander), who served my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South with distinction as their MP for 18 years, between 1997 and 2015, before being returned to this House again this year. The help and support that he provided to so many across my constituency was mentioned frequently and fondly at many of the doors on which I knocked during the election campaign. That he has already been appointed as a Minister of State in the Department for Business and Trade in this Government is testament to the talent and experience he brings to our Benches.

Both Mhairi and Douglas leave large shoes for me to fill. I am just glad that that is a metaphor rather than a physical requirement, because it might have been a challenge that eluded me. Madam Deputy Speaker, size is not everything, as I am sure people will appreciate. My constituents did not vote for me on the basis of my height. In the words of one of my constituents when I knocked on their door, "We are voting for you—you're not getting any taller." But no one in this House should mistake my height or size for the scale of my ambition for my constituency.

I am pleased to make my maiden speech in this debate on education and opportunity, because without good education, opportunities are reduced for many and inequalities widen. In doing so, I remember fondly my modern studies teacher, who, almost 30 years ago now, brought a class of working-class kids from the west of Scotland down to London on a bus to show us this mother of all Parliaments and remind us that, whatever our background, this place is as much our place as it is anybody else's. His passion and belief in the power of politics to improve people's lives gave me the confidence to fight for the values that I believe in, and I will forever be grateful to him for that.

My values were shaped by my grandad, Tadeusz Sadowski. He was a Polish migrant who came to Britain and worked down our pits. The loss and trauma that he experienced by the war waged at home led him to seek a better life here and in Scotland. His experiences taught me that no matter their background or birthplace, everyone deserves the opportunity to live a decent life, free from persecution and prejudice. That is why I have spent my entire working life until now in the service of the trade union movement and ordinary working people.

My constituency lies on the west of Scotland, covering the southern portion of the Renfrewshire council area. It includes much of Paisley, Scotland's largest town, the smaller towns of Johnstone and Linwood, and the beautiful villages of Kilbarchan, Elderslie, Lochwinnoch, Howwood and Brookfield, among several other hamlets and farmland spreading across the rolling Renfrewshire hills. It has a proud and rich industrial history: the mills of Paisley, the carpet factory at Elderslie and the establishment of the first machine tool foundry in the world. While the industries people work in may have

changed—many now work in our vital public services and at the nearby Glasgow airport—it remains a place where people work hard and rightly expect to be treated fairly in return.

A fair day's pay for a fair day's work should not be much to ask, but wages have lagged behind costs in recent years. Too many people who are in work have had to claim benefits just to get by, and the number of those claiming unemployment benefits in my constituency is above the Scottish average. For too long, our communities have been failed and forgotten by two Governments—but no more. I am proud of the commitments set out by our new Labour Government to improve people's lives, particularly the commitment to a new deal for working people. Making work pay, ending insecure work and extending employment rights will make a huge difference not just to people's pockets but to the quality of their lives. They will be the biggest transformation of workers' rights in generations, restoring dignity to work and preparing people for the changing world of work.

My constituents have never been afraid of standing up for what they believe in, and neither have I. We are, after all, the birthplace of William Wallace. It is our persistence in the pursuit of equality, opportunity and justice for all that binds us like the threads of the Paisley shawl. It was the spirit of persistence in the pursuit of equality that prompted the early uprising of the weavers who sought recompense for the sma' shot thread—an invisible thread without which the Paisley shawl would fall apart. That industrial dispute was won by the workers, whose story lives long in our memory and continues to inspire us today.

It is persistence in the pursuit of opportunity that brings my constituents together to provide for others, as exemplified by the brilliant work of Thorn Athletic; the community bus service launched by Kilbarchan's John McBarron, who stepped out of retirement to help fellow residents by filling a hole in local transport provision; and the West End Growing Grounds Association, which provides raised beds to help grow food and prevent food poverty in the local community. It was persistence in the pursuit of justice that gave us the infamous Paisley snail, which formed the basis of tort law. These are all ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and they are heroes, every one of them.

My constituents know that good work should provide not simply the bare necessities that people need to live, but the means by which they enjoy a good life—like our famous poet, Robert Tannahill, who knew how to weave threads and verses alternately. St Mirren football club provides huge enjoyment to many people across the constituency, and I hope that the entire House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West (Martin McCluskey), whose constituency includes St Mirren's arch rivals, Greenock Morton, will send its best wishes to the club as it heads to Iceland tomorrow to face Valur FC in the UEFA conference league second qualifying round—its first European tie since 1987.

I know the value of people being able to spend time appreciating the beauty of the natural world. We have the beautiful Gleniffer Braes, with its highland cows, the Clyde Muirshiel regional park, and the tranquillity of the Lochwinnoch RSPB nature reserve, one of the few remaining wetlands in the west of Scotland, where people can watch whooper swans, widgeon, goldeneye

[Johanna Baxter]

and, if they are very lucky, the elaborate displays of the great crested grebe. It would be remiss of me if I did not mention the enrichment provided in everyone's life by the pets of Paisley and Renfrewshire South, many of whom I had the pleasure of meeting on the doorstep during the campaign.

Let me conclude with this message to the voters of Paisley and Renfrewshire South. I will fight for you every day with every fibre of my being. I will work with everybody in the House who has a genuine desire to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in our communities, because one person living in poverty is one person too many, and we must work together to do everything in our power to combat that. JFK once said:

“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

That is the motto to which I held true as a trade union negotiator. We must ensure that we do everything we can to lift people out of poverty and provide good jobs with decent terms and conditions that allow people to thrive, not just survive, because people need bread, but they need roses too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Dr Lauren Sullivan to make her maiden speech.

6.4 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I congratulate you on your new post and wish you very well? I pay tribute to the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter); she may be small, but incredibly mighty things will come from her standing up for her constituency. I offer my deepest sympathies to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), and say to him, “Your mum would be so proud, and you moved many people in this Chamber today.”

I also welcome my new colleagues from Kent, my hon. Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) and for Dartford (Jim Dickson), to their seats in Parliament. They spoke with passion about their constituencies and I look forward to working with each and every one of the Members who have made their maiden speeches today, and Members across the Chamber.

I begin by thanking the residents of my Gravesham constituency for putting their faith in me. I will work to the very best of my abilities to raise their concerns and issues in this House. I also pay tribute to the Member for Gravesham who served before me, Adam Holloway. Adam served the residents of Gravesham for 19 years and he and his office provided much support, advice and guidance to a range of constituents over those many years. I will seek to enhance and build on that work by holding surgeries and having an office in the borough to fulfil my promise of being an accessible MP. We may have disagreed on much, as hon. Members would expect, but, as a former soldier, Adam served his country, and his dedication in this House to those who serve is something I wholeheartedly support and will continue to champion.

Gravesham is a great place, encompassing the towns of Northfleet and Gravesend, which are bound by the River Thames to the north, 20 miles that way. They are surrounded by the beautiful rural villages of Meopham, Higham, Istead Rise, Shorne, Cobham, Sole Street, Luddesdown, Culverstone, Harvel and Vigo. We have a blend of manufacturing and industry close to the river, such as refined metals and paper making, and farming and agriculture.

We are proud to have not only one of Europe's largest—if not the largest—gurdwaras, but two gurdwaras in Gravesham, and I commend and pay tribute to the incredible voluntary work they did before, during and after the covid pandemic. For many communities during covid, we saw a coming together, whether in churches, mosques, temples or other voluntary organisations. We saw the very best of people, and I am proud to represent a diverse constituency of many faiths and cultures.

I recall the recent celebrations of the Windrush generation, whose relatives docked across the river—they cannot get there at the moment because the Tilbury ferry is down, but we are working on that. They have enhanced our borough and they chose Gravesend and Gravesham for their home. One such legendary woman was Sister Ursula Sullivan, also known as Sully, who is known for having birthed and cared for most of the population in my constituency, including my husband.

Gravesham has a rich history dating back to before the Roman settlers. I pay tribute to the Gravesend Historical Society—100 years old today—and to Christoph Bull, Victor Smith, Sandra Soder and many others for documenting our proud history, as has been done since the Domesday Book. One of Gravesend's claims to fame is that it is the final resting place of the native American princess Pocahontas, or Rebecca Rolfe, as she was known later in life. A fictionalised story of her early life was immortalised in a famous Disney animated movie, in which Pocahontas was not only a Disney princess, but a strong female leader. That is a part of Gravesham, and as the first woman MP for Gravesham, I can draw on her for inspiration. However, I can assure the House that, while I admire the strong female role models that Disney provides, such as Mulan, Merida from “Brave” or even Elsa, I am no Disney princess. Certainly nobody in this Chamber would want to hear me sing—so, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will just let it go.

There is so much to admire about Gravesham, but there is also much to admire about Labour's plan for education and opportunity, so I will turn back to the subject of the debate. I welcome the Secretary of State and Ministers to their positions. Having campaigned alongside many of them, I know their passion for all our young people and children.

As well as being a scientist working on neglected tropical diseases under the supervision of regius professor Michael Ferguson at the University of Dundee—particularly African sleeping sickness, or trypanosomiasis, which is transmitted by the tsetse fly—and having worked more recently on malaria with Jean Langhorne at the Francis Crick Institute in London, supported by a brilliant Daphne Jackson fellowship, which returns its fellows to science after a break, I am also a qualified secondary school science teacher. I know full well that lessons should instil the excitement and inspiration needed for young people to choose to pursue a scientific career—one that our nation's growth depends on

—so I welcome the proposed modernisation of the curriculum, and especially the curriculum for life. So many of our young people in Gravesham tell me that they do not feel that the current school curriculum prepares them for life's many challenges.

Although my children attend a great state school, the stress and pressure of the system, and the constant testing even at primary school, is leaving less time for play, creativity and socialisation. At times, our education system seems focused on evidencing for Ofsted's needs rather than on the education and wellbeing of children—especially those with special educational needs. Academic achievement is important, but we must ensure that our young people are included in an education system that leaves them well-rounded and ready for life with practical skills. A fully equipped, statutory, universal and open-access youth work system will be vital to achieve that aim.

I thank the residents of Gravesham, my wonderful campaign team, and my family, who are with me today—and have behaved incredibly well! [*Interruption.*] I would not be here without their love and support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Peter Swallow to make his maiden speech.

6.12 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): It is a privilege and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), who, like me, worked in teaching and the university sector before entering this place. My background is in humanities while hers is in science, and I know that we will both have to resist the urge to tell anyone off for speaking at the back of the class during our time here.

It is the honour of my life to rise and offer my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Bracknell, Crowthorne, Sandhurst and Whitegrove. I am the first ever Labour MP to represent this corner of Berkshire. I offer my thanks to my constituents who have put their trust in me, and in this new Labour Government, to serve them. It is now for me and colleagues on the Labour Benches to deliver the change that we have promised. I take that duty seriously, and although change cannot come overnight, it is time to begin the steady task of building a better future for Bracknell and for the country.

My predecessor, James Sunderland, represented Bracknell through a challenging Parliament dominated by a global pandemic and two major international wars. I pay tribute to the manner in which he served during that difficult period. James was an advocate for the eradication of malaria, a disease that he saw in action while serving overseas in the Army. He was also a champion for special educational needs—a cause that I will be proud to take up as his successor. In his maiden speech, James remarked that

“politics is ultimately about service.”—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 98.]

We disagreed about many things during the election campaign, as Members would expect, but on that we were and are agreed: politics is ultimately about service.

This year is the 75th anniversary of Bracknell being designated a new town. In 1949, after the war, Britain was facing a housing crisis, and a Labour Government established new towns such as Bracknell to address a

burning need for more social housing. I am proud that in 2024, a new Labour Government facing a new housing crisis are again committed to developing the next generation of new towns, in order to build a better future for families struggling to find safe and secure housing. This next generation of new towns would do well to look at the success of Bracknell: a sense of community has been embedded by good town planning; transport links and active travel have been designed into the fabric of the town; and we are home to many national and international businesses, including in the tech and life sciences sectors.

My constituency's long and proud history did not start in 1949. The new town of Bracknell was originally a small market town in the parish of Warfield, some of which lies within the new constituency boundaries. I am also proud to be the MP for Crowthorne, which is a beautiful, peaceful village, yet one that has a long history of automotive innovation. Everyone in this House will have benefited from the new road signs, mini-roundabouts, zebra crossings and speed humps that were designed and tested at the Transport Research Laboratory based in Crowthorne. In the south of my constituency lies the town of Sandhurst. It is, of course, home to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, where British Army officers receive their training. The close relationship between the academy and the town is commemorated every four years with the Sandhurst freedom march, marking Bracknell Forest council's decision in 1997 to grant the freedom of the borough to the academy. I was privileged to attend this year's march, which happened to take place in the middle of the election campaign; it was an important opportunity to pause and honour those who serve.

As I have said, before my election I was a university lecturer, and before that I was a secondary school teacher. I have also been a primary school governor, so I have worked in education at all levels. Given that, it is no surprise that I would be keen to make my maiden speech on a topic that is of great importance to me and to this whole House: that of education. I welcome the Secretary of State for Education's commitment to breaking down the barriers to opportunity for all children, her announcement today of a pause and review of the defunding of technical qualifications, and her laser-like focus on raising standards in early years education. We are lucky to have a number of excellent schools across Bracknell Forest, and as this week is the start of the school holidays, I take this opportunity to thank teachers, teaching assistants and the wider school staff across my constituency for another year of hard work and dedication, and wish them a pleasant summer.

The measures set out by my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary are badly needed in my constituency. Despite their heroic efforts, teachers are finding it harder than ever to offer an excellent education while supporting the increasingly complex mental health needs of their students. Alongside that, there has been growing child poverty and real-terms cuts to funding. Nowhere is education reform more needed than in the area of special educational needs provision; a long-term failure to grapple with SEND has threatened local government finances and has meant, frankly, that we are letting our children down. During the election campaign, I was privileged to get to know a young man called Fred. Fred is 13 years old. He has autism and ADHD, and for the

[Peter Swallow]

past 18 months, he has been out of school because mainstream education is not suitable for him and he is still waiting on a place in a special school. Fred wants to go to school. He wants to learn—he is an inquisitive kid. I know that because Fred helped me with the research for this speech. But because the system is not working, he has been locked out.

Fred is not alone. There are far too many children like him in Bracknell and across the country—so-called ghost children who are missing education because the right support is not in place. This is a national crisis and requires national solutions. I welcome the Secretary of State's acknowledgement of that fact today, since the first step towards solving the problem is admitting that it exists. Let me conclude with this commitment: for as long as I serve in this place, I will do everything I can to fight for better educational opportunities for all, and to speak up for kids like Fred, who just want a chance to learn.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Al Carns to make his maiden speech.

6.19 pm

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on taking up such an important role. We look forward to working with you. Thank you very much for allowing me to vacate the Front Bench and come to the Back Benches to make my maiden speech; I really do appreciate it. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) and for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) for their fantastic maiden speeches. I will try to live up to them and get the third one done okay, but they were really well done, with a fantastic story to tell.

Before I delve into my speech, I thought it would be worthwhile stepping back and taking a look at the position globally. First, I do not know any country in the world that has high education standards and a weak economy, and I would argue, as we sit here in this debate, that better education and having more opportunities relate directly to the economy, and that the two are mutually supporting. Secondly, I would like to say, as Veterans and People Minister in the Ministry of Defence, that the Army is one of the biggest providers of apprenticeships in the UK; there are 13,000 to 14,000 across the whole service—and that is just in the Army, not necessarily across the MOD. I and other ex-military individuals here are testament to the fact that the military provides people with a fantastic opportunity to realise their ambitions.

It is a true privilege to stand before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and an honour to be in this historic place. I am deeply grateful to the constituents of Selly Oak for placing their trust and confidence in me. I will work tirelessly to deliver change for the people of Selly Oak, and indeed this great nation.

It would be remiss of me to stand here without thanking the man who held the seat before me, Steve McCabe. Steve was a devoted public servant and an esteemed MP, a role he held for over 27 impactful years. To name but a few of his achievements, he worked to improve the NHS and social care, and championed

small businesses in our constituency. His legacy in these great halls and in Birmingham Selly Oak will be enduring. I am also personally grateful for his guidance, and indeed his friendship throughout the campaign, which, as I took to knocking on doors, felt very alien to me. I used to joke with him that if he did not know it, it generally was not worth knowing. On the doorstep, people would often chastise me by commenting that it was one in, one out. Indeed, the Scots are slowly taking over.

I would like to outline my heartfelt sympathy for the Army officer involved in the shocking incident outside Brompton barracks in Kent yesterday evening and his family. Our thoughts, collectively, are with them all.

Importantly, I would like to extend my gratitude to the extraordinary and unflagging volunteers in my constituency from all walks of life. Their drive and dedication helped me, and helped our election victory become achievable. The generous spirit with which they committed huge amounts of their personal time genuinely humbled me. I have never seen so many people give up their time to support the cause. It is one of the many reasons why I am really proud to stand here representing Selly Oak constituents, and to drive forward change for them.

I have the privilege of being the MP for Birmingham Selly Oak, which is a constituency rich in working-class heritage. Its historical developments are interwoven with Birmingham's industrial story, but it also blazed its own unique trail in, I would argue, industrial and social relations. The Cadbury family, for example, was not just any family, and theirs was not just any business. That business saw the value in investing in the local workforce by building hundreds of homes, social spaces and schools, not only securing a legacy, but making Selly Oak a far better place to live when times were exceptionally tough. Imagine if big business mirrored even a small fraction of that same spirit, or indeed that self-generated leadership, in today's society.

When walking around knocking on doors and speaking to constituents, I often described Selly Oak as a United Kingdom squeezed into a constituency. We have different cultures, different characters and hundreds of small businesses. We had the Cadbury factory, and we have the Cadbury attraction, which has over 500,000 visitors every year. We have the great Birmingham University, which is so fantastic. We have many NHS workers and teachers, and an abundance of entrepreneurs, micro-breweries and charities. Much to my dismay, when I found out that I was to be a junior Minister, I learned that I could not attend the all-party parliamentary beer group. I can only apologise.

Selly Oak is still developing. I apologise to the rest of the west midlands MPs, but it was no wonder to me that a reputable newspaper named Stirchley, a small part of my constituency, one of the best places to live in the west midlands. We have one of the most stable and diverse populations in the UK, and as I am sure the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is acutely aware, we have the second biggest medical university in the UK, leading hospitals in our backyard, and an upcoming life science facility that makes Selly Oak and Birmingham a centre of gravity for the mission to transform and invest in the NHS, and for championing and harnessing the spirit of this immensely innovative nation.

Selly Oak not only has wonderful leafy suburbs, but is home to one of the biggest council estates in Europe. I look forward to working with the Deputy Prime Minister on the homes and communities agenda to ensure that the regeneration of Druids Heath is in keeping with the indomitable spirit of those who live there. I also want to do everything in my power to deliver on the Chancellor's mission for growth, so that we reduce the requirement for food banks, increase police numbers, support our NHS more effectively, and release the pressure on our education system. There is much to do, but I have complete confidence that Labour Members will be able to do it.

The work of the small army of volunteers—people who stepped in to care for each other when past Governments forgot them—has my deep admiration. They keep so much afloat—no Navy pun intended—supporting Acorns children's hospice, which is one of the biggest in Europe; Oaks and other primary schools, which are the backbone of opportunity throughout our constituency; the Shed in Cotteridge Park; and many social gardens and food banks across the constituency. Their energy, commitment and selflessness is truly remarkable.

What was most noticeable on the campaign was the Brummie culture, and I was amazed and humbled by the willingness to engage, discuss and debate throughout. The constituents of Selly Oak wanted to talk and have a voice. They have the energy, hope and ingenuity to build a better life, and it is our job to help them get there. Selly Oak and countless other places across the nation deserve our respect, our support, and our steady leadership in enacting meaningful and lasting change.

This general election result saw democracy in full swing, which I am deeply proud of, but as many in the House will have witnessed, there is a rise in threatening, malicious and intimidatory behaviour in our politics. Just as the constituents who put us here deserve respect, I commend those on all sides of the House who have put themselves in this place, in difficult circumstances, ready to volunteer, stand up and serve. I salute you all.

In that spirit of service, it was an honour and a great privilege to accept the Prime Minister's offer of the role of Minister for Veterans and People, and to take up the mantle of working not only for the people of Selly Oak as their MP, but for veterans and families who have sacrificed so much for our nation, and who have stood and fought, often in the face of the unimaginable. I will stand with them, as one of them, to deliver the highest duty of care, commensurate with the risk and rigour that we expect from those who have defended, and continue to defend, the nation on the frontline. Achieving that will deepen the effectiveness of our service overall. It was therefore a huge thrill to announce yesterday in Birmingham, in my capacity as Minister, and to share here today that the 2027 Invictus games, which provide opportunity to those who have been wounded in service in any way, shape or form, will be hosted in the great city of Birmingham. What better way to demonstrate the unconquerable soul and unity of our veterans, their families and those serving, and of Birmingham and indeed Great Britain?

I would like to step back and give the House a reflection from my experience over the last 24 years that may be relevant to the rest of the year. After spending the past 24 years in the far corners of this world, fighting to uphold and protect our democratic values, Members cannot imagine—I genuinely mean this—how

humbling it is to participate in this democracy, to go out on the campaign trail, to knock on doors, to vote, and to see the democratic process at work, and now to stand here among this fantastic cohort. I see this election victory not only as a moment for me, or from the perspective of Selly Oak or of all of us; I think it is a moment for all democracies. Our deeds must be as strong as our words. The world has become tougher and far more unstable, with insecurity surrounding us.

As His Majesty alluded to in his speech last week, we live in an increasingly fractious world; one where autocratic regimes seek to erode the universal freedoms that our parents and grandparents fought to protect. I have been on some of those frontlines and seen that at first hand. I can tell the House that there is little doubt in my mind that the tapestry of the international order is fraying, and in some cases now threadbare. The rise of populism and extremism and the assault on values such as the rule of law, self-determination and democracy itself should be of the greatest concern to us all.

I welcome and support the call for a ceasefire in Palestine, and we watch with a wary eye the developments in the Asia-Pacific. Most important though, from my perspective, is acknowledging and countering Russia's despicable and illegal invasion of Ukraine. Russia has not only brought war to Europe, but even questions whether Ukraine has the right to exist and govern itself.

It is worth considering that if four years ago I had stood here on either side of the House and explained that today in Ukraine there would have been 900 Russian casualties by this time, and that by the time hon. Members had had lunch there would have been 500, and perhaps a similar number of Ukrainian casualties, Members would have probably told me that I was a scaremonger, a dramatist or, at worst, a belligerent Scot, but here we are. We have a war on the edge of Europe of a scale and of such devastation that is inconceivable to us. Indeed, it is taking place at such a pace that it is changing the very character of warfare. That is why I welcome the defence review, because the only thing consistent about change is that change is consistent. We must adapt and keep pace with the shifting character of conflict. If not, we risk falling short of our mission and indeed our duty and our responsibility to serve.

In my career, I have never stood idly by and done nothing in dangerous or uncertain times. The United Kingdom has not, either; we lead the way. After fighting for democracy all over the globe for so long, it is a great privilege to be stood here in this great Chamber and carry that fight forward not only on behalf of Selly Oak, defence and our veterans, but on behalf of all the people in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I would like to call the Front-Benchers at 20 minutes to 7. That gives us time to get in John Slinger for his maiden speech.

6.32 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I warmly congratulate you on taking up your position and warmly welcome the Secretary of State and her ministerial team to their positions, too? I express my deepest condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden)

[John Slinger]

for his loss. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) on his sobering and powerful words, and other colleagues across the Chamber on their speeches today.

I start by thanking my family for their love and forbearance in recent months, my Labour and other friends for their support, and the people of Rugby and the villages for giving me the honour of representing my constituency, which has been my home for the last 17 years. As the MP representing the only seat with a sport named after it, I hope that the House will indulge me the occasional rugby analogy.

The rugby ball has been passed to me, notwithstanding a couple of minor mauls during the election campaign, which I overcame. I want to pay tribute to Mark Pawsey, my predecessor, who ran with the ball—literally and metaphorically—as a member of the Commons and Lords rugby team. Mark is an honourable, decent and kind man who served the House with distinction, worked tirelessly for his constituents and promoted the game of rugby internationally. I also put on record my respect for the former Labour Member Andy King, whose distinguished service continues to inspire me.

Rugby is a market town that has grown rapidly in recent years, surrounded by many small villages—too numerous to mention one by one—set in the beautiful Warwickshire countryside. To the north of the constituency is Bulkington, which some say is one of the largest villages in England, although my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) may disagree.

Rugby's population ballooned when the Oxford canal was constructed in the 1770s, and the railway hastened industrialisation. I say to any Front Benchers listening that being on the west coast main line can very much hasten any ministerial visits that they may or may not want to make. [Interruption.] No, stop at Rugby. The confluence of the M1, the M6 and the M45 near Rugby places us firmly in the logistics golden triangle.

Notwithstanding this logistical good fortune, Rugby's potential lies primarily with its people. We have been blessed, and still are, by people who innovate, challenge norms and think creatively. Let us take sport: a plaque at Rugby School records that, in 1823, the legendary local schoolboy William Webb Ellis,

“with a fine disregard for the rules of football, took the ball in his arms and ran with it”.

Although my connection with the game of rugby as a player was, I confess, somewhat underwhelming, I am proud to say that my dad, who is in the Gallery, played for England as a schoolboy.

I will not join the House rugby team, but I might join a reformed House rock band. I am acutely aware of how dangerous such statements can be, given that yesterday I wandered innocently into a meeting of an all-party parliamentary group, and wandered out slightly bewildered as vice-chair. As a classically trained violinist and semi-retired rock musician, I am glad to represent a constituency filled to the brim with talented people. I will bang the drum and strum a chord for them. Rugby was the birthplace of the poet Rupert Brooke, whose words

“That there's some corner of a foreign field that is forever England”

epitomised a quiet, contemplative English patriotism.

We have spawned famous rock bands and musicians, from Spacemen 3 to James Morrison. The creative arts scene is thriving, with fantastic local bands of all genres, an orchestra, dance schools, Rugby theatre for amateur dramatics, galleries and much more. The sporting scene is vibrant, with several rugby football and football teams, and a plethora of clubs in the town and villages, where selfless volunteers offer pretty much every sport to the community.

Rugby also has a proud track record of technological innovation. As hon. Members get on a jet plane this week, they should think of Rugby, as the prototype of the first jet engine was built by Sir Frank Whittle at the British Thomson-Houston works in the town in 1937. At the same site a decade later, a young Hungarian refugee Dennis Gabor invented holography. I live in hope that holographic technology advances so far that, one day, MPs can be beamed into multiple locations, to assist with our busy diaries. Until recently, dozens of giant masts formed part of the world's most powerful radio transmitter. In 1927, the site was instrumental in the first transatlantic telephone call. I believe in maintaining the strongest possible transatlantic alliance, so I am proud that Rugby played its part in deepening the ties between our two great nations.

That pioneering industrial and scientific prowess persists. Today, GE Vernova builds world-leading advanced generators, including for Royal Navy vessels. At Ansty Park we have the Manufacturing Technology Centre, the London Electric Vehicle Company—which makes the electric cabs in which many of us newbies may have been moved around in recent days—and FANUC UK. When I visited the MTC recently with my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and the West Midlands Mayor, it struck me that in order to unleash potential, we need partnership between business, the education and skills sector, local and national Government, trade unions and much more. We met apprentices, beaming with pride at their achievements and in anticipation of a brighter future.

We also need investment, most importantly in education. I am therefore delighted that the King's Speech includes measures to raise standards in education, reform the apprenticeships levy and establish Skills England. Having visited so many of our excellent state secondary schools and the brilliant local college, I am confident that the people of our area will do the modern-day equivalent of inventing a sport, designing an engine or writing an immortal poem.

Rugby is a place that is at ease with itself. We are a very diverse town, and that is unequivocally a huge strength. We learn from one another, celebrate one another's traditions, break down barriers and focus on our common interests, something epitomised by the late Dr James Shera MBE, a mentor of mine who is sadly missed across the constituency.

Our charitable sector is strong. I will take the liberty of mentioning two local charities that inspire me: the Our Jay Foundation, which installs defibrillators; and Back and Forth Mens Mental Health, an issue close to my heart. The churches, temples and faith groups are at the heart of our community. The Street Pastors, who I shadowed on a late night shift, show kindness in action—kindness is a much underrated virtue.

The people of Rugby and the villages are compassionate. They warmly welcomed refugees from Ukraine. I pay tribute to the thriving Rugby Ukrainian community,

its Ukrainian members bravely forging their new lives away from home, and all from the constituency who are helping them. The Benn Partnership's "Meet and Eat" on Fridays, catered for by recent immigrants who not only cook the food but are learning English there, shows our cohesion. Our community invests in our young people, with fabulous youth centres, such as Hill Street and the Bradby Club. There are too many voluntary groups and organisations for me to mention; I simply salute them all.

We thrive more when we work together and when the Government are truly an enabler. I want to put on record my appreciation as a councillor of the work of council officers and all public servants in serving our community in difficult circumstances. I campaigned to become a Labour candidate using the phrase "Together we can". I believe that is the only approach that will truly unleash the potential of the constituency. We now have a brilliantly led Labour council, a Labour MP and a Labour Government committed to empowering places with a strong vision.

I will do all I can to bring together people in this constituency, urban or rural, factory or farm worker, whatever their background, to tackle the problems we face, whether the lack of infrastructure such as GP surgeries, the need for more services at the superb Hospital of St Cross, insufficient affordable and social homes, town centre regeneration or the need to make our streets safer. In doing this, I am inspired by the late, great Ann Clwyd, for whom I worked, and the late, great Frank Field, with whom I worked.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I now have to call the Front Benchers.

6.42 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a real pleasure to have you in the Chair. This is a first time for both of us.

I thank each and every Member for some awesome maiden speeches. I remember, four and a half years ago, how daunting it was. I still wake up today in a cold sweat thinking that I have to redo it. I will start with the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), whose journey to this place is enlightening. This place is better when we bring our life experiences here to create better policy and to ensure that the next generation's lives are better. I think that being honest about our own journeys helps others to feel as though they are part of our great country. One of the pleasures as a Member of Parliament is going into schools and speaking to school kids. I am dyslexic, and when I speak to them I ask, "Does anyone struggle to read or write?"—and I always stick my hand up. If someone like me can do this job, it hopefully gives the children I speak to the confidence to think high.

There are a lot of Members here with an education background. I ask them to please bring that experience to the forefront. Every single Government, of whatever stripe, want to make sure that our children do better. Politics is a team sport. You are all critical friends—I can say that because I am on this side now—but as a former Whip I can also say that your ability to communicate is what differentiates you on the Government Benches from the Opposition: speak to your Whips; feed in your views. None of us wants to create bad laws or regulations.

I say "Well done" to my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), because I thought it was only the other side that made politics a family business. I look forward to her own private Member's Bill, which will be life-changing. I say to the hon. Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) that I am not sure you are allowed to let your child abseil on behalf of Rainbows children's hospice. I know the area well because I have family members from that part of the world, and I look forward to your legal skills being helpful.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Not mine; those of the hon. Lady.

Mr Mohindra: Oh, I am sorry. Excuse me: I am a newbie at this bit.

As for the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), you have some big shoes to fill in replacing my old boss, Michael Gove, but you have started very well. Your experience as a lecturer will be very helpful.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): Not "your"; the hon. Member's.

Mr Mohindra: The hon. Member's experience of being a professor will be very helpful to this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) has significant experience of three separate careers, and I know he will be a strong advocate for his community. I applaud his focus on early years.

I now come to the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince). I was a councillor in the neighbouring area before I came to this place, so I know your patch well. Your experience as a teacher—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member's experience as a teacher will be extremely helpful. He highlighted the important issue of young carers. That is probably below the radar for many of us as constituency Members, and we all need to spend a bit more time focusing on it to ensure that our communities are supported properly.

I now come to the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). I applaud her ambition to have 50:50 in this place. When I speak to my nieces, and indeed my nephew, it is always a disappointment to us that while 51% of our great country consists of women, only about a third of my colleagues are women—although the proportion is probably greater now—and, similarly, many boardrooms throughout the country are still very male-dominated.

The hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) talked about Great British Railways. As my in-laws continually say, Derby remains the centre of the United Kingdom geographically, and I am surprised that neither of the new Derby Members mentioned that. As for the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), his Filipino heritage is a matter of passion and importance. When I was growing up and looking at Parliament TV—well, I didn't really, but let us suppose that I did—this place did not reflect what I thought the country did, and today it does. We are on a journey towards getting better in that regard, and with his help and, hopefully, subsequent general elections and by-elections—and, also hopefully, with a few more Members elected to my side—this place will become truly reflective.

[Mr Mohindra]

The hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) spoke about the Rolling Stones. Music is a strong theme in Parliament; he will figure that out in the bars and the all-party parliamentary groups. His significant experience in local government will be very helpful.

I offer the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) my sincere condolences about his mother. We realise that we are all human. Sharing that personal background with this place humanises us and makes sure that we all have “more in common”. All of us will have had a difficult general election, and I hope that the tone of politics returns to what I thought it was meant to be about 20 years ago, when politicians were held in high esteem. When I speak to individual members of my community, they still seem to consider politicians to be public servants, but unfortunately social media may not always reflect that and unfortunately you will all experience that; so make sure you communicate with colleagues, because they will all be going through it as well.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) spoke about Roald Dahl. I have the poem “If” on my wall at home, and I read it every single day. We have a really rich heritage in our great country, and when Members talk about things that inspire them, it will only inspire the next generation to be inquisitive. I hope that Stoke Mandeville will be improved, because it is a hospital that I will have to use, if and when necessary.

I am conscious of the time and that the Minister will need to say a few words, so I am going to wrap up my comments on maiden speeches. I know that I have not addressed every single one, but I will buy Members a drink at the bar in the next few days, weeks and years. Please do enjoy this job. It is the best job in the world, and you really are life-changing. On that note, I welcome those on the Government Front Bench to what is a phenomenal brief, and I look forward to supporting them where they are changing people’s lives for the better.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

6.50 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Catherine McKinnell): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I warmly welcome you to your place in the Chair, and I warmly welcome the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) to his place. I also welcome the shadow Secretary of State, whom I previously shadowed.

I thank hon. Members who have made contributions to this afternoon’s debate, and pay tribute to those who have made their maiden speeches today. They do themselves and their communities proud. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), the first Member of Filipino heritage to stand in this Chamber; my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), the youngest Member of the House, who spoke about his education, which was fairly recent; my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who has rightly been recognised in this place for his experience; and my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger), who is forgiven for all his rugby analogies after making an excellent speech.

In this House, we come together with a common goal: to give every child the best start in life and equip them with an education that sets them up for their lives. We are the Department for Opportunity at the Department for Education. We are bringing education back to the centre of national life again, and we will work tirelessly to spread opportunity across our country, so that every child can thrive in a school with high and rising standards, and with a broad and rich curriculum that they can enjoy. Like every parent, I want that for my children, and I am so pleased that we have a Labour Government who are ready to deliver it.

I know what a brilliant school and education can mean. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), who made an excellent maiden speech today, I am not one of three Darrens, but I am a Sacred Heart girl, and I am not the only one in this Parliament. The parliamentary Labour party boasts three alumni of my old school, Sacred Heart Catholic high school in Newcastle; my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon) and for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) went there, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), who made an outstanding maiden speech today, also attended a Sacred Heart school. It means that there are now as many state-educated Sacred Heart girls in the House of Commons as there are old Etonian boys—a tangible demonstration of the radical redistribution of opportunities that this Labour Government represent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Johanna Baxter) gave an account of her school trip to Parliament, which reminded me of my own trip at the age of 17, when I got in trouble for sitting down on these Benches. Clearly, such trips work to break down barriers to opportunity.

The journey starts in a child’s early years, when their development and education begin. Under successive Conservative Governments, however, the attainment gap has widened. It is now some years since I served on the Treasury Committee, but I still recall our inquiry into childcare as a part of national infrastructure. It was ground-breaking at the time and acknowledged that childcare is a fundamental service to our economy; it is not a “nice to have”. It is fundamental to allowing parents to work longer hours to provide for their families, and it is fundamental to people’s life chances. That is why this Government will deliver 3,000 more primary school-based nurseries, making them widely accessible to parents and unlocking opportunity for our youngest. In answer to the shadow Secretary of State’s question earlier, that will be delivered in partnership with the sector to ensure that it meets the needs of children and parents.

We know that childcare needs do not end when school starts. When a child moves up to primary school, in England, they will benefit from the roll-out of free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England. This will drive up attainment, improve behaviour and attendance, and enable parents to start work on time and support their families. It will set children up for the day and set them up to achieve, because it is as much about the club as it is about the breakfast. Being in the classroom at the start of the day matters.

Schools have a unique power to open up enormous opportunities for their pupils, with teachers and support staff who make a mark on every child’s life. That includes supporting children with special educational needs

and disabilities to flourish, but across that system we have to acknowledge the many challenges that we face. Our buildings are substandard, our children are too often unhappy in school and our support staff feel underappreciated. We have to do better.

So many Members today have touched on the crisis in support for those with special educational needs and disabilities, including my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who I know has worked tirelessly on this issue for many years, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson), who also spoke passionately today. This Government will help schools to take a community-wide approach to SEND, improving their capability to accommodate pupils in mainstream settings and supporting them to flourish.

Last week, I visited the brilliant Croftway academy in Northumberland. It demonstrates how children of different abilities and needs can have the highest standard of education in a mainstream setting, but we also need to ensure that special schools can cater for those with the most complex needs. For those struggling with the pressures of school life, this Labour Government will fund mental health support in every secondary school and in every community so that they can access support before problems escalate. I know that mental health is a priority for many in this place, as was powerfully described by my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrie-Smith) in her speech.

As shadow Schools Minister, I heard many stories of decisions being taken about our schools that just did not factor in the needs of communities. There was delay that turned to disappointment and frustration. I have seen this in my own constituency with a lack of proper planning causing chaos to school admissions in Gosforth this year, and countless stories of failure are replicated across the country. So under Labour, schools will need to co-operate with their local authority on school admissions, on SEND inclusion and on place planning. No more of the chaos that we have seen over the last few years.

We want children to leave school with the skills and knowledge to set them up for life. That means a broad and balanced curriculum that encourages them to try new things, ask questions, express themselves and be creative while also gaining an excellent foundation in reading, writing and maths. So we are establishing an expert-led review on the curriculum and will collaborate with the sector to allow schools, teachers, parents and students to contribute and to plan ahead.

On the question of removing exemptions for private schools, which has been raised, this change will enable vital investment in more teachers and improved nursery provision. I commend the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), a former maths teacher. While we are delighted that he is in his place, we need to ensure that we have more maths teachers in our state schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) spoke about being a school governor, and we need more of those too. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) gave a powerful testimony to his dear late mother. We share his grief and we share her pride.

Ultimately, education is about preparing children and young people for life and giving them the skills they need to get on, but these opportunities do not end at the

school gates. For too long, post-16 education has been poorly matched to the ambitions of young people and the needs of businesses and employers, allowing talent to go untapped and the economy to flag. That is why, earlier this week, we announced Skills England, a transformative new body to match post-16 education to the needs of the economy. By deploying skills investment strategically, we will bring employment opportunities to the parts of the country where young people need a break and businesses need their skilled labour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) spoke powerfully about his apprenticeship and his passion for ensuring those opportunities for others. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) spoke about the need to not have to leave the place you love to get on in life. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) wants to see a curriculum for life. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak has rightly been recognised, as I mentioned earlier.

All of this work will require a partnership approach. None of the challenges we face can be addressed by one person or one body alone. That is why we are resetting the relationship between Government and the sector. We are listening to professionals. We are learning from best practice. We are working to improve standards across the board. It is also why I want to take this opportunity today to pay tribute to all those who work in our schools, to thank them and to wish them a restful and restorative summer break.

Under this Labour Government, neither a person's place of birth nor the income of their parents will determine what they can achieve, how they find fulfilment, how they discover their skills and talents, or how they grow in confidence, because breaking down the barriers to opportunity is Labour's guiding focus. It is the job of this Government, and it is one that we are committed to delivering.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered education and opportunity.

Business without Debate

ESTIMATES 2024-25

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 55(1) and (3)).

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2025:

(1) further resources not exceeding £463,737,669,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 108, HC 139, HC 568 (Session 2023–24), HC 734 (Session 2023–24), HC 741 (Session 2023–24), HC 750 (Session 2023–24) and HC 777 (Session 2023–24),

(2) further resources not exceeding £103,197,519,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum not exceeding £463,992,280,000 be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolution;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Darren Jones, Tulip Siddiq, Emma Reynolds and James Murray bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

James Murray accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2025; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2024.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 4).

Flood Defences: West Worcestershire

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

7.1 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and what a pleasure you have had in listening to such an excellent array of maiden speeches this afternoon. I thank Mr Speaker for allocating me one of the first Adjournment debates in this new Parliament.

My speech will be more of a reiteration of certain points and less of a novelty, as I was lucky enough to get an Adjournment debate on the same flood defences at the beginning of the last Parliament. During that winter, we suffered not only from coronavirus but from Storms Ciara and Dennis.

I congratulate the floods Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), on her appointment. She and I were colleagues on the Treasury Committee, and I know how passionately and genuinely she cares about flooding issues, so I look forward to working with her.

My constituency is in a part of the world that floods frequently, and we realise that we will flood a lot in West Worcestershire. We have the River Severn running through the middle of the constituency, and the Rivers Avon and Teme flow into the Severn just south of Worcester, so we accept that flooding is a part of nature and part of what we have in West Worcestershire.

In the years that I have been fortunate enough to represent the area in Parliament, and before, I have tried to mitigate some of the problems that arise from being in a very flood-prone part of the world. Last winter, we again saw how difficult it can be when there is a very wet winter. Many local farmers, residents and businesses were very grateful for funding from the flood recovery fund after Storms Babet and Henk.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Rural areas are often the worst impacted by flood damage, yet they are often deemed less of a priority for flood defences than urban areas. Does the hon. Lady agree that the flood defence grant in aid cost-benefit analysis must be reviewed to ensure it sufficiently values agricultural and rural communities?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady highlights something that I have grappled with throughout my time as a Member of Parliament.

I will now move on to the situation in Tenbury Wells in my constituency. Seventeen years ago this month, in the middle of summer, we had the most severe flooding for many, many years. It caused massive damage and misery across West Worcestershire. In fact, it was the right hon. Member for Leeds South (Hilary Benn) who was the Environment Minister at the time. In 2007, he came to see the devastation in Tenbury Wells. It was at that time that I first started to look into these cost-benefit analyses and the formula that the hon. Lady raised. While accepting that, in West Worcestershire, we will flood regularly, I think that there are many things we can do to mitigate the misery of being flooded, and of being flooded regularly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) on being elevated to Deputy Speaker. She is well-respected and her appointment is well-deserved. Everyone in this House is very encouraged to see her in that position.

May I also congratulate the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) on securing this debate? Is she aware that inadequate flood defences mean an increase in homeowners' insurance premiums? That increase has been noted in her constituency, as it has been in mine of Strangford. Does she agree that this House and Government must work on a UK-wide approach to ensure that insurance premiums are not hiked because defences are inadequate?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter. Indeed, it was after the 2007 floods that the idea of a flood reinsurance scheme came about. It was something that was established when the last Government came into power in 2010. It has now become somewhat easier to get insurance, but it does continue to be a challenge, and I shall highlight examples of that in my speech. It will be interesting to hear if the Minister can confirm from the Dispatch Box whether Flood Re will continue to be a priority for the new Government.

I have campaigned successfully for many flood defence schemes in West Worcestershire over the years. We have made real progress. In particular, the two schemes that protect Upton upon Severn have been deployed year in, year out. In fact, they have successfully protected Upton upon Severn from flooding something like 40 times since they were opened in 2013. We have had a bund built along the Defford Road in Pershore; a flood defence gate installed in Kempsey; a gate barrier installed at Uckinghall; a bund built in Powick; and a community scheme is now in place in Callow End, so there has been real progress.

We have seen the cumulative impact of the many millions that have been spent on flood defences across West Worcestershire in the resilience that the communities showed last winter when it was so very wet. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to previous flood Ministers, to the teams at the Environment Agency, to Worcestershire county council and to the regional flood defence committees, which have helped over time to get these flood defence scheme funded and built.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She describes the huge amount of investment that has been going into the River Severn. She has an awful lot of the River Severn in her constituency. She will be aware that, in Bewdley, about £11 million is being spent on flood defences. She may remember that Daniel Kawczynski, the former Member for Shrewsbury, set up an action group because he recognised that the whole of the River Severn is a cohesive watercourse, which requires a lot of effort and attention. That role in the action group is now vacant and I was wondering whether she would be enthusiastic to take it on. She would have a lot of support from all of those Members of Parliament representing constituents on what used to be the blue River Severn, which is now, I think, a bit red and orange in places.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I thought my hon. Friend was making a good pitch to take on that role himself, and I would certainly support him in that. None the less, he is right: all of us who live along the Severn catchment and the rivers that flow into the Severn have a responsibility to work together to make sure that we make progress.

With the very wet weather that we had this winter, we discovered that some of the roads that we accept will close once or twice a year are now closing more frequently. I have asked for an analysis from both our county council and the Environment Agency to explore the projections of the frequency with which those closures might happen. I am looking to find a solution to the situation with the Hanley Road outside Upton upon Severn and also the historic Eckington bridge, where the floodplain is also flooding more frequently. We need to see whether we need solutions to these infrastructure challenges over the decades to come.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On the impact on local people, I wonder whether the hon. Member is, like me, very concerned about the proposals of the Conservative-run Newcastle-under-Lyme borough council to build on Keele golf course? Many of my constituents are very concerned indeed about the potential impact of flooding that may come with such development. Does she agree that, when it comes to building, councils have to factor in the climate and our natural world?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I think the hon. Member needs to have a word with his Deputy Prime Minister about that. He and I may share some concerns about the ability of Whitehall to determine where concrete is poured across our country.

Let me turn to two schemes that are still not built. They were the subject of my Adjournment debate back in 2020. I think that we can make progress in this Parliament on the Tenbury Wells and Severn Stoke flood defence schemes. I would like today's Minister to be the Minister who sees those schemes completed. Tenbury Wells is the most beautiful town, but it was built on a floodplain centuries ago, so protecting it is a very complicated project that comprises flood gates, bunds and walls. After my Adjournment debate in 2020, to my delight a funded scheme was agreed, with £4.9 million allocated to move it forward. On top of that, last year I secured another £2.5 million from the frequently flooded communities fund, because inflation had taken its toll and construction costs had spiralled. We are now in a situation where some of those millions have been spent on consultants and advisers, but the flood defence scheme itself is still stuck on the drawing board and has not yet gone to planning. I ask the Minister for an update on that.

Severn Stoke—the clue is in the name—is another community that sits on a floodplain. The village, its popular pub, its church, and the busy A38 road are frequently flooded. In fact, the village hall had to be pulled down because the parish could no longer afford to insure the property. The church is now struggling with insurance. In the last Parliament, I was pleased to win funding for that scheme as well, including from the frequently flooded communities fund, and arranged the transport of local topsoil to the place free of charge, but I would now also describe that scheme as stalled. In fact, there is a forlorn pile of topsoil in Severn Stoke

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

that sat there while the village flooded again last winter. Will the Minister tell me how we can get both schemes moving again and, importantly, how we can get them finished?

In April, I had a very helpful meeting with the Environment Agency chief executive Philip Duffy and the Environment Agency team. I had another one scheduled for June, but of course the general election intervened. I ask the Minister whether we can reschedule that meeting at the earliest moment, to identify how to unblock the two schemes. I know that the last Government were on track to spend over £5 billion on flood defences over the spending review period.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech, and making a very strong case for why we need to invest in flood defence schemes. Under the last Conservative Administration, we increased the amount of investment in flood defence schemes from £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion over the next six-year period. Does she agree that the new Government should adhere to those funding increases so that we can ensure that schemes such as the ones for which she is advocating are dealt with and funded?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He points to a fact that I acknowledge: cumulatively, we have become more resilient to flooding in West Worcestershire over the last 14 years, but there are still these two schemes. That was going to be my next question to the Minister: will she confirm that the new Government will continue with the same level of spending that my hon. Friend mentioned? Is there anything that I could do, other than leading debates such as this and meeting with the chief executive of the Environment Agency, that would help locally to unblock any of the issues?

I know that these schemes, particularly the one in Tenbury Wells, are complicated. I just want the Environment Agency to be able to find its way through the obstacles. The local community knows that in order to make the omelette that is the flood defences of Tenbury Wells, a few eggs will need to be broken, with a few road closures at times and potentially some loss of road space down some side roads. I just want to say on behalf of the community that it is prepared to put up with that level of inconvenience and some traffic disruption for a while in order to protect its beautiful town. As can be seen from the other examples in West Worcestershire that I have mentioned, particularly Upton upon Severn, the long-term benefit of protecting the town is immeasurable.

Will the Minister join me in an effort of shared persistence and determination to protect these two communities by finally getting the two schemes built, preferably before the inevitable arrival of the next serious floods? Finally, will she confirm that she will press ahead with the expanded offer of the farming recovery fund? Farmers in my constituency and elsewhere think it is very important that the offer includes those who experienced damage due to extreme rainfall, and not just those who experienced flooded land.

Sarah Dyke: On that point, will the hon. Lady give way?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I have given way once already to the hon. Lady. I am going to allow the Minister to use the remaining time to respond.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Minister, Emma Hardy.

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Thank you and congratulations, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a night of firsts—I am giving my first speech as Minister and we have you here for the first time as Deputy Speaker—but of course we have the continuity of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) being here to intervene in the Adjournment debate. As so many things change, so many things remain the same. Long may that continue.

I am delighted to respond to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), who I hold in high regard and esteem. I enjoyed our time together on the Treasury Committee. I am pleased, in my first debate as Minister, to be able to talk to her about something that we had conversations about before I took this role. I want to state at the beginning that I will be very happy to continue the conversation; I recognise that she requested a meeting and I will be more than happy to follow that up.

The hon. Member alluded to 2007, which we remember very well. She talked about the challenge and the impact in her constituency, and it was the same for me in Hull—absolutely devastating. As she mentioned, people continue to feel the trauma, which has a long-lasting impact not just on the economy and the state of people's property, but on people's mental health. I therefore want to make it abundantly clear that this Government are committed more than ever to protecting communities from flooding. It is one of our top five priorities in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the good news is that the work has already begun.

I want to be as open and honest as possible with the hon. Member, so I have looked in detail at the two schemes that I was aware she would raise tonight. Although I have been informed that the Environment Agency has completed some work since 2007 and progress has been made—I am sure we both want to acknowledge that—these two schemes do seem to be particularly difficult. I recognise that she raised the same issue with the previous Minister. I extend my sympathies to all the communities of West Worcestershire who were affected by the winter flooding, which is an awful thing for anyone to experience. I enjoy and share the hon. Member's persistence. In fact, I believe that this place only works when we have persistent and talented women leading the way, so I am absolutely with her on that.

Let me turn first to the Severn Stoke flood alleviation scheme. I understand that the hon. Member was involved in securing some of the soil required for the embankment. My understanding of the situation is that if the scheme is completed, it will better protect 18 homes and businesses and the Rose and Crown pub, which I have heard good things about, but the difficulty seems to be making sure that the scheme is within the funding envelope that has been allocated. My understanding—I will make a comment on the funding formula—is that the benefits of the

scheme, as assessed, cannot be greater than the cost of delivering the scheme. The funding envelope that has been allocated is based on the benefit that is meant to be given, so the scheme has to be delivered within that envelope, even though payment in kind has been received, in terms of the provision of the soil. That is the difficulty with that particular scheme. The good news is that the Environment Agency is still working on finding a contractor; it is still going out there and talking to organisations that could deliver the scheme within the budget available.

The hon. Member mentioned the role that she could play. She has knowledge and experience of businesses in the area, and that might be one avenue to explore with contractors, who would learn the benefits that they would bring to the city and how they would be celebrated. We would need to make sure that they could deliver within the funding that is provided. That is the particular difficulty, as I understand it. I recognise the frustration that the hon. Member expressed. There can be nothing more frustrating than, to use her words, a forlorn pile of soil sitting there doing nothing. I share her frustration, and I hope that we can find the contractor that is needed.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that many flood schemes have not been completed, including a number in my constituency of Carlisle, as a direct result of the economic chaos created by the previous Government, which has forced the Environment Agency to cancel a quarter of the planned schemes?

Emma Hardy: It is great to see my hon. Friend in the Chamber. She is right. The economic chaos that we face, and which continued as we changed Government, Prime Ministers and Chancellors, did not provide the stability needed to get on with these schemes and deliver them. The change that people required has now taken place, and we have stability and new Ministers—hopefully, I am not going anywhere quickly—so I hope we can get on and deliver. I hope that my hon. Friend will be persistent in pursuing this issue.

I had a careful look at the Tenbury Wells scheme mentioned by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire and how complicated the measure would be. As she said, it would potentially involve people having to move house and, at times, parts of their garden being removed and roads being closed. I understand that the necessary consultation has been undertaken with residents, in the detail needed. Nobody wants a scheme that will be expensive and disruptive, or that does not perform as expected. Anything put in place must also be in keeping with that beautiful part of the country. As a result, design costs have increased repeatedly. There is always the difficulty that we want something that is as good as possible at ensuring flood alleviation, designed in the best possible way, in keeping with the character of the town and that causes minimum disruption.

My understanding of the situation is that the scheme has become much more expensive as time has gone on; that is something that we might want to discuss in more detail when we meet. It is important that we get it right, and that it is affordable, given the amount of money that has been allocated. I am happy to take forward that conversation. I would not want to be the Minister for delivering something that residents would not want to have in their community.

As the hon. Member will know from the National Audit Office report, “Resilience to flooding”, which was published last November, we have inherited a floods capital programme that faces extreme delivery challenges. As has been mentioned, the NAO cites a number of projects that have not gone through, partly because they could not be delivered within the timeframe, partly because of inflation, and partly because of covid and other challenges in government. That has had an impact, so I am reviewing absolutely everything that is going on in the Environment Agency and looking at all the schemes. I want to update hon. Members on all that as quickly as possible, and if anyone wishes to see me about individual schemes, they are more than welcome to do so.

Mark Garnier: I congratulate the Minister on her new job; she is doing a fantastic job so far and saying all the things that I, as a neighbour of this scheme, want to hear. She talked about reviewing the project, and I think we would all agree that there is no harm in that, but it is probably worth bringing up my experience just down the river from Tenbury Wells in Bewdley, where flood defence schemes are being put in place very successfully, and are working well for the town and the community. However, one issue keeps coming up: the disruption caused by having to switch to one-way traffic on the bridge results in a slight drop-off in trade in the town.

It is very early days for the Minister, but as part of the review, it might be helpful to reassure traders. Perhaps her Department could look at not necessarily financial compensation, but something that could help businesses that struggle with cash flow during lean periods because of the works, in order to get them through. Ultimately, we will get far better economic value from a town that has flood defences, because it will not flood any more, but in the interim, this issue is problematic. I ask her respectfully to have a look at that in her review, so that we can help traders to get over the hump—that difficult moment—of the flood defence works.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, and I recognise the difficulty that these works cause to businesses. That goes to the point that I made to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire: the design has to be right, and works have to be done in conjunction with the community. That is why works sometimes become more expensive. However, I will take away the point the hon. Gentleman makes.

On the funding formula, I said many times in opposition that I was keen to look under the bonnet, and now I am delighted to get that chance for a detailed look at exactly how things work. That is something I am reviewing. As is always the case, pulling one lever can have unintended consequences elsewhere, so I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not giving the details of exactly which levers I intend to pull. However, I am actively gaining a clear and transparent understanding of how the funding works, who the winners and losers are under the formula that we have, and our priorities.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), I referred to insurance premiums. If we sort the flooding out, insurance premiums will fall and there will be less cost. That must be a factor for constituents and their living costs. Is that something the Minister will look at, please?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his second intervention in this Adjournment debate; we are doing well. I have been passionately supportive of the Flood Re scheme, but it is meant to come to an end in 2039, and I am looking at that in real detail. The whole point of the Flood Re scheme was that we would be able to build resilient properties, which would not be reliant on it, but that has not happened—I think we need a level of honesty about that—so I am looking at the Flood Re scheme at the moment. We want to ensure that wherever people live in the United Kingdom, they are able to find affordable insurance for their property. That has to be a priority.

In the last few minutes that I have, I will touch on one of the other big problems we face, which is the maintenance of existing flood defences. We have talked a lot in this debate about the capital building, and the need to build new flood defences, but we have a significant issue with the flood defences that we already have, and it has been exacerbated by the problems we had as a result of the two storms. One of my big concerns is the deterioration over the past few years of some of our key infrastructure. That is another priority for me.

In opposition, I talked about our flood resilience taskforce and what Labour would do, and I am pleased to say that Labour is getting on with this as promised.

We will look to create the taskforce as soon as possible, ahead of the wettest season. The flood resilience taskforce will look at co-ordination across Government and across agencies on the ground, and will work with stakeholders in fire and rescue services, to inform policy and establish national standards. A difficulty I often noticed in opposition was with Government Departments maybe not always working together as one when they should.

To finish, this Government are dedicated to collaborating closely with the Environment Agency and, of course, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire to advance the Severn Stoke and Tenbury Wells schemes in her constituency. More generally, however, this Government commit to works that will ensure that communities throughout England receive the protection that they need, especially as the risk of flooding rises due to climate change. I salute her and every other Member present for their persistence on this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 July 2024

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government changes.

On 10 July the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was renamed the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

I am today announcing the following further changes to the machinery of government.

First, responsibility for the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union, including co-chairing the ministerial structures under the UK's treaties with the European Union, will move from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to the Cabinet Office. This change will allow the Paymaster General as Minister for the Constitution and European Union Relations to drive the Government's European Union agenda, overseeing the existing relationship, and leading the cross-Government work to deepen this relationship

in the future. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office remains responsible for bilateral relationships, Gibraltar negotiations and Europe strategy using the Department's diplomatic expertise.

Secondly, the Office for Veterans' Affairs will move from the Cabinet Office to the Ministry of Defence. This change will enable the Minister for Veterans and People to have complete oversight for the entirety of service life, from training to veteran, working with all Government Departments to deliver for our service personnel.

Thirdly, the Government Digital Service, the Central Digital and Data Office and the Incubator for Artificial Intelligence will move from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. This change will embed the delivery of digital services and levers to drive public and private sector innovation within a single Department. Working closely with the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology will be the digital centre of government.

Fourth, the Government car service will move from the Department for Transport to the Cabinet Office. This change will better align the Government car service with other centrally provided protective security services for Ministers and support end-to-end provision of executive protective security.

The four additional machinery of government changes outlined above will take effect immediately.

[HCWS19]

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