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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 26 July 2024

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Infected Blood Inquiry

9.34 am

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to provide an update on the Government's progress in responding to the infected blood inquiry's report.

I start by reiterating that the inquiry's final report laid bare harrowing aspects of the scandal that make it vital that we provide regular updates on this work. The infected blood scandal is an injustice on an unprecedented scale that spans decades. Thousands of people have died and, sadly, continue to die every week. Lives have been shattered and the voices of victims have been ignored for decades. People have watched their loved ones die and—this is one of the most chilling facts that the inquiry brought to light—children were used as objects of research. It is hard to conceive of the scale of the damage done and the incredible suffering of all those impacted.

On 20 May, the country bore witness to the devastating findings of the infected blood inquiry's report. It was a national moment, a profound moment of shame for the British state, and a moment of long-overdue recognition for the victims and their loved ones. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister, in his former role as Leader of the Opposition, acknowledged that

“suffering was caused by wrongdoing, delay and systemic failure” by all parties

“across the board, compounded by institutional defensiveness.” —[*Official Report*, 20 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 667.]

The former Prime Minister issued an apology on behalf of the state for the devastating impact that the use of infected blood and infected blood products has had on countless lives. Today, on behalf of this Government, I reiterate that deep and heartfelt sorry. First, let me reassure the House that the Government are committed to acting on the findings of the infected blood inquiry report to ensure swift resolution. We are also committed to working cross-party, and will work with others to deliver the compensation scheme and get final payments to victims as soon as possible. It is vital that we shine a penetrating light on the lessons that must be learned, and that includes paying comprehensive compensation to those infected and affected by the infected blood scandal.

I would like to thank hon. Members who have played prominent roles in pushing the work to this point. The Minister of State, Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), has always been—and I know will continue to be—a powerful advocate

for this cause. Her work in pushing forward the cause and representing the voice of those infected and affected was unquestionably pivotal to our reaching this point. I also thank my predecessor as Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). As I said yesterday in Cabinet Office questions, I am grateful for his work in the lead-up to the announcement of the compensation scheme, and for his collegiate approach. I hope that we can continue to work together on this important issue.

The scale of the horror that was uncovered by Sir Brian Langstaff's report almost defies belief. One of the issues that the report brought to light is the importance of addressing the unacceptable culture of defensiveness in the public sector. We must make sure that people's reputations and protecting institutions are never put above public service. This Government will bring forward legislation to place a duty of candour on public servants and authorities to make sure that this kind of behaviour cannot happen again. That legislation must be the catalyst for a changed culture in the public sector by improving transparency and accountability. It will address the culture of defensiveness and help ensure that the lack of candour uncovered in the infected blood scandal—and, indeed, in too many other instances, such as Hillsborough and Horizon—is not repeated.

We recognise that as well as delivering institutional change, we must provide financial redress to people whose life has been irreversibly and tragically changed as a result of the infected blood scandal. One of the most powerful conclusions in the inquiry's report is that an apology is meaningful only if it is accompanied by action, and it is now my responsibility to carry forward this action. I hope to lead that work not only with the support of this House, but with sensitivity and respect towards the people who have been so unfairly affected by this scandal. After all that has happened, listening to the voice of victims is crucial, and I will endeavour to work closely with the infected blood community as we progress this work.

I would also like to update the House on the progress being made in establishing the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 legally created the authority on 24 May, and since that point, the interim chief executive David Foley has been working closely with Sir Robert Francis KC, the interim chair, to set up the compensation service. It is, frankly, no small task. The Cabinet Office is supporting the organisation as it recruits and sets up a service that is easy to access and simple to use. The authority will provide regular updates to the infected blood community and all others interested in its work.

Let me turn to compensation. On 21 May, I welcomed the former Administration's announcement on compensation. There is an urgent need to get money to people in the most timely way possible. On 24 June, further interim payments of £210,000 were made to beneficiaries of the infected blood support schemes living with infections, bringing the total paid in compensation to victims to more than £1 billion. However, we recognise that this is not enough, given that many others have also been waiting for far too long.

The Cabinet Office is working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, the devolved Governments and the administrators of the existing infected blood support schemes to establish the process

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

for making interim payments of £100,000 to the estates of deceased people who were infected with contaminated blood or blood products, and whose deaths have not yet been recognised. Work is progressing to ensure that these payments are made as soon as we are able to. I am pleased to confirm to the House today that applications for these payments will open in October, and we will set out further details in due course.

There is also the matter of the final compensation scheme. We are committed to delivering this work quickly. We are also committed to getting it right. The proposed compensation scheme was published on gov.uk on 21 May, and we are committed, as I indicated yesterday to the shadow Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury, to making regulations to establish the scheme by 24 August, as we are obliged to by the Victims and Prisoners Act. However, we also recognise the importance of building support and trust among those who will access the scheme. Sir Robert Francis undertook an engagement exercise in June at the former Government's request, with the support of all parties. The exercise engaged those who have been most impacted by the scandal on the content of the compensation scheme. I have been engaging with Sir Robert to hear his advice following his meetings with members of the infected blood community. I am considering his advice carefully, with a view to publishing both his report and the Government's position on it in advance of 24 August.

Finally, I reassure the House that there will be an opportunity to fully debate the content of the inquiry's final report. I am conscious that given the timing of the recent election, there has not yet been time for right hon. and hon. Members to do so. It is essential, in my view, that Members of this House have enough time to digest and debate the devastating findings of the report. The Government are considering Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations, and we will provide an update to Parliament by the end of the year on the progress that we are making on responding to the inquiry's recommendations, as Sir Brian recommended in the report.

The infected blood scandal is one of the gravest injustices this country has seen. I want to end by paying tribute to the courage and determination of the victims of this scandal—those infected and those affected who fought so hard for justice. At every debate on this issue, we remember that they are at the centre of all this. It is for them that we must come together to restore the sense that this is a country that can rectify injustice. They deserve nothing less. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

9.46 am

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on your elevation. I thank the Paymaster General for his statement, and thank him very much for the customarily early sight of his statement this morning.

The findings of the infected blood inquiry remain a shameful moment for the British state. First of all, I reiterate our apologies to all those whose lives have been changed as a result of this appalling tragedy, which

never should have happened. On 20 May 2024, the day of the inquiry's final report, the then Prime Minister confirmed that the Government would pay comprehensive compensation to those who have been affected and infected, as quickly as possible.

Before the election was called, on 22 May, I took a number of steps to ensure that interim compensation of £210,000 would be paid as quickly as possible to those registered with existing infected blood support schemes, as well as those who registered with the support scheme before the final scheme became operational, and to the estates of those who passed away between then and payments being made. I am delighted that the Paymaster General this morning confirmed that over £1 billion has now been paid during the run-up to the general election.

The legislation passed on 24 May established the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to administer the compensation scheme, and appointed Sir Robert Francis as the interim chair. Sir Robert had previously led the infected blood compensation framework study, and I understand from engagement with senior officials right up till the day of the general election that he undertook a meaningful series of engagement meetings, as the right hon. Gentleman confirmed, with representatives of the infected and affected communities during the purdah period.

We also accepted the then Opposition's call for regulations to set up the scheme to be made within three months of the legislation receiving Royal Assent. We asked for an update to be provided to the House within 25 sitting days of the inquiry's final report being published. I believe that the statement this morning honours that. I welcome the fact that the new Government have continued to prioritise this issue, and to keep the House and, of course, the victims and their families updated on progress. However, there remain questions, and matters on which I think the infected and affected blood communities would, respectfully, expect me to challenge the Government.

Will the Paymaster General confirm that the debate that I promised after the Whitsun recess could be scheduled for September? That would give Members a reasonable amount of time over the recess to study this considerable report. Will he reiterate my commitment to respond to Sir Brian's recommendations one by one, as quickly as possible, within a comprehensive response to the report?

I am grateful today that the Paymaster General is considering the advice from Sir Robert's engagement with the infected blood community in June. I hope that he will not just consider it, but decide to publish it in advance of the 24 August deadline for making regulations. In my modest experience, any regulations laid would be open to misinterpretation unless the Government set out Sir Robert's considered reflections on the engagement exercise that he supervised and his considered judgment on what changes, if any, to qualifying criteria and parameters may be required to ensure that the scheme has maximum credibility. I believe that the Paymaster General's new ministerial colleague, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), would also advise him that maximum early transparency will yield maximum understanding and acceptance of the path forward.

I am anxious that the guarded optimism I heard during my 18 meetings with representatives from 40 groups in May will be sustained, and that the good will generated on the path the delivery will not be squandered. I

give my commitment this morning that I will seek to support the Paymaster General as he completes the delicate process of finalising regulations by building on the engagement exercises and the invaluable work of Sir Jonathan Montgomery and his expert team.

On wider matters, can the Paymaster General confirm that the £1 billion he referred to represents the completion of the 90-day interim compensation commitment, or indicate to the House what quantum is outstanding and confirm that that will be paid within the 90 days that I set out on 21 May? It is critical that Sir Brian's forensic assessment of culpability across the medical, civil service and ministerial domains is properly addressed as part of the Government's evolving thinking on legislation on the duty of candour. While recognising that this is ultimately a matter for this House, it would be good if the Paymaster General could define what role the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee could play in scrutinising the Government's progress.

Following my statement on 21 May, the Paymaster General referred to potential criminal charges and asked me to ensure that all relevant evidence would be made available for consideration by the prosecuting authorities. Will he update the House now on whether he is in a position to be able to do so? I also ask him to reiterate my acknowledgement of the call for memorialisation and to say whether he will appropriately frame the commitment the Government will make to the recommendations by the end of 2024, as I committed to do.

Finally, I wish the Paymaster General every success in this delicate work. I believe that he is well supported by an excellent team of civil servants to complete this work, and he will have my full support as he operationalises the legislation that the previous Government passed on 24 May.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the characteristically collegiate way in which he approached his perfectly reasonable questions. I shall deal with them one by one.

I will certainly push for the debate to be scheduled as soon as possible. It is really important that across the House we are able to comprehensively consider not just the recommendations, but the level and scale of the criticisms that have been made. Yes, the Government will respond one by one to the 12 recommendations made by Sir Brian Langstaff. In relation to Sir Robert Francis, I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the need for transparency. I certainly undertake to publish those findings and that report ahead of the regulation to operationalise the scheme being laid by 24 August.

In relation to the right hon. Member's point about the 90 days, my understanding is that the payments were completed on 24 June, which is within that 90-day period, but there will be, as I announced in my statement, additional interim payments to the estates of infected people and that process will begin from October.

With regard to parliamentary scrutiny, I welcome the scrutiny that there rightly will be on this, whether it is by PACAC or, indeed, by the House more generally. I certainly undertake, as the right hon. Gentleman did, to ensure that all relevant information is provided to the prosecuting authorities as they see fit for any action that needs to be taken against specific individuals.

Finally, in respect of memorialisation, Sir Brian Langstaff set out that there should be memorials in the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and also a specific memorial to those children who were sent to Treloar's for protection, but who ended up in the hideous situation of being experimented on when they were at their most vulnerable. I look forward to taking forward the process, as the right hon. Gentleman committed to do, of ensuring that we do have appropriate memorialisation, which is crucial to recognising the scale of what happened.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): May I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your elevation to your position?

I welcome the Minister's statement this morning, but can he say a little more about how the compensation authority will arrive at its decisions? There is concern that advisers have undue influence on the Cabinet Office and that the voices of those who have been infected and affected are not being heard sufficiently in this process. There are concerns about the compensation process and whether that will be in addition to, or conflated with, support payments; the non-payment of exemplary or punitive damages; the lack of recognition of the impact of illegal experimentation or the knowing use of contaminated blood products; and the payments that will be made to estates where people have died. The people who really should be scrutinising this are those who have been infected and affected, so will the Minister commit to involving them in the compensation authority, so that they can have confidence in the decisions that are being made?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his questions. First, may I say that, of course, the voice of victims should be absolutely central to this. I thank Sir Robert Francis for the work that he did in the general election purdah period to ensure that that is the case. I will consider very carefully the recommendations that Sir Robert makes on the basis of that engagement and hearing the voice of the victims.

I want to deal with one other point that my hon. Friend raised, which was to do with the future of the infected blood support schemes. I understand that there has been concern about this. The current proposal is that no immediate changes will be made to the infected blood support schemes. Payments will continue to be made at the same level until 31 March next year, and they will not be deducted from any compensation awards.

From 1 April next year, people who receive the England infected blood support scheme payments will continue to receive them until such time that their case is assessed under the new scheme by the Infected Blood Compensation Authority. Once assessed under the scheme, the applicant will be able to choose how to receive their compensation, either as a lump-sum or periodic payment. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks.

I have absolute confidence in Sir Robert Francis to run the Infected Blood Compensation Authority in an entirely appropriate way. I was in the Chamber when his appointment as the interim chair was announced, and it was welcomed warmly, as I recall, from the Public Gallery by the infected blood community.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair following your election, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Paymaster General for early sight of his statement, and I welcome the tone and the cross-party approach that have been taken on this serious issue.

Victims of the infected blood scandal and their families have been waiting for decades to see justice. As we know, tragically, thousands have died without ever receiving compensation. The report of the inquiry into the scandal chaired by Sir Brian Langstaff laid bare the suffering inflicted, the cover-ups and the systemic failures across the British state. Not only did the state fail to help the victims, but in many cases people were lied to, treated with contempt and outright dismissed.

Now we have the evidence, and we have heard and read the most personal and courageous testimonies from victims. One of my constituents in North East Fife was a participant in the inquiry, and I have met others in the constituency. It is imperative that every one of us works across the aisle to deliver this effective and just compensation scheme.

We welcome the work by Sir Robert Francis and David Foley in setting up the IBCA. It is clear that transparency is vital in establishing trust between the IBCA and the infected blood community, so I am pleased to hear that the IBCA met with the community over the election period, but I would be grateful for more detail from the Paymaster General about what the ongoing work with the community will look like.

Not only do we have a duty to support the victims and their families with a fair compensation settlement, but, in order to create a lasting solution, we must ensure that the state cannot let such scandals happen again. Therefore, I am glad that the Paymaster General agrees that we need to adopt a duty of candour for public officials to ensure that victims are never treated in this manner again. Given that we have so many inquiries ongoing, can he give more detail on when the legislation on candour that he referred to will be brought forward?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for those questions, and I look forward to working with her on this issue on a cross-party basis throughout the next few months and, I suspect, for quite a bit longer. I really do echo her point about the need for cross-party working.

The hon. Lady made a very fair point about the need to establish trust between the victims and the compensation body; that will be vital. She also asked me to say a little more about the voice of victims being heard. It will be for the Government to consider Sir Robert Francis's recommendations, which follow on from his extensive engagement with victims and victims' groups during the purdah period. As I said to the shadow Paymaster General a moment or two ago, I agree with him entirely about the need for transparency in the publication of Sir Robert Francis's work and report ahead of 24 August. I will be writing to the victims' groups to ensure that their voice continues to be heard.

The duty of candour stands alongside other measures that we are bringing forward, including the public advocate and ensuring that families who find themselves in the tragic situation that many did with Hillsborough are able to be appropriately represented at inquests. We need to see those measures as a collective package, but we will be bringing them forward as soon as we can.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): My constituents Justine and Rachel Gordon-Smith lost their father six years ago on Wednesday. He suffered from haemophilia and was given infected blood in the 1980s. I welcome today's statement. The current compensation scheme makes provision for children of affected persons only while they are under the age of 18, which does not take into account the long-term impact faced by my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my constituents to discuss this matter and ensure that the scheme supports all affected persons in Edinburgh North and Leith and across the country?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, I think the whole House will have every sympathy with the situation that my hon. Friend's constituents and their family find themselves in. In the scheme, there are of course those who were infected and those who were affected, who include partners, parents, children, siblings and, quite rightly, those who provided care to infected people, because there were often situations where the carers were not necessarily close relatives but none the less provided significant care. If my hon. Friend could please write to me, I can ensure that there is an appropriate ministerial meeting.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I too congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your recent elevation.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, which was very welcome. I echo his words by acknowledging that the infected blood inquiry is one of the greatest scandals of our age. I pay tribute to the victims and their families, who have fought tirelessly to bring matters to this point.

I am glad to hear that the Minister is committed to meeting the 24 August deadline for laying regulations to establish the final compensation scheme, but I am a little disappointed that he did not set out a full timescale for the full operation of the scheme. It would be helpful if he said a little more about that. Will he comment on his commitment to working closely with the Scottish Government on the scheme's implementation in Scotland, to ensure that victims seeking redress face no further delay?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about the scale of the scandal and his appropriate tribute to the victims. On the timescale, as I indicated in my statement, the additional interim payments to the estates of the infected will start from October. As I indicated at questions yesterday in respect of the full scheme, I would expect the final compensation payments to start being paid from the end of this year.

It is my intention to meet the Health Ministers of the devolved Administrations in my native Wales, in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. I am committed to working with the devolved Administrations. As I indicated earlier, they will have a key role to play in the memorialisation process, too.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate you on your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Front Benchers to their roles and thank them for the content and tone of the statement—my constituents will welcome that update.

However, this is not an isolated incident in which the state has failed to protect its citizens. We have had the Horizon Post Office scandal, the Hillsborough families, and the child migration scheme—a matter in which I must declare an interest—for which former Prime Minister Gordon Brown gave a national apology back in 2010. Will the Paymaster General assure me and my constituents that the Government are committed to bringing about the culture change that is so clearly needed, as those scandals show?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, I can give that commitment. I should really emphasise its importance. As I indicated a moment or two ago, we are committed to the introduction of a duty of candour; we are committed to ensuring that families are supported at inquests and inquiries, particularly for situations such as Hillsborough; and we are committed to a public advocate. Those are all really important steps that we need to take. Ultimately, that has to be accompanied by leadership and a change of culture, to move away from what Sir Brian Langstaff described as “institutional defensiveness.” That is absolutely critical.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): As your constituency neighbour, may I congratulate you on your elevation to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker?

I must put on record my sheer admiration for one of my constituents, Clive Smith, who chairs the Haemophilia Society. When I was first elected to this place in 2019, one of my very first constituency meetings was with Clive at his home, to talk specifically about the importance of pushing these matters through the House. I thank the previous and current Government for their collective work to get the House to this position of providing reassurance to those who have been impacted. I also thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) for her work as part of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood.

There are still concerns about how the payments will be made to the estates of those who have died. There is a risk that if such payments are made to the estates, they will be directed away from those who have been most impacted. My understanding is that it is currently expected that the executors of wills will decide how compensation payments are made to family members, and the payments may not go to those who have been most impacted. How will the Paymaster General ensure that the payments get to those who are most impacted?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. I echo his tribute to his constituent Clive Smith for all his remarkable campaigning over many years. In respect of the hon. Gentleman’s second point on the probate process and ensuring that the money actually reaches those it is supposed to reach, the Government are considering how we can best support victims through the probate process. I hope to have further details on that in due course.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Huge congratulations to you on your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) for her dogged work in getting everybody to this point.

I want to raise with the Minister the interesting report that has come out from the National Audit Office this week, which looks at compensation schemes across the piece and makes recommendations to the Cabinet Office. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) said, there have been a number of compensation schemes, but they seem to be ad hoc, and lessons are not always learned about how to deliver them, so victims in the middle get squeezed. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister can tell us that he will be considering that and coming out with recommendations in due course.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. She is entirely right that we need to learn lessons from previous compensation schemes, where they have gone well, and, frankly, where they have gone not so well—where, after looking at and reflecting upon them, we see that the proportion of money that we wanted to go to victims did not quite make it. I certainly give the reassurance that we are looking at those previous schemes and trying to learn best practice from them.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Congratulations on your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This statement is welcome in my constituency, where it is estimated that between 80 and 100 people were infected with HIV and approximately 26,800 were infected with hepatitis C after a blood transfusion. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the campaigners who have fought so hard to move this campaign and search for justice forward for those victims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I certainly join my hon. Friend in doing that. As we speak today, we really should recognise that it took decades—a frankly unacceptable length of time—for people to achieve justice in this scandal. Not only did we have that profound moment when Sir Brian Langstaff announced the inquiry’s report, but it is so important that we now take the time that is necessary to learn the lessons for the future.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for this update. He mentioned that one of the crucial points in this scandal is the fact that children were identified because of their genetic condition. Would my right hon. Friend explain how that issue will be looked at? How on earth can we compensate children who were identified at a very young age? Many of them have since died. They need substantial compensation and much more support than I think they are currently getting.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend refers to one of the most chilling aspects of this scandal. There is no varnishing this; the reality is that children with haemophilia went to an institution—Treloar’s school—for protection. The school was set up in such a way that it was meant to give reassurance to parents that their children’s condition would be appropriately cared for, but they were actually used for medical experimentation. It is absolutely shameful and appalling. Of course my hon. Friend is right about appropriate compensation, but it is also vital that, as we go through Sir Brian Langstaff’s 12 recommendations, we put in place procedures, standards and structures so that something like that can never happen again.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Last week in my constituency I met Mike and Diana Blake, who told me the harrowing story of their son Stuart. Stuart was infected by contaminated blood, and was then infected with HIV and hepatitis C—he was just six years old. Stuart lived and suffered, and passed away aged 27 in 2006. The torment of the Blake family has been compounded by the fact that they have not received the full compensation that I know everybody in this House believes they are due. I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement from the Dispatch Box, setting out the intention to move forward with compensation for bereaved families such as the Blake family. I would be grateful if he could say a little more about that process.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am sure the whole House sends its sympathies to the Blake family on the loss of their son Stuart in such appalling, tragic circumstances. As I indicated a moment or two ago, I do not think any of us can conceive of the grief of losing a child in those circumstances, but Stuart's parents are clearly people who are affected—they are exactly the kind of people whom the scheme has in mind. Whether they are partners, parents, children, siblings or those who provided care, it is absolutely critical that the compensation body recognises their suffering.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I would like to talk about Linda, one of my constituents, who sadly lost her husband Bill Dumbelton because of the infected blood scandal. He contracted HIV and hepatitis C, and lost his job when he told his employer that he had HIV. He had no life insurance—he was unable to get life insurance at that time because of his HIV status—so Linda had to pick up the pieces and deal with all the financial problems when he died. Can the Paymaster General please update the House on how the scheme will be used to compensate those affected by the scandal, including spouses such as Linda? Are the Government still aiming to make those final compensation payments by the end of the year?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are looking to make and start those compensation payments by the end of the year. Again, I am sure the whole House offers its sympathies to Linda on the loss of her husband. My hon. Friend highlights another problem when she speaks about the fact that Linda's late partner could not secure life insurance at that time. Another aspect of this scandal was that the people who were both infected and affected were, in decades past, unable to access the support that they should have been able to access.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate you on your elevation, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Paymaster General for his statement. Can he update the House as to what measures are being put in place to learn the lessons of this scandal, including on the indefensible time it has taken to put it right and on improving mechanisms for whistleblowing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises a really important question. First and foremost, we need to consider very carefully the 12 recommendations that Sir Brian Langstaff has made. The Government will respond to them as requested in the timeline that Sir Brian

mentioned in the report. In addition, we need to introduce the duty of candour and the public advocate, to support families at inquests and inquiries, and above all—in relation to my hon. Friend's point about whistleblowers—to lead a change that moves away from the culture of defensiveness and towards one of putting the public interest first.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I welcome you to your new place, Madam Deputy Speaker—congratulations. I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement today, and for the swift actions of this Government in starting to resolve this situation. As we have heard, there have been far too many scandals over recent years, such as Hillsborough, Horizon, this infected blood scandal and the women against state pension inequality. Does the Minister agree that people have to fight far too hard and for far too long to get the recognition and justice they deserve, and that this simply has to change?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hillsborough, Horizon, a number of other past scandals and this one are all severe and awful injustices, but what makes them even worse and compounds them is then having to fight for decades and decades. That is simply unacceptable, and it is one of the things that this Government are determined to change.

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): Like many others in the House, I have constituents who have been deeply impacted by this scandal and will welcome the statement. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we take action not only to deliver the compensation, but to tackle the culture of defensiveness, which we have seen in this scandal and in every other scandal that has emerged? If we do not tackle it now, it is never going to change.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Anyone who reads Sir Brian Langstaff's report will see the emphasis he puts on culture and the chilling nature of what he talks about as institutional defensiveness. That is something we need to change. We will put forward legislative measures that we hope will make a significant difference, but it is also a question of attitudes and culture, and changing that will require leadership.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Can the Paymaster General clarify whether an office for the whistleblower would be an independent office? That would be helpful in progressing the sort of clarity and transparency that he has referred to.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Protection for whistleblowers is important; it is something the Government are considering and keep under constant review.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation. I thank my right hon. Friend for updating the House so quickly after the general election. This issue is one that families in my constituency, and across the country, care about deeply. Will he commit to ensuring that hon. Members are regularly updated as we move toward drawing a line under this dreadful scandal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do give that commitment, and I hope the House will see that the Government have moved swiftly to update Members. It is critical that the whole House gets to have a full debate on Sir Brian Langstaff's report and its recommendations. I certainly commit to keeping the House regularly updated.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation to the Chair. I thank the Paymaster General for his statement and action so far. I was proud to stand on a Labour manifesto promising a duty of candour. After 14 years of broken promises, people in my constituency, as in so many others, have lost trust in politics and public institutions, and cynicism is a toxic consequence of these broken promises. I was so glad to see the duty of candour in the King's Speech, but can the Minister update us on progress on this long-overdue measure?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. He points to one of the deep issues across this debate, and indeed across other scandals such as Horizon and Hillsborough: there is a lack of trust in public institutions. This has happened because it took far too long—decades—for the truth to come to light. The Government are committed to bringing in the duty of candour. It was in the King's Speech alongside the measure to create a public advocate and to support families in inquests. I look forward to that being brought forward as soon as possible.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation to the Chair. I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I pay tribute to the brave campaigners whose lives have been changed in the worst possible way by this scandal, including in my constituency. Many of the campaigners are children of people who have died as a result of their infections, and they have suffered immeasurably. I am pleased to see that there is support for this community across the House. Can the Minister confirm that the voices of the affected children will be included in his ongoing discussions and in the implementation of the recommendations in order to ensure fair and proper compensation and true accountability for this scandal?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We have to listen to the relatives, including the children, of those who have died as a result of this scandal. It is an awful fact that thousands of people have died. Now we must listen to their relatives, who are their voices for today in this process.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Like many Members, I have constituents who have been affected. Indeed, I grew up without a grandmother, due to infected blood. Not only did my constituents in Barnard Castle lose a child, but their other son experienced severe mental health challenges, which are lasting throughout his adult life, as a consequence of the strain that has been placed on the family because of their long struggle for justice. I am grateful for questions about the duty of candour, but will the Minister agree to regularly update the House on the other measures that will bring about culture change? Culture change is difficult, and it is difficult to know if and when it has been achieved. I would be interested to see a regular update on that.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am sure the whole House extends its sympathies to my hon. Friend on the loss of his grandmother as a consequence of this scandal. He is entirely right to highlight the impact that it has had on others: the people we call the affected people as a consequence of this scandal. With regard to the culture of institutional defensiveness, the critical thing is that people do not put protecting individual reputations or the reputation of institutions above what is in the public interest or above the duty of public service. I am not suggesting for a moment that that is an easy thing to lead on, but it is certainly something that this Government are determined to lead on, and of course I undertake to update the House regularly on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call John Slinger to ask the last question.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation to your position. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the public note that all too often in such cases of egregious state failure, prosecutions do not follow? It appears to the public that there is, in some ways, impunity. Compensation is belatedly given; reforms are made; but all too often individuals are not held accountable. That is part of the problem that we are discussing this morning. Will he commit to giving further updates on the steps that may be taken to ensure that individuals are held properly accountable?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Whether individuals are prosecuted is rightly a matter that is independent of Government; that is for the Crown Prosecution Service. What I do undertake to do is ensure that all relevant information is made available to the prosecuting authorities, so that the decision can be an informed decision based on the evidence. I also undertake, as my hon. Friend asks, to keep the House updated on that.

Making Britain a Clean Energy Superpower

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of making Britain a clean energy superpower.

It is a genuine pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and a privilege to open this debate on the Government's plan to make Britain a clean energy superpower. It is also a genuine privilege to have been asked to do the best job in Government—I think the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) would concur—and serve as Energy Minister.

The urgency of the multiple challenges that we face as a country is the reason why this Government are moving at such pace on this mission. First, we have the challenge of energy insecurity and our over-reliance on fossil fuel markets, which was laid bare by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. According to the International Monetary Fund, the soaring inflation that Britain suffered as a result of the energy crisis was far worse than in any other G7 country.

That led to the second challenge, which many of our constituents are still facing: skyrocketing consumer bills, with the default tariff price cap rising by approximately £2,800 in the year after the invasion.

Thirdly, while families continue to face the worst cost of living crisis in a generation, there is still huge demand for good jobs with good wages across every part of the UK, but perhaps particularly in the industrial heartlands that have too often been left behind in both the good and the bad times.

Fourthly, there is the challenge posed by the climate crisis, which grows more and more urgent every day. We are now halfway through the most decisive decade in preventing irreversible damage to our planet. This is our last chance to limit global warming to 1.5° and, frankly, we are way off track.

This Government are determined to address these challenges, but, unlike our predecessors, we do not see them as separate issues pulling us in different directions—a case of either green or growth. Each of these challenges points to the same solution, a green energy future, because investing in clean energy at speed and scale is the only way to deliver energy security and to save families from future energy shocks. It will also create tens of thousands of good, skilled jobs.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions families and energy prices. During the general election campaign, the Labour party and Labour candidates across the country claimed that GB Energy will save the average British household £300 a year. However, the Secretary of State refused to repeat this claim when given the chance last week. There has been quite a lot of confusion in the national media over the past couple of days, with Downing Street saying one thing and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero saying another. Can the Minister now confirm, on the parliamentary record, how much GB Energy will save or cost British bill payers by the time of the next

election? He is absolutely right that all these things are part of Labour's energy plan for the country, so we need to know how much it will cost or save British taxpayers.

Michael Shanks: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, but it takes a bit of brass neck to come here and talk about bringing down bills when the Government he supported for so long saw those bills skyrocket. We have been very clear that bills will come down. We said it throughout the campaign, we said it yesterday and we stand by it, because bills must come down, but this will not happen overnight. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] The Opposition Front Bench make noises now, but they have wasted years. We now need to catch up on this mission. We will catch up, and we will bring down bills.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Michael Shanks: I will make a bit of progress, if that is okay.

We will create thousands of skilled jobs, which, crucially, will also tackle the climate crisis that we have not done enough to tackle in recent years. It is for these reasons that the Prime Minister has made making Britain a clean energy superpower one of his five missions. The Government have a clear long-term plan to deliver that mission by increasing our energy independence, protecting consumers, and delivering good jobs and climate leadership. The outcome of that plan will be the decarbonisation of our power supply by 2030 and an acceleration to net zero across our economy.

To achieve that mission, we need to forge a new path that moves away from these volatile fossil fuel markets. That is why I was so delighted to introduce the Great British Energy Bill to Parliament yesterday. The Bill corrects an anomaly in our energy ownership, in which we have widespread public ownership of energy in this country, just not by us. We have offshore wind farms that are owned by the Governments of Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden, but not our own.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Ealing Southall are incredibly excited by the Minister's plans for Great British Energy, for taking back control of our energy system and for lowering the bills of hard-pressed families, but does he agree that the Conservative party will have confused many of my residents with its support for public ownership of energy infrastructure only by foreign Governments, and not by the British Government? Taking into account his great plans to make this country an energy superpower, does he agree—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Lady for her helpful intervention, and I am very happy to agree with her. There is confusion at the heart of the Conservative party's plans. They have been very happy to hand over key parts of our national infrastructure to foreign Governments, for the profits go to the public in those countries, but they have been ideologically opposed to any suggestion that the British taxpayer should have any stake in those futures. That is something that we will turn around.

Andy McDonald: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Michael Shanks: I will, and I apologise for not doing so earlier.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I welcome him to his position. I think it is clear to everyone that the early advance of the Great British Energy Bill demonstrates the Government's priority, their commitment to driving down carbon emissions and the cost of energy, and their recognition that that can happen only through public ownership and private investment. That is something that the last Government failed to understand. I know that we will debate the Bill's Second Reading after the summer recess, but could my hon. Friend say something about GB Energy having a controlling stake in new energy projects, and support to ensure that the public benefit? Perhaps he might also say something about the vexed issue of energy storage, because that will constitute a huge part of the programme.

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend has raised two important points. To answer the first, GB Energy will invest in a range of projects and will have a key stake in them, delivering a return for the British taxpayer. There will be a range of projects, in some of which we will certainly have the controlling stake, and some of which we might help to get over the line, but in every single project there will be a return for the British taxpayer.

My hon. Friend's second point is vital. I have been in this role for only a couple of weeks, but every meeting I have comes back to this question of connection, storage, and how we make sure that renewables can be delivered throughout periods in which there is electricity demand. Storage will be important, and GB Energy will have a part to play in that, as well as in answering wider questions about grid and network.

Let me return to the point about ownership by foreign countries. British waters are home to one of the largest offshore floating wind farms in the world, Kincardine, off the coast of Aberdeen. It is a good example of the problem with the current model. The foundations were made in Spain, the turbines were installed in the Netherlands, and only then was it towed into British waters. Our view is that British taxpayers should own some of that infrastructure, which is why yesterday the Prime Minister and the Energy Secretary announced an exciting new partnership between GB Energy and the Crown Estate to unleash billions of pounds of investment in clean power.

This partnership will enable two national institutions to work together for the benefit of the British people. As well as building supply chains, GB Energy will develop and own power projects in every part of the United Kingdom—in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It will be capitalised with £8.3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament, money that can be invested in wind, solar, nuclear, tidal and other technologies, and it will deliver profits to the British people, playing a vital role in delivering the new jobs that we need.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Government's plans to ban new oil and gas licences have been criticised by business leaders, unions and community groups throughout Scotland. As a fellow

Scottish Member, will the Minister say whether or not he supports his Government's plans, which it has been said will put up to 90,000 jobs across Scotland at risk?

Michael Shanks: We made it very clear during the election that the future of the North sea is incredibly important, but that future is a transition away from the oil and gas industries that we see at present. The Conservatives also need to recognise that the North sea is a declining basin. We have lost thousands of jobs there over the past decade, and that will continue in the future unless we accelerate our transition in the North sea to the clean energy jobs of the future. It is not good enough to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that this problem does not exist. We need a plan to give people secure, long-term, sustainable jobs for the future, rather than thinking that we can just carry on with business as usual.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The Minister has referred continually to the role of GB Energy, but how will it deliver lower gas prices? Only yesterday one of his colleagues, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, admitted that the price of gas was determined on the international market.

Michael Shanks: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman understands the purpose of GB Energy, but it is not to bring down gas prices; it is to bring down bills. The whole point of GB Energy is to move us away from our over-reliance on gas. If we are not reliant on gas prices, we will remove that risk to bills from the shocks that we receive from the international markets, but we can do that only if we invest in the clean energy of the future.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Does the Minister agree that the energy crisis is a matter not just of supply but of demand, and that the cheapest bill is the one that does not have to be paid because the energy is not being used? Does he intend to announce today ways of tackling the demand side? We could, for example, ensure that all new buildings are built to net zero standards, and announce a timeline for getting to that point as soon as possible. We could also announce a nationwide, street-by-street insulation programme to tackle the need for energy efficiency; that is the cheapest and quickest way to address the energy crisis. If he is not going to make those announcements today, when will they be made?

Michael Shanks: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She has perhaps been reading our manifesto, because I agree with everything she has just said. That is why we are announcing a warm homes agency and looking at energy efficiency across the public and residential sector, and why we will massively upscale that domestic investment. I will come back to her points in more detail later. It is almost as if she knew what I was going to talk about.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): An announcement was made recently about collaboration with the Crown Estate, and how it will work with GB Energy. In Pembrokeshire we have a fantastic opportunity in the form of floating offshore wind. The Crown Estate is undertaking the leasing

[Henry Tufnell]

process for the seabed. Can the Minister assure us that there will be binding commitments to there being local content in the supply chain, and to addressing the skills gap in the region?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend, who has already become a very strong advocate for his constituents. He cornered me in the Library to talk about these issues, and long may he continue to do so. He raises a really important point. The whole point of our partnership with the Crown Estate is that we will be able to look not just at investment in the clean power that we need, but at the supply chain creating good jobs in industrial communities. Our commitment to the British jobs bonus means that we will invest in those jobs in this country, creating the skills for the future.

Finally on GB Energy, as a Scottish MP it would be wrong of me not to say that I am incredibly proud that Great British Energy will be headquartered in Scotland. It is a signal of our commitment to delivering the good jobs that communities need, and to bringing the expertise and skills of Scotland's growing renewables sector to the table as we drive forward towards even more ambitious plans across the whole country. In the driving seat of these ambitions is our new mission control centre, led by the former chief executive of the Climate Change Committee, Chris Stark. Mission control is about bringing together the best minds across Whitehall, but also, crucially, outside of Whitehall, so that we can set the direction, monitor progress and remove all the barriers in the way, whether they relate to the planning grid, supply chains or skills, so that the Government can work with one voice to deliver this plan.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On barriers, one of the key challenges is the capacity of our construction industry. Is my hon. Friend having conversations across Government about how we resolve that issue, so that we can deliver on this crucial agenda of moving towards net zero?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. This transition has to be hand in hand with the industrial strategy that the Government are driving forward. That is why the Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon West (Sarah Jones) is also a Business and Trade Minister; that will bring together work right across Government on the industrial strategy. We also have to look at the skills for the future, and developing the next generation of apprentices and skilled workers, who will be in jobs that will be with us long into the future.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned Scotland, but I would like to mention Wales again, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell). Monmouthshire has plenty of wind and wave opportunities. We have the tidal River Severn, and we also have small tributaries in the Wye valley, such as the Angidy above Tintern. My constituents are really looking forward to benefiting from the community energy projects mentioned in the Bill. When can our community energy projects start bidding into the process?

Michael Shanks: I thought for a moment that my hon. Friend was going to make a bid for GB Energy to be headquartered in Wales, which is one thing that I cannot commit to. She raises a really important point. One of the missions of GB Energy will be around the idea of community-owned power. We have to bring two things together: we want communities to be in the driving seat of much of this in the future, but also to have some sense of ownership of the assets. We also know that some of the smaller generation projects can be the most successful. If we can bring together the benefits of community ownership with smaller-scale generation projects, that would deal with some of the issues regarding the grid and network, because we would not be trying to bring power to communities from far away. There is real appetite for that, and it is some of the early work that GB Energy will do.

The Government have moved quickly on two aspects, one of which is onshore wind. We swept away some of the significant barriers that have held us back for far too long. Within 72 hours of coming into office, we removed the de facto ban on onshore wind in England that meant that just a single objection to a wind turbine prevented it from being built. Onshore wind is quick and cheap to build, and it becomes one of the cheapest sources of power that we have. Under the ban, in place for nearly a decade under the Conservative party, only two onshore wind turbines were built in the whole of England, and the pipeline of projects shrank by nearly 90%. We are now consulting on bringing large onshore projects back into the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime, and we have established an onshore wind taskforce to tackle the depleted pipeline of projects, to help us on our way to doubling onshore wind by the end of the decade.

We also have to speed up the roll-out of solar power. That means not leaving planning decisions languishing on desks for month after month, but getting on with making decisions. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State consented to 1.3 GW of solar, powering the equivalent of 400,000 homes.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister talks of solar farms. In Huntingdon, the proposed East Park Energy solar farm stretches for six miles, from Great Staughton to across the constituency boundary, and is, at 1,800 acres, larger than Gatwick airport. Local residents have grave concerns about the scale of that development. What commitment will he make to our rural communities that they will have a say over the Labour Government allowing large solar farms to be built in local areas, given the detrimental impact on them?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman is right to represent his constituents, of course, and we will not in any way remove the ability of communities to be part of the consultation process and the planning system, but the issue is that this has not been happening for so long. We need to move forward with some of this infrastructure. We want to look at the benefit that communities will get from it—a range of options are being looked at—but at some point we need national recognition that some infrastructure is necessary and nationally significant. Some communities will have to host that infrastructure, and there should be benefits for them to doing so;

it does not mean that we should stop doing these things. The days of the Government passing the buck to a future generation to fix the issues are gone. We need to tackle the crisis, and that means that we will build projects in communities—with consultation, of course—because nationally significant projects will have to go ahead if we want to reach our targets by 2030.

In one week, more solar capacity was delivered by this Government than through all previous solar projects consented to by the Department and its predecessors combined. We have reconvened the solar taskforce to explore what else Government and industry can do to help us to treble solar power by 2030.

Underpinning a renewables-based system will be a baseload of nuclear power. We want to see Hinkley Point C operational this decade, with extensions to the currently operating fleet, and we are also supporting the development of new sites such as Sizewell C. Meanwhile, Great British Nuclear is continuing to drive forward the competition for small modular reactors, with bids currently being evaluated by the Department.

There has been much debate about the role the North sea will play and what a just transition will look like. The reality, as I mentioned earlier, is that the North sea is a mature basin with declining reserves. Figures from the Office for National Statistics suggest that the number of direct jobs supported by the oil and gas industry has already fallen by more than a third since 2014.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Regarding the potential closure of the Grangemouth refinery, the Just Transition Commission recently said that the UK Government have taken positive steps in working collaboratively with the Scottish Government. There is no doubt that we are behind schedule because of the previous Government's inaction. Will my hon. Friend provide an update on when the Grangemouth future industry board leadership forum will next meet?

Michael Shanks: Again, I thank my hon. Friend not just for his intervention, but for all the work he has done before and since his election. He has been a dedicated campaigner on this issue and has raised it a number of times with me and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend's point about collaboration is incredibly important. We have reset our relations with the devolved Administrations across the country. In particular, on Grangemouth, we have been working hard with the Scottish Government to find a solution. That has been a far more helpful set of interventions than we had from the previous Government. For example, on Project Willow, we have committed to joint funding with the Scottish Government to drive forward to find a solution. We are leaving no stone unturned to secure an industrial future for the Grangemouth site, and I know that my hon. Friend will continue to campaign on the issue.

The future of the North sea more generally depends on having a plan for the industries of the future, whether that is carbon capture and storage, hydrogen or, indeed, renewables. The just transition is critical and it is something I take incredibly seriously, so we will work with North sea communities to develop a credible long-term plan. That work will be supported by a British jobs bonus to incentivise developers to build their supply chains here in the UK and to create good jobs in our industrial

heartlands and coastal communities. We will make sure that our offshore workers are the people who decarbonise our country and deliver our energy independence, and that there is a strong, resilient workforce in the North sea for decades to come.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): My hon. Friend, very importantly, mentioned the role that carbon capture, usage and storage has to play in the decarbonisation of our economy. I am sure he will have seen the latest National Audit Office report on CCUS and will therefore be aware that the Department has increased its reliance on CCUS substantially since this was first mooted. The NAO is clear in its report that uncertainty remains about the funding available for future stages of the CCUS project proposals; that the previous Government were behind in agreeing support for track 1; and that future progress on the programme is dependent on reaching financial investment decisions for at least some of the track 1 projects very swiftly. Will he give us an update—if not now, at some point later—on how this essential part of the programme will be handled?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The Department is reviewing the NAO report at the moment. This area will need investment, but we also need a concerted effort to understand what some of the barriers are. It is very clear that carbon capture and storage will be a critical part of the North sea infrastructure in the future, so we are taking those issues very seriously.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I very much welcome much of what the Minister has said in this announcement, including on the need for a just transition for those working in the oil and gas sector. However, before the election, the Government made a commitment to end new oil and gas licences, although they are still planning to allow the new Rosebank oil field to open, despite it being connected to a level of carbon emissions that we simply cannot allow in this country. I have two questions about the future of oil and gas. First, will the Minister confirm how and when the ending of new oil and gas licences will happen? Secondly, will the Government reconsider the opening of the disastrous Rosebank oil and gas field?

Michael Shanks: I was hopeful that that was going to be a very positive question, but then we got to a "however". I thank the hon. Lady for her support of what I have said so far. North sea licensing is an important issue. We were clear throughout the election that we do not intend to issue any further licences in the North sea. We are looking at how exactly that will come into force, and a lot of detailed work is going on because we want to give assurances to the industry.

On the question of Rosebank and some of those other fields, we have said that we will not bring to an end any of the licences that are currently in place. I cannot speak on some of the particular issues, because there are, of course, cases before the courts, but we will come back to the House in due course to set out the detail. What is important is that we have said that we do not want any new licences in the North sea and we stand by that commitment. We now want to work out a detailed plan, so that that just transition, to which the hon. Lady rightly referred, can come into effect.

[Michael Shanks]

I wish to finish on the warm homes plan, which the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) mentioned earlier and is so committed to supporting, and we are grateful to her for that. It will invest £13.2 billion in clean heat and energy efficiency over the lifetime of this Parliament, doubling the previously planned investment to upgrade 5 million homes, with grants and low-interest loans to support investment in insulation, low-carbon heating and other home improvements.

The latest Government figures show that 3 million households in England are in fuel poverty. In the private rented sector, the figure is one in four. Shamefully, the last Government abandoned their commitment to get those homes up to decent standards of energy efficiency, but we will not abandon tenants. We will ensure that homes in the private rented sector meet minimum energy standards by 2030, saving renters hundreds of pounds a year.

Ellie Chowns: Will the hon. Member give way?

Michael Shanks: I will carry on, if that is okay.

We will ensure that we have a regulator that fights for consumers as well. We have seen repeated failures in recent years, including the scandal of the forced installation of prepayment meters, poor customer service, and consumers picking up the cost when companies go to the wall. The Government will overhaul the mandate, powers, remit and redress of Ofgem, and we will reduce the burden of standing charges, which have risen by £150 since the start of 2022. We will hold companies to account for wrongdoing and ensure that there is automatic compensation for those failed by their energy supplier.

Finally, the next 18 months in the run-up to COP30 are critical to ramping up and delivering on our global climate commitments. Britain must and will regain its influence on the international stage, so we will work with international partners to raise ambitions, including by leading a clean power alliance that brings together a coalition of countries to accelerate the clean energy transition.

The Government's clean energy mission and our wider energy agenda are critical, not just for that international leadership, but as a route to lower bills, energy security and good, long-term jobs. There is no doubt that we are playing catch-up. If we succeed—and success is vital for all of the reasons that I have outlined—the benefits will be substantial and felt by everyone long into the future. We have wasted no time as a Government getting started in pursuing this mission and I look forward to the contributions of hon. Members across the House, so that together we can deliver this critical agenda for the future of our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

10.57 am

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I say how wonderful it is to see you in the Chair?

I warmly welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks) to his place on the Government Front Bench. I know that he used to be a

schoolteacher, a wonderful profession, and I am sure that his ability to wrangle with unruly children will help him with his work in this place.

I also welcome the continuation of the fine tradition started by my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) of having a Minister from Scotland in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. Scotland has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in our energy security, and I know that the hon. Member will bring his local expertise to the role.

I was surprised to see the title of this debate. Under the Conservative Government, we built more offshore wind than any other country bar China, much of it driven by our contracts for difference scheme, which weaves together the Conservative principles of competition and enterprise. It was under the Conservative Government that we went from having 7% of our electricity coming from renewable energy to almost half today, and it was under the Conservative Government that we kick-started the largest nuclear revival in 70 years, committing to three large-scale nuclear reactors and a whole new fleet of small and advanced modular reactors. That is the record that has led to more than £300 billion being invested in green technology since 2010, creating jobs up and down the country.

The Labour party likes to say that the difference between us is that they are the climate believers and we are the climate deniers, but that is obviously nonsense. It was under the Conservative Government that we became the first country in the G20 to have halved carbon emissions, and we did that while growing the economy. The real difference between us is this: we know that the transition needs to happen, but we recognise that it is now at a stage where we are asking the British public to incur great costs—to change their cars, their homes and many other things. We are way ahead of other countries, and what happens next is not cost free. If it is not managed carefully, if it is driven by ideology rather than the national interest, then it will cost us jobs, hit struggling families and leave us reliant on fuel imports from foreign regimes. This country will succeed in the decades ahead only if we have enough cheap energy to power our nation. It is no use being world-leading at cutting emissions if the cost of our energy goes through the roof and all our businesses leave to set up in countries that still burn coal for 60% of their energy. That would be worse for global emissions and a disaster for the British public.

We will do our bit from the Opposition Benches to hold the Government to account on their plans, but my message to those MPs now sitting on the Government Benches is that it is in their interest to ask these crucial questions too. Throughout the general election campaign, the people now sitting on the Benches behind the Minister told their new constituents that their plans would save them £300 on their energy bills—they said it in hustings, they said it in local media, they said it on their leaflets—but they will have noticed by now that their Ministers are no longer saying that at all.

This is the problem, Madam Deputy Speaker: when you get into government and you speak in the House, you cannot use numbers for which you have no basis. [Interruption.] Labour Members will learn that. But their voters—[Interruption.] They laugh, but their voters will not forget that they made that promise. Their online

clips and social media accounts will not go away. They all know that their leadership have sold them down the river on this one. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State know that those savings cannot be delivered; in fact, their approach to energy will add huge costs to people's bills.

That is not us being evil Tories. It is also the view of the European lead for Mitsubishi Power, who said that the Labour party's plans would require a "huge sacrifice" from Brits; it is the view of the GMB trade union, which has said that the Secretary of State's plans will lead to power cuts and blackouts across the country and come at an enormous cost; and it is the view of the Tony Blair Institute, which says that Labour's plans would raise bills and harm our energy security. People the Labour party normally listens to, from the right to the left of the party, agree with us on this issue.

I urge the hon. Members sitting behind the Minister to take this issue seriously and examine his plans in detail, because it is their promise, which they all made just a few weeks ago, that is being ditched. Come the next election, the first question their voters will ask is not, "Have you met the 2030 target?", but, "What did you do to my energy bills?" If the trade unions, the business leaders and the Conservative party are right that their approach would place huge costs on British households, I can tell them that their constituents will check the parliamentary records and see whether they asked any questions, and they will have to explain why they let these measures pass without challenge.

Dame Meg Hillier: I have to congratulate the right hon. Lady on her chutzpah after 14 years of Conservative government. I have examined closely those net zero policies—the stop-start on feed-in tariffs, the failed competitions for carbon capture and storage, and the stalling of new nuclear. She does not have a record that she should be proud to stand on, and I would have hoped that she would graciously accept and back the innovative plans of the Labour Government.

Claire Coutinho: I have enormous respect for the hon. Lady, but I disagree, particularly on nuclear, because every single operational nuclear power plant in this country was started by Conservatives.

I will offer some suggestions for questions that Labour Members might like to ask. They like to say that renewables are cheap, and they are cheap to operate. After all, wind and sunshine are free. However, if we want to know what a type of power will do to our bills, we have to look at the full system costs. If we race ahead with renewables at the same time as making our gas power stations uninvestable, what will be our back-up when the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow, and how much does that cost the system? New technologies such as small modular nuclear reactors, carbon capture, and batteries of long duration storage are all welcome, but they will not be ready by 2030. What will be used, and how much will it cost?

Will the largest nuclear expansion in 70 years, which I set out, be sacrificed to pay for GB Energy? I know that Ministers barely refer to it any more, but nuclear will be critical to our energy supply in the years ahead. Have they made an assessment of how much their plans will increase our reliance on the current dominant provider of pylons, cables, batteries and solar panels, which is

China? If not, when will they do so? How much private investment into the energy transition will they lose through their plans to tax the North sea into oblivion and ban new oil and gas licences? It is not a coincidence that many integrated energy companies in this country pursue both oil and gas and renewable projects at the same time; it is because they use the same skills, supply chain and workers. Industry says that more than £400 billion is at risk from these plans. GB Energy, at £8 billion, will not touch the sides of replacing that. How much will be lost, and where will the extra money come from? Will it be from central Government through people's taxes, or will it be through the bills and standing charges of all our constituents?

The Government keep claiming—I think the Minister did so today—that GB Energy will turn a profit. I believe he said that "every single project" will make a return, but the slice of the pie that they want to invest in is the slice that even businesses do not think they can make money from. That is what de-risking means. Members should ask on what basis the Secretary of State thinks that he can turn a profit for the British taxpayer when highly experienced energy companies believe that they cannot.

If I were to give one piece of advice to the Minister it would be to do what I did when I first started the job. He should not listen to just one side of the climate lobby who pretend that there are no costs involved in this transition, but go to speak to industry, and to oil and gas workers, and listen to how much those families value secure, well-paid jobs on their doorstep. He should not follow the Secretary of State's path of quoting only from the Climate Change Committee, and never from business or industry. The Minister's job, first and foremost, is to keep bills down and the lights on. He should not forget those last two priorities, or he will find that those on the Benches behind him will turn very quickly.

Barry Gardiner: The right hon. Lady said that Members should not quote only from sources that they feel are friendly to them, so I will not quote from the International Energy Association, but perhaps she might accept a quote from the World Economic Forum, which stated:

"Renewables are now significantly undercutting fossil fuels as the world's cheapest source of energy", according to its report.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but as I said, we have to look at the full system cost. He is very experienced in the energy sector, and he knows as well as I do that the flexible capacity that is used to back up an intermittent system is where the true costs lie. It is fair for Opposition Members to ask for an assessment of what those costs will be, and what they will mean for British bill payers.

The other area where the Government must be honest with the public is about what they are going to build. The Secretary of State's first week in the job saw him approve 4,000 football pitches' worth of solar farms on farmland in Rutland, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. Those projects were not sat on my desk, as the Secretary of State has claimed. I had made a decision to reject Sunnica on the basis of a scathing examining authority report, and I changed policy to protect our best agricultural land. These are not projects that were likely to be approved; these are bad decisions.

[*Claire Coutinho*]

Work was being drawn up to be announced, but the decision had been taken in the case of Sunnica. The Secretary of State will know that from civil servants, who are duty bound to brief him honestly in the Department.

In the case of Mallard Pass, the site has been signed off, 40% of which will be built on our best and most versatile agricultural land, taking no notice of legal planning guidance that says that best agricultural land must be avoided. The Secretary of State and his Ministers will have to justify that, and many more decisions, to his new colleagues, many of whom now represent rural communities and whose constituents will be rightly concerned that they are next.

I wish the new Minister well for his time in the Department. The energy sector is one of the most interesting and important policy briefs affecting this country, and it is in all our interests that he does his job well. However, what the Government have done so far—make claims during the election that they cannot stack up now they are in government—will just not do. They have set out a hard target to decarbonise the grid by 2030, and the Secretary of State stakes his entire political reputation on it, without being honest about the costs. These issues are far too important for Government not to take seriously, and they are far too important for Labour Members to follow the Government blindly without asking questions. They did that during the election with promises to save households £300, and they can no longer stack up those promises just three weeks into Government. I humbly suggest that this is their first lesson of the Parliament: they should not give the Secretary of State a blank cheque again.

11.10 am

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish you all the very best in your new role. It is great to be asked to speak first, so thank you—it is a total shock!

It is an honour to speak in this debate as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend, as we have a thriving offshore sector along the Tyne. To use the words of the Secretary of State, it is time for Britain to build things again, and my constituency is open for business. The UK has a lot to be proud of in its service sector, but it is a catastrophic error to have let manufacturing in this country decline. To cite the title of a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research, manufacturing matters. The conversation around manufacturing and services in this country is often binary—it is one or the other—but the reality for other countries is far from that. Importantly, the IPPR report points out that while we have lost over one third of our manufacturing strength since the 1990s,

“Countries like the US and France, which are similarly services-focussed, have maintained their manufacturing strengths at 1990s levels...Productivity growth in manufacturing was five times higher than in services between 1997 and 2021”.

High productivity means higher wages in good, well-paid jobs—jobs that I want to see in Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend and which match the aspirations of my constituents.

Dame Meg Hillier: Does my hon. Friend agree that these 14 years of Conservative government have been a missed opportunity? We have been shipping in components for wind turbines that could have been manufactured here, for example. We need the industrial revolution that a Labour Government will deliver.

Mary Glendon: Indeed, we certainly need to seize the moment now.

Our determination in this place to raise living standards for working people must be unwavering, and good jobs have their role to play in that. The past 14 years have seen unprecedented levels of wage stagnation. Resolution Foundation data shows that wages returned to pre-financial crisis levels only last year. That decade and a half of lost wage growth has cost the average worker more than £10,500 a year. I thought that there was a one nation tradition among those on the Opposition Benches—an element of the Conservative party that cared about raising living standards for the worst off—but after 14 years the Tories have left us with two nations: one rich, one poor.

As we try to unpick the mess that the Labour Government have inherited, the growth of green industry will be an exciting part of the way forward. I am thrilled that companies seeing the opportunities that Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend has to offer are bringing jobs to the region in the process. The expansion of green hydrogen is just one example of that. During a recent visit, I was amazed at the ambition of GeoPura’s hydrogen project at Siemens Energy in Byker, where it produces hydrogen power units to replace traditional diesel generators. That is an example of the private sector at its best: the sharpest minds coming together to solve some of the biggest problems that we face.

I am proud of the breadth of the energy and offshore sectors in my constituency. That includes the area’s oil and gas industry, which has understandable concerns about its future. We need to think exceptionally carefully about how we shape the sector in the coming years for working people who earn their living from oil and gas.

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady and I have worked together closely on some of these issues. Does she accept, as I do, that the Climate Change Committee says that in 2050, even when we have reached net zero, 25% of our energy will be met by oil and gas? It is so important for our energy security that we produce that oil and gas here in the UK.

Mary Glendon: That is exactly what the companies are telling me and, as a member of the former all-party parliamentary group on oil and gas, I know it has often been said.

The people working in these industries are worried about how their lives will change if they are not able to adapt to new industries. These are important jobs in our communities, where sweeping job losses are still in people’s memories. In Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend, it is not uncommon to speak to people who were affected or know someone who was affected by the de-industrialisation of the 1980s. The closure of the pits, shipyards and factories ruined people’s faith in politics and the economy for a generation.

The offshore energy sector includes independent oil and gas producers, large integrated energy multinationals, renewable energy companies and a supply chain that we need to keep here in the UK. That includes companies

in my constituency, such as Baker Hughes and Peterson, which operate right across the UK and, indeed, the globe. These companies have the vision and ambition, which we all share, to deliver a home-grown energy transition and net zero. Almost £200 billion will potentially be spent over the decade, but the companies investing in nascent opportunities such as floating offshore wind and carbon capture and storage will require the cash flow from a stable and predictable oil and gas business to fund these opportunities.

I welcome Labour's manifesto commitment to manage the North sea in a way that does not jeopardise jobs. However, I would be grateful if the Minister could set out, in practical terms, how he will safeguard important jobs and investment in communities like mine. Britain's potential to become a clean energy superpower is not only exciting but necessary. As the Government accelerate this journey, I urge Ministers to ensure that no one is left behind.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

11.17 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to see you in your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker. I also welcome the new Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), to his place. I look forward to a much more constructive way of working compared with what happened under previous Energy Ministers.

The race to net zero is the major economic opportunity of this century. The green economy must sit at the heart of economic growth, and the Government have work to do to rewrite the damaging narrative of the previous Conservative Government that this is about green versus growth, and to remedy their unforgivable failures that delayed, blocked and even reversed urgent action on climate change. Now is the time to move forward.

The global market for net zero technology is estimated to be \$650 billion a year by 2030. We must use Britain's unique geography and abundant natural resources—wind power and the world's second largest tides—to consolidate our position as a green economic powerhouse. Community benefits, community buy-in and individual economic incentives are critical to making this a reality.

Bath and West Community Energy in my constituency is putting people at the heart of the energy transition and placing the ownership and control of energy in local hands. It raised £11 million from nearly 1,000 members and bondholders, and it has donated £300,000 back to the community for local food production, recycling projects and fuel poverty programmes, yet community energy was not mentioned in the Labour manifesto.

Imagine a future in which people can purchase clean energy directly from a local supply company or co-operative, and in which every pound spent on powering our homes or cars is recycled back into the local community, supporting jobs, funding new facilities and services and contributing to renewable energy infrastructure. That is what community energy is about: ensuring that people everywhere support and benefit from the clean energy transition.

The biggest barrier, especially for smaller projects, is the cost of access to the grid. There are regulatory challenges too, but surely the creation of Great British Energy should include the opportunity to realise the

enormous potential of community energy. It is often local council and grassroots projects that show the greatest ambition to get to net zero. Until now, local authorities have been hampered by a lack of resources and a lack of co-ordination between central and local government. Even within central Government the co-ordination of net zero strategies has often been fragmented. We Liberal Democrats therefore call for a net zero delivery authority, both to devolve decision-making powers and resources to local government, and to co-ordinate all net zero strategies and decision making across central Government Departments.

The last energy crisis, which saw household bills in the UK spiral out of control, was exacerbated by the UK's reliance on fossil fuels. Ironically, the previous Government did very little to accelerate the deployment of renewables. Onshore wind was de facto banned and the targets for the roll-out of solar were regularly missed. Only by fast expanding renewable energy—not just offshore wind—and prioritising a radical home insulation programme can we ensure that families will never again be severely out of pocket.

To fully realise the potential of renewables, the Government must address our outdated national grid. Nearly 100 GW of electricity from offshore wind projects is currently awaiting grid connections. I hear that that is now to be accelerated. That would have been sufficient to power 150 million homes. Some developers have been waiting for up to 13 years.

There is no shortage of capital or will to invest, but delays and rising costs have deterred investors, who see projects in other markets such as mainland Europe as a safer return on investment—I know that the Government are all over this, but I am setting out what the failures of previous Governments were. Significant new infrastructure is required to connect renewable energy from where it is generated to homes and businesses across the country, but the Government must pay close attention to the communities hosting the required infrastructure. I know that is a challenge, but I support the Government in understanding that significant infrastructure cannot be delayed, because we really need to get to net zero.

Mr Holden: I totally agree about the need for new infrastructure. Germany is now pursuing an “underground first” approach to new energy transmission infrastructure, rather than overground pylons. Does the hon. Lady agree with me and other Opposition Members that the UK Government should adopt that approach?

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. We have had a Westminster Hall debate on that very subject, and I absolutely agree. Saving private companies money is no reason not to do something that is better for communities. Half the time it is all about what is affordable, so I agree that there is a very fine balance to be struck, but where other solutions exist than having big pylons that ruin the landscape, National Grid should look at them.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member claimed that Labour's manifesto did not mention community energy. In fact, a statement from Community Energy England says:

“Labour's Local Power Plan would turbocharge community energy and local climate action”.

It is an integral part of the Labour party manifesto.

Wera Hobhouse: I am only mentioning how important community energy is to Liberal Democrats. The Labour manifesto did not seem to have as much emphasis on it, but if we agree on it, hurrah! We all win.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady is being generous in giving way. On the issue of undergrounding power lines, although that may in some cases be necessary for communities, does she not accept, given that it is 10 times the cost, that it is possible to screen the power lines and, in doing so, create biodiversity corridors that can connect biodiversity from one part of the country to another, so that biodiversity can cope with climate change?

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed, there are not easy answers to all these questions. We need to look at the fine balance of cost versus getting community buy-in. There is going to be a transformation of our landscape, and we need to be aware of that. We must also make a good case for why it is urgent that we get to net zero, and in my view that balance in the argument was not struck properly by the previous Government. It is important that communities buy into our big landscape transformation, but it is also important that we do this at an affordable cost for the whole of the UK.

We Liberal Democrats are calling for all new homes to be net zero immediately. It is crazy that we are building homes today that will need upgrading in a few years' time. We are proposing a 10-year emergency upgrade programme for homes, starting with free insulation and heat pumps for those on low incomes. That will not happen without incentivising private landlords and having tougher energy efficiency targets. The private rental sector has the most energy-inefficient homes. Nearly half of households living in these properties are in fuel poverty, but local authorities have taken limited action to enforce minimum energy efficiency standards.

Whether it is tighter regulation on private landlords or further sanctions to ensure that they comply, the Government must put their mind to the private rental sector. We will ensure that energy efficiency for rentals is not brushed under the carpet. That includes incentives for the private rental sector. From discussions in the previous Parliament, I know that the Labour party is relatively reluctant to give money to private landlords, but without incentivising the private rental sector, I do not think that a home insulation programme will happen, particularly for low-income families. I urge the Government to think about that.

As well as landlords, businesses must be incentivised to invest in the green transition. The U-turning of the Conservative Government sparked immense distrust from industry, with the UK chair of Ford warning that her business needs three things from the Government: ambition, commitment and consistency. That is exactly what they must deliver. Years of stop-start investment have left the energy sector reeling. Businesses and trade organisations have long been calling for a detailed plan of action that offers the clarity and certainty that will make the UK an attractive country to invest in. I hope that this Government can finally deliver the certainty that the country so badly needs.

Climate change is happening, but every cloud has a silver lining. Seizing the economic opportunities of net zero will help us spread wealth and opportunity to every

corner of the UK. From insulating homes to providing thousands of new jobs in the energy sector, it is clear that everyone can benefit from a thriving green economy. I look forward to working constructively with the new Government to combat climate change, reduce energy bills and be a leader in the journey to net zero.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Due to the large number of maiden speeches, and the fact that I want to get everybody in, I am now imposing a six-minute time limit—with the exception of maiden speeches. I call Jess Asato.

11.28 am

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation to the Chair.

It is such a great honour to be in this place. My thanks for that must, of course, go to the people of Lowestoft, Beccles and the villages, who put me here. They have placed their faith in me to do what is best for them, to be their voice here in Westminster and to champion them nationally. And they have placed their faith in the Labour party to lead a Government worthy of this great country, to do away with the decline of the past 14 years and work to bring about a brighter future for all.

As I begin my role in making that happen, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Peter Aldous, and his contribution to East Anglia's position as a green energy leader, his defence of our local fishing industry and his campaigning for the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. I thank him for his many years of public service and wish him all the best for his future. I also pay tribute to his predecessor, Bob Blizzard, who very sadly passed away in 2022. He served the people of my constituency for more than 20 years, in local government and in Parliament, and his decades-long fight for a third crossing will see its fruition with the opening of the Gull Wing bridge later this summer.

Finally, I must mention Dame Tessa Jowell, my mentor, who was much loved and is much missed. I would not be in this place if she had not encouraged me to follow my passion for change. In her maiden speech, she implored Members to always

“ask themselves whether what they are deciding is what they would want for themselves or for their families.”—[*Official Report*, 14 May 1992; Vol. 207, c. 791.]

I aim to channel her dedication to public service and, as she called it, the human-sized picture each day that I have the honour of representing the people of Lowestoft in this place.

For me, politics is personal. I grew up near Lowestoft. I was a young carer for my grandmother and managed our precarious life on benefits. As a child, the daily struggle I faced was my normal, but it should not have been, not for any child. That is why I joined the Labour party 27 years ago. I know that when we are bold, we bring real and lasting change, such as the introduction of Sure Start. I know that when we are focused, we can eliminate the barriers to success; we can make people's aspirations more than a dream; we can pull children out of poverty.

I represent the most eastern constituency in the UK, and for many people there it can at times feel as though they are at the end of the line, not just on the railway map but when it comes to political priorities. If politics is not about making those at the periphery central, it is nothing. We have failed if our focus is only on those who are most visible to this place. My job, and the mission of this Government, is simple: to bring those who have not been served well by politics back into the fold, proving to them that politics can work for them; that it can be a force for good. It is a job that I am relishing, and one that I am deeply humbled to be able to do.

Lowestoft is a special place to represent, with incredibly friendly people and our wide, sandy beaches and beautiful broads, which are a real hidden gem that I recommend colleagues visit. We are home to some great sights: for the thrill-seekers, there is Pleasurewood Hills, arguably the UK's best theme park; Africa Alive, for those wanting a taste of safari without leaving the country; fascinating maritime and transport museums; the majestic Somerleyton Hall; and, whatever the weather, Beccles lido. Indeed, Members looking to book their next holiday should contact my office.

However, that beautiful scenery and the really close sense of community we find in places such as mine have been let down. Talking to constituents over the past 18 months, I heard the same issues again and again: people are disgusted by sewage in our rivers and the sea. They are concerned about the lack of flood protection and about coastal erosion, not least because of the devastating impact of the 2013 flood in Lowestoft and the precarious nature of homes on Pakefield cliff threatened by the sea. Most worryingly, they are concerned about feeding their children—a quarter of children in Lowestoft are growing up in deprivation, and 18,000 people have had to turn to Lowestoft food bank in the past year.

One of the most pressing issues for many residents is access to NHS dentistry. We are a serious dental desert—a 2022 investigation found that not a single dental practice in Suffolk was taking on new NHS patients. I met one constituent while canvassing who told me that he had grown so fed up with the pain, with no obvious remedy in sight, that he had pulled his tooth out with a pair of pliers in his garden shed. I think we can all agree that that is not a state of affairs we want to carry on with. Labour's promised increase in emergency dental appointments will be a huge relief for local residents, and incentives for dentists will be crucial to attracting them to work in dental deserts such as mine. Our plans to introduce supervised toothbrushing in schools will also be essential for children's future oral health.

Making sure that all children are able to seize all of the opportunities in life, challenging childhood inequalities and, importantly, addressing childhood trauma are central to my vision for politics. I am incredibly proud of my record outside of this place, campaigning for women and children alongside life-changing charities such as SafeLives and Barnardo's, but I knew that, being on the outside, I could only do so much. That is why I am here to stand up for vulnerable people, and to make sure that our coastal towns and rural communities feel the benefits of Labour in power.

That is why policies like GB Energy are so important. They mark a break with the failures of the past. They demonstrate a true ambition and commitment to righting

many wrongs. When the question is asked, "How do we make Britain a clean energy superpower?" my answer is: Lowestoft. My answer is: by unlocking our capacity to grow our offshore wind. The partnership announced yesterday between GB Energy and the Crown Estate represents a massive step forward for the country and a huge opportunity for my constituents. From a lack of housing to polluted rivers and seas, and from high energy bills to antisocial behaviour and much more, this Government have set their sights firmly on the issues that matter to people in Lowestoft, Beccles and the villages. I am very glad to support them in that.

11.35 am

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It is a delight to welcome you to your new position, Madam Deputy Speaker, which I am sure you will fill with great aplomb, as you have done other positions that I have seen you in over the past few years in this House.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) on her maiden speech. It was very interesting to hear about her background in the charity sector. Her tribute to former Members who were inspirations to her and who have passed away was very moving. I know in what high regard Tessa Jowell was held, particularly by those on the Labour Benches. It was also very nice to hear her tribute to Peter Aldous. He is a calm and quiet man in some ways, but he is also a very kind man who really did stand up for his constituents on many of the important issues that she mentioned. He will be missed by those on the Conservative Benches.

One of the first things that I did when I was a new Member was try to speak to constituency neighbours from other parties. Those conversations can be incredibly helpful and revealing, and can ensure that you work together on local issues that should really transcend party lines. I spoke just yesterday with the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), who has taken an area of my former constituency. I hope the hon. Lady does that, and takes advantage of the all-party parliamentary groups. One of my best baptisms was with the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who was superb on the APPG for gambling-related harm. We worked together cross-party with MPs from Northern Ireland, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, so I urge the hon. Member for Lowestoft to delve into the APPGs. She gave a fantastic maiden speech.

Thank you very much for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to touch on a couple of points that have been raised already, and then touch on a few local issues for my constituents, as well as making slight mention of a couple of national issues. The previous Government's record is clear. We started with 7% of our electricity coming from renewable sources and ended with 50%. That was a good move for the long-term interests of the country. However, as the Committee on Climate Change says, and as I mentioned in an intervention, there will still be a need for oil and gas in the long term in our country. There is a manufacturing base for delivering that, which often works symbiotically with our manufacturing base for new offshore wind. I really hope that the Government think about and recognise that. When it comes to our energy security, I do not want our country at the mercy of foreign powers. I urge

[Mr Richard Holden]

them to really think about the impact that not pressing ahead with new oil and gas in the North sea is having on constituencies, particularly in the energy heart of our country, around Aberdeenshire in Scotland. We will require it, so I think that is a mistake. I sort of understand politically why they might have gone for that, but I really urge them to think again in the national interest.

Since 2010, there has been over £300 billion of investment in our energy sector from the private sector. Whatever we do, it will be private sector-led. The relatively small investment figures that the Government have been talking about has been reflected on. I just urge them to ensure that whatever happens is private sector-led, and delivers the really good long-term jobs and growth for the country that we have been talking about and have secured over the last few years.

I want to pick up on a few things that the Government have said. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) mentioned the £300 a year, but the Minister did not cover that. Could he provide clarity on that issue? It is something that constituents up and down the country will think about.

The Minister talked about community-owned energy companies similar to Great British Energy. There have been experiences of that; there was Robin Hood Energy in Nottingham, which ended up costing taxpayers a huge amount of money in the long term. I am interested to know whether the Government are investing in the bits that the private sector will not invest in. How can they guarantee the returns that the Minister is talking about, and how can they guarantee that the policy will not cost taxpayers more in the future? As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I do not want to see, when I look into this in a few years' time, that taxpayers were left on the hook when the private sector would not step in.

On the overall costs of the net zero plans, in the run-up to the general election, the Labour party dropped its commitment to spending £28 billion a year on moving towards the 2030 target. I really could do with clarity from the Government on the figures that they are looking at, given that in the months preceding the general election, shadow Ministers talked about it potentially costing hundreds of billions of pounds to get to that target.

As I mentioned in an intervention on the Liberal Democrat Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), on energy infrastructure, the impact would be on communities such as Billericay, Burstead, and Laindon in my constituency, where there would be 160-foot pylons right down the centre of an area of unspoilt countryside. I really would ask the Government to reflect on that, particularly as Germany is moving to an underground-first approach. If the Germans can do it, I do not see why we cannot. It was in the Conservative manifesto.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in July 2009, Steve Holliday, the then chief executive of National Grid, said on the record that going underground was a “no-brainer”? It was reported widely in various newspapers, as was his saying that when National Grid is required to

go underground, such as when going through an area of outstanding natural beauty, it just does it. This requires Government to be muscular with private organisations, and to insist that they use the technology that they can.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that interventions should be brief.

Mr Holden: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. As technology develops, it seems remarkable that we are not looking at going underground as a sensible solution. She is absolutely right that it can and does happen; I think that it is a question of making it happen.

The Government seem willing to ride roughshod over local considerations. I ask them to take a little step back and just try to take communities with them. We got the first, second, third, fourth and fifth-largest offshore wind farms in Europe delivered under the last Conservative Government. Obviously, infrastructure was required for those, but the Government have to take communities with them.

I want to be able to back new renewables. That is a sensible thing to do, particularly in the offshore wind sector. That is why we saw, under the last Government, renewable energy go from 7% to 50%. However, we cannot ride roughshod over local communities. I urge the Minister, as he takes this policy forward, to consider the impact across the country.

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

11.43 am

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your elevation. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden)—a constituency much closer to mine than the one that he represented previously.

First, of course, it is right to pay tribute to the fortitude and resilience displayed by my immediate predecessor, Craig Mackinlay, who represented the old seat of South Thanet. He demonstrated extraordinary strength of character when faced with life-changing injuries as a result of sepsis. His return to this House, when Mr Speaker permitted Members to applaud, was unforgettable. I know that he will use his elevation to the other place to promote his various passions, now including better prosthetics for amputees. I wish him and his family well.

Craig was immediately preceded by my good friend Laura Sandys. Although Laura took her seat for the party now sitting on the Opposition Benches, she and I have worked together on a range of issues, not least the importance of tackling climate change and the opportunities that a transition to clean and renewable energy offers in helping us to tackle social and economic injustice. If she were still in the House, she would have a lot to say in this debate. Before her, the South Thanet seat was Labour's for 13 years. It was held by Dr Stephen Ladyman, a Minister of State in the last Labour Government who was able to effect real change for his constituency and beyond with his work as a Health Minister and also in

the Department for Transport, where he secured the transformational high-speed rail service to Thanet. As a result, the three towns that now make up my constituency—Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate—became highly accessible to the rest of the country, and that accessibility is both a new thing and a constant characteristic of the story of this beautiful place.

Much is said in Thanet about DFLs—“down from Londons”, of whom I am unashamedly one—as though this were a new phenomenon, but it is a tradition that goes way back. New arrivals, mainly but not solely from the capital, have made their home in Thanet recently, as the pandemic has changed working patterns and the train link has made commuting more possible; but people have been coming down from London to enjoy the sea air, the sandy beaches and the stunning skies of Thanet for more than two centuries. J.M.W Turner started a trend that runs to this day.

Margate can argue that it is, in fact, the first seaside resort. Working-class Londoners took a sea packet down the river and stayed over in Margate, often only for a night, to fit in with the strict holiday limits before the trade unions secured a proper weekend for working people. In that tradition, I will be proud to vote for a better deal for workers when the time comes. Despite this strong working-class tradition, and the fact that Labour held its party conferences in the town after the second world war when Clement Attlee was our Prime Minister, the boundary changes mean that I am the first ever Labour MP for Margate.

From Chas and Dave to “Carry On”, Margate has been home—or escape—for some of England’s best entertainers. John Le Mesurier and Hattie Jacques lived there, and Eric Morecambe held his wedding reception in a pub in the old town. Margate is now the home of the world-famous Turner art gallery, which has driven the growth of a vibrant art scene, supported by Tracey Emin and involving the Margate art school and Open School East. Yet, as in so many places across the country, many people are locked out of access to the arts, either as makers or consumers. That is something that we can and must address as a Government, and as a community in East Thanet. My good friend the artist Bob and Roberta Smith, a resident of Ramsgate, campaigns tirelessly on that, and I welcome the Government’s approach to the school curriculum, which will mean that all children can experience art in all its forms.

Ramsgate is a town steeped in history, with the only royal harbour in the country, gracious houses built for naval officers in the Napoleonic wars, a rare Georgian church with a chapel dedicated to the heroes of the evacuation of Dunkirk, and Ramsgate tunnels, which were a place of refuge for hundreds of people during the second world war. Thanks to the Ramsgate Society and the town’s residents, there are blue plaques where van Gogh painted, where Wilkie Collins wrote and where Coleridge recuperated. It is also where the architect of this place, Augustus Pugin, built his home. This history deserves to be more widely known and celebrated, including the stories of ordinary people. Access to understanding the fullness of our past is crucial to shaping our future.

Ramsgate is also home to a publicly owned port, which hosts a range of companies and services, from the Border Force and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution to the wind farms that generate enough

electricity to power more than a quarter of a million homes—wind farms owned by another Government, however, not ours. I look forward to working with my right hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench to ensure that Great British Energy enables not only more energy to be generated, but jobs to be created and supply chains to be developed, in Thanet and in places like it where high-quality jobs are in short supply, and renewable energy sources—commonly known as sunshine and strong winds—are plentiful.

This amazing climate means that Broadstairs is synonymous with holidays for many, but the reality is that its economy, like that of the rest of the constituency, is affected profoundly by the sewage scandal. As one business owner explained to me, “No one wants to paddle through poo.” It is a priority for me and the Government to tackle the sewage scandal, which has not only environmental and health implications, but economic implications for East Thanet.

What Thanet needs more than anything is a year-round economy. That will require something that so many towns need—including that of my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), as well as Beccles and the villages—and that is a coastal communities strategy that addresses the challenges faced by constituencies such as mine and makes the most of what these amazing places have to offer. For all of the ways in which Thanet is unique, my experience here and elsewhere in the country tells me that, as ever, we have more in common than that which divides us.

Thanet shares challenges with many other coastal communities: poor healthcare, creaking bus services, a housing crisis partly driven by unregulated, short-term holiday lets, shocking crime statistics, blighted high streets and few good job opportunities. It shares opportunities, too: renewable energy, heritage, stunning natural assets and the creativity and determination of the people who live in our coastal communities. Whether born here or drawn here, people value Thanet’s unique character—it is one of our unifying characteristics. Like many before me, I have chosen Thanet and I am honoured that it has chosen me. I felt able to ask the voters of East Thanet to have me as their MP because it is a place where I can walk safely and freely in town hand in hand with my wife. That is a precious and special thing.

Thank you, Thanet, for having me. I may not have the wit of Chas and Dave, the timing of Eric Morecambe or the vision of J. M. W. Turner, but I will serve you as best I can.

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

11.51 am

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your new role. I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), with whom I worked before we both came to this Chamber, through UK100 and elsewhere, on local climate action, which I will speak much about today. I also congratulate the Minister and the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

[Pippa Heylings]

It means a great deal to me to make my maiden speech during a debate in which the new Government are setting out green energy policies and plans to get us back on track with our climate pledges here at home, so that we can once again contribute on the international stage towards collective global action. Closer to home, Government research shows that local climate action would achieve net zero for half the cost of the national approach and deliver three times the financial returns, but we need a clear framework between the national and the local and for how councils fit into the national plan for net zero, including community energy initiatives.

Let me say how proud and humbled I am by the faith the residents of beautiful South Cambridgeshire have put in me. They wanted change, and this was a truly historic result. The Liberal Democrats won all three Cambridgeshire seats, turning them from blue to yellow for the first time, forming a golden ring around the constituency of the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I congratulate him on his appointment as the Minister for farming. We have a golden ring, or rather a golden doughnut with red jam in the middle, and it is thanks to family, friends and activists, many of them here today, that that happened.

I am a lass from Hull, whose dad was a GP and mum a nurse. From an early age, I accompanied my dad on his home visits to patients, and it was those roots in the NHS that fostered in me a deep sense of community service, as well as an insight into the links between inequality, child poverty and poor health outcomes. That is why I am proud that the Liberal Democrats put the NHS and social care at the forefront of our campaign, after years of Conservative chaos and neglect left the NHS on its knees. I will continue to campaign to get fairer funding for our GPs in Cambridgeshire, because the unfair funding formula in Cambridgeshire is leaving GPs struggling to keep their heads above water.

Inequality was a cruel determinant in the covid pandemic and led to many avoidable deaths. South Cambridgeshire helped avoid more. It was here that the quick deciphering of the covid virus's genetic code allowed for the vaccines to be developed straightaway. That partly explains why they were available in record time. The researchers then continued to detect the variants as they emerged. It was truly lifesaving. That is part of the reason why semi-rural South Cambridgeshire is fast changing. It is now home to world-leading innovation, with Europe's largest biomedical centre and the Wellcome Genome Campus, as well as more than 8,000 start-ups and businesses, most of which are small or medium-sized enterprises.

Our world-leading tech and life science sectors are among the biggest contributors to the country's economy, and I invite the Government to recognise that. They are the goose that lays the golden egg, which is why their future needs to be shaped carefully with and through the local authorities, giving local people a voice and tackling affordable housing, the water supply, transport and grid infrastructure gaps in a way that allows communities, businesses and nature to thrive.

That is why I would like to pay my respects to my predecessor, Anthony Browne, who worked hard to raise those issues. He supported the calls on Government to tackle the water crisis, and I look forward to continuing

his work supporting the campaigns for the new cancer and children's hospitals, too. I also pay tribute to his predecessor, Heidi Allen, who is still remembered fondly by many residents. Sadly, Heidi stood down from politics as a result of the abuse that many MPs—mainly women—face. In her words,

“Of course public scrutiny is to be expected, but lines are all too often regularly crossed and the effect is utterly dehumanising.”

Heidi had become an MP to stand up for the vulnerable and for those who have no voice. Now, more than ever, I want to continue their work by helping to ensure that there is a positive and inclusive vision for all in South Cambridgeshire where no one is left behind. It is distressing that 15% of children in my constituency are living in poverty, with increasing numbers dependent on food banks and free school meals, isolated in villages with no public transport.

This inclusive vision must include our unique and precious chalk streams that connect us—our blue veins; the silvery threads weaving together our villages. We have the Granta that twinkles through Stapleford, Linton and Balsham; the River Shep that starts in Fowlmere nature reserve and flows through Shepreth and Barrington villages; the River Rhee that flows through Haslingfield and Harston; the Mel that rises in Melbourn and flows through Meldreth; and the Fulbourn and Wilbraham chalk streams. Residents are rightly outraged at the dumping of raw sewage in these streams and rivers. I urge the Government to get tougher with the water companies. Together with the Government, I will champion breathing new life into the Chalk Streams (Protection) Bill. I have worked professionally for many years with Governments around the world to integrate climate and nature into growth plans, mediating agreements where benefits can flow to local communities.

What motivates me most is how young people see their future. A recent study on young people found that too many had climate anxiety. Their most used words were fear, anger, frustration and worry. There were two main reasons why they felt this way: first, they did not think that decision makers listened to them; and, secondly, they thought that decision makers did not care or take the right decisions for their future. I have met many young people in South Cambridgeshire who feel this way, and they want action on the twin climate and nature emergencies. I speak to them now: I want what we do in this Chamber to restore your faith and give you agency, so that together we can be the change that we want.

12 noon

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, congratulations on your elevation.

Today, we stand on the brink of a new era for our country, with the recent announcement of an historic partnership between Great British Energy and the Crown Estate that will usher in billions of pounds of investment for clean power. This landmark collaboration will be a defining moment in this new Government's mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower, highlighted by the introduction of the Great British Energy Bill to this House.

I share the concern of many in this Chamber that, for too long, families and businesses had to endure sky-high energy bills. That was due to mismanagement and exposure

to volatile international markets. Great British Energy will be owned by British people and fortified with £8.3 billion of new investment. It is positioned to drive clean energy deployment across the United Kingdom, promoting job creation, energy independence and economic revitalisation. The formation of Great British Energy signifies a definitive break with the past, steering us towards our ambitious goal of clean power by 2030.

The Crown Estate, with its extensive £16 billion portfolio and newly enhanced investment capabilities, will synergise with Great British Energy's strategic oversight. This will enable up to £60 billion in private investments and ensure that the benefits of our home-grown, secure energy will be felt across our nation, from urban areas to rural communities.

It is essential that we collaborate with the private sector, which will allow us to amplify our renewable energy capacity—to double onshore wind, triple solar power and quadruple offshore wind—by 2030. This broad-based investment in renewable energy represents an investment in our future energy security and independence. This ambitious plan will not only produce cheaper power for our constituents, but ensure that profits are reinvested back into our communities.

The creation of Great British Energy marks a critical step towards generating clean energy, cutting energy bills and delivering good jobs, particularly at a time when our constituents are grappling with the consequences of previous Government failures, which led to an energy insecurity crisis.

I have served on the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee since its formation. I strongly believe that accelerating our investment in energy infrastructure is critical. Initiatives such as the green prosperity plan will create hundreds of thousands of new jobs in clean industries by 2030. This plan is vital to securing British leadership in the global clean energy transition.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister is proud that Great British Energy will be headquartered in Scotland, ensuring that every corner of our United Kingdom plays a critical role in this green revolution. Alongside the lifting of the onshore wind ban, approval of significant solar power projects, and the establishment of a mission control headed by Chris Stark, yesterday's announcements underscore our Government's commitment to securing Britain's energy future. Furthermore, the Government's plan to impose a windfall tax on the record profits of oil and gas companies will serve as a financial leveller. It will redistribute excess profits and ease the public burden.

The transition to renewable energy must be meticulously planned and executed. In this context, the burning of woody biomass for electricity presents substantial risks to our clean energy future. The Government need to reconsider subsidies for large biomass generators—such as Drax and Lynemouth power stations—which under current subsidy arrangements could significantly undermine our carbon reduction goals.

Investigations have revealed that Drax, the UK's largest emitter of carbon, has been involved in practices that are environmentally unsustainable and counterproductive to our objectives. Extending the subsidies could result in an increase in carbon emissions and burden bill payers with higher costs. The Government must heed the advice of independent bodies, such as the Climate

Change Committee and the National Audit Office, by ensuring that any future subsidies are conditional on sustainable practices. That will promote the use of local waste biomass over imported material.

Furthermore, an equitable transmission away from North sea oil and gas remains crucial. Despite 50 years of drilling, those resources are depleting and cannot meet UK demand. Increased domestic oil and gas production would not alleviate high energy bills or enhance energy security, as global market forces determine those prices. By ending new oil and gas licences and speeding up the adoption of renewable energy, we solidify our position as a world leader in climate action—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I call Greg Smith.

12.6 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I add my congratulations to you on your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), and equally, I congratulate all those who have made their maiden speeches in this debate. In particular, I join the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) in paying tribute to Craig Mackinlay, who was a superb Member of this House. As he makes his transition from being the bionic MP to being the bionic peer, I think I speak for the whole House in wishing him well.

On today's subject matter, I want to be clear from the outset that we absolutely have to decarbonise and we absolutely have to defossilise. The challenge laid down to our great innovators and scientific minds is enormous, and those great minds are rising to the challenge, from electricity generation to the fuels of the future. But that is also why I am so frustrated by an approach to cleaner energy and cleaner fuel from Government that always seems to favour the first, but not necessarily the best or most sustainable, solutions for the future.

Let me start with the controversial topic of solar. Since I was first elected in 2019,

the threat of large-scale solar developments has caused significant concern for many of my constituents. Across my constituency and parts of my former constituency now represented by others, field after field and farm after farm have already been blanketed by solar panels, to the detriment of the surrounding community, food security, nature and landscape. Food security is national security, yet before any of us who were elected on 4 July had even sworn in, the new Energy Secretary had signed off 6,000 acres of solar installation, later admitting in his statement a week after that a land use strategy was yet to come. We simply cannot have this language of community consent when the decisions that are taken walk all over the views of the communities so badly affected. Smaller, stand-alone solar is less impactful, quicker and easier to install, does not risk damaging the local infrastructure, and provides an additional, reliable source of income for many struggling farmers.

It is not just the panels that consume vast amounts of our countryside. The infrastructure needed to carry the electricity generated through to the grid swallows up yet more. It is no coincidence that adjacent to the proposed Rosefield site in my constituency a battery storage

[Greg Smith]

facility is being put forward. In the ultimate manifestation of the tail wagging the dog, National Grid has come along and proposed another huge land take essentially to rebuild the east Claydon substation next door.

Let that be a warning to any community where solar is coming: it does not end with the panels. Solar has its place, but that is on our rooftops and not our fields. Research by the wonderful charity, Campaign to Protect Rural England, found that there is potential for 117 GW of renewable energy to be generated from rooftops and other existing developed spaces in England. We should be prioritising that, and not losing our agricultural land.

My solution has always been to propose nuclear as the option, and to look at small modular reactors. I have given this statistic in the House before, but I will do so again: we need around 2,000 acres of solar panels to generate enough electricity—on current usage and before everybody has two Teslas on the drive—for 50,000 homes. By contrast, just two football pitches are required for a small modular reactor that will power, again on current usage, 1 million homes. I fail to see how anyone can look at those two competing land uses and choose solar over the small modular reactor. It is simply not a good use of land to turn our farms into solar.

Let me move to another clean energy that I am particularly passionate about, and away from electricity generation to the future of fuel. The United Kingdom is already an international powerhouse in the field of synthetic and sustainable fuel, with companies such as Zero Petroleum innovating right here, and international companies such as P1 Fuels making huge investments in bringing the manufacturing of fossil-free fuel to the United Kingdom. It is a straightforward fact that there are 1.4 billion internal combustion engine vehicles on the road worldwide, and that is before we start counting agricultural and construction vehicles, planes, ships and so on. They are simply not all going to convert to electric, as some argue that they should. Green hydrogen mixed with atmospheric carbon capture makes a wholly man-made liquid hydrocarbon that works in everything we already have. After more than a century's refinement on those engines, and this clean fuel will just work in them.

Mr Holden: On the point about synthetic fuels, is it also the case that for several types of vehicle, such as incredibly heavy vehicles or those that need to travel incredibly long distances, there is no battery option, and synthetic fuel as an alternative is exactly where we need to go?

Greg Smith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Certainly for heavier application vehicles, batteries just would not work. I saw a diagram at one of these companies that shows that if we were to try to make a 747 fly on batteries, the batteries would be bigger than the plane. Therefore, that is not a viable option going forward. Synthetic fuels are entirely man-made. There is no need to grow food to burn or recycle old chip fat, or for raw earth mineral mining for batteries; it is just clean synthetics. My ask to the Government, as they look to a clean energy future—that is the right ambition; where we disagree is on how we get there—is that they truly

embrace synthetic fuels and make them mainstream. They need to be scaled, and in order to be scaled, manufacturers need confidence that the Government will permit that.

An important point to finish on is that the carbon at tailpipe when these fuels are burned is the same volume that is then recaptured to make the next lot of fuel. They are net zero. It is one volume of carbon in a perpetual circle. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment, and ask him to take the message back to the Department that we need to embrace synthetic fuels as part of the clean energy revolution that he claims at the Dispatch Box to want to see.

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

12.13 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your appointment, and it is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) and to hear so many other maiden speeches today. They make faraway places such as East Thanet and Lowestoft, with which in fact my constituency has old herring connections, seem closer to us. It has also been a pleasure to hear so many maiden speeches this week from my 35 fellow new Scottish Labour MPs. I realise that that number somewhat brackets the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who blazed a trail for us. I am delighted to see him on the Front Bench, just as I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West (Martin McCluskey) bar the doors so that everyone has to hear what I am about to inflict upon them.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, and my translation, I begin: Mar urram dhaibhsan a thàinig romham agus iadsan chleachdas i as mo dhèidh, tha mi togail mu ghuth nam chànan fhèin airson Na h-Eileanan an Iar. In honour of those who became before me, and those who will surely use my native language after me, I raise my voice today for the people of the Western Isles.

The commonest question I am asked in this House, apart from how to pronounce the name of my constituency, is how I manage to travel from Westminster to the Western Isles. Of course, the easy answer is by Tardis, but the honest answer is that here we are a mere hop and a skip away from Glasgow, and then I travel by a small jet—on schedule, hopefully—to Stornoway. As I board that small, tubular jet, I feel almost like a character in “Succession”, but I know that there is gold at the end of the flight.

Of course, we are connected; we are not in the middle of nowhere but at the heart of the Atlantic. We have the wealth of wind that will deliver the benefit of jobs, growth and energy security for this country in years to come. Those Atlantic islands and the western seaboard are what will give GB Energy meaning and reality in that transition from east to west, away from the North sea and away from the myth that we will not be there in another two generations. Two generations of my constituents have earned energy security for this country from the North sea, and two generations more will continue as we make that just transition to renewables.

That will be done with the heft of two Governments—the UK Government and the Scottish Government—and will require the muscle, investment and expertise of commercial developers. Vitally, it must involve the consent, involvement and power of communities. Just as the Labour Government of '97 established, from the pre-devolution Scotland Office, a community land unit enabling communities to have the means and wherewithal to take over their own land, setting in chain the land reform revolution in the highlands and islands, I am encouraged that this Labour Government are open to ideas such as a community energy unit, to enable communities such as mine to take their stake in that wealth of wind, and create a template that can be used across the whole of Britain. These are themes to which I will return, alongside the unfinished business of land reform—I read today that a highland estate is for sale at £12 million, with carbon capture and the Ponzi scheme of peat restoration attached, and I know that that is unfinished business.

Of course, wild weather and radical land politics are not the only things that the Western Isles have to offer the United Kingdom. There are deep connections to the country and to this place itself. The tide of the Thames that rises and falls outside, marked by Mary Branson's "New Dawn" high up there in St Stephen's Hall, is the same tide that covers and uncovers "Sheòl an Iolaire", a tidal installation that I installed in Stornoway harbour, along with my good friend Malcolm Maclean, to mark a wartime tragedy and the loss of a ship of that name.

That same tide that sweeps into the Viking bay of Stornoway also laps Tarbert in Harris, Lochmaddy, North Uist, Lochsboisdale and Castlebay in Barra. That Hebridean archipelago of nine—or is it 10— islands guards our western approaches. Were they to be transposed on to a map of mainland Britain, they would run from London to Sheffield in length—with better scenery, of course. That is why I am reluctant to enter the traditional rivalry between maiden speakers of declaring their constituency the most beautiful in the country: when they come, they will see that there is no competition.

I do not intend to give a Cook's tour of my constituency, but Barra, the jewel of the Hebrides, is where Angus MacNeil, the former MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, resides: fìor Ghaidheal—a true Gael—and a generously spirited man, whose chairmanship of many Committees in this House was testimony not just to his political acumen, but to his ability to befriend people across the Chamber. That is one characteristic of my predecessor that I hope to emulate.

I will not take the House around the whole of the Western Isles, because time is short, but there are some other political monuments that deserve mention. I have no fewer than four former Labour MPs in my constituency on whom to lean for advice: Dame Anne McGuire, the queen of Stirling; Ian Davidson, the former Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee, who is still campaigning for Labour; Calum MacDonald, the former Labour MP for the Western Isles and our community wind farm expert; and, foremost among them, Brian Wilson, a former Energy Minister, whose counsel I commend to those on the Front Bench, and who has been a guiding light for me since he hired me at the *West Highland Free Press* as a journalist many years ago.

In passing, I cannot but pay tribute to those above us. I do not mean the angels; I mean the devils in the Press Gallery, among whom I danced for many years as a journalist for the *Daily Record* and *The Glasgow Herald* and as a freelance broadcaster for the BBC. Of course, it is Friday and nearly lunchtime, so they are not there. When I was in the Lobby, it was always nearly Friday, and always nearly lunchtime.

In a double transfer deal, which performed that rare feat of uniting the Westminster Lobby and Downing Street, I am joined on these green Benches by my hon. Friend the new Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh), who was my Lobby roommate upstairs and will now join me here. On the old maps, my constituency might have been marked "Here be dragons." My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale slayed one to get here.

I will not detain the House with descriptions of whisky, salmon, scallops that reach Singapore in 24 hours, Harris tweed or beautiful bays, but I remind the Minister that the people of the Western Isles have the tenacity, the wherewithal and the resourcefulness, embodied in the Arnish yard near Stornoway, to act as a stepping stone in the journey to renewables and to clean energy.

It has been a long road from there to here. Many people have helped, and since I have arrived I have had many messages of support, and prayers and passages too. As I come from one of the most religiously observant parts of Britain, that comes as no surprise. One passage, from an old friend, has stayed with me. To save the *Hansard* reporters, who are probably struggling with the accent, never mind the translation, I will do the task for them. She said: "May your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to deal with anyone"—biodh ur comhraidh an-comhnaidh grasmhor, air a dheanadh blasta le salainn.

Seasoned with salt, Madam Deputy Speaker. I like that. I hope that all our exchanges in this House will be gracious and seasoned with the salt air of the Atlantic and our common future, because in this Chamber and in this kingdom, we are all islanders.

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

12.23 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your new role.

I am honoured to follow the maiden speeches of other Members, including my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), with whom I look forward to working, and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton), whose speech I enjoyed very much, particularly his closing remarks about delivering our speeches with some salt and showing a gracious approach to engaging with one another in this House. Many hon. Members, particularly new Members, have talked about the opportunity to set a new tone in our politics in this Parliament, one of working constructively and showing a respectful approach to how we work together. I thank the hon. Member for setting that out.

I am grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech as a new MP, one of a group of newly elected Green MPs, and as the MP for a brand-new constituency, the beautiful Waveney Valley on the Norfolk-Suffolk

[Adrian Ramsay]

border. As it is a new and additional seat, I do not have a direct predecessor to pay tribute to, but I will briefly thank all five of the previous MPs whose seats I have taken part of, for their work in representing the residents whom I now have the honour to represent. I thank Richard Bacon, Dan Poulter, Jo Churchill, Peter Aldous and Thérèse Coffey for their work as MPs.

I am proud to be in this place today to represent Waveney Valley, which has been created as an additional seat in the east of England. As a native East Anglian, it is an honour to be able to represent such a wonderful constituency spanning such beautiful parts of Norfolk and Suffolk. I hope that other hon. Members, who are no doubt equally proud of their constituencies, will indulge me for a few moments as I try to give them a sense to what it means to me. From its vibrant market towns with lots of independent businesses on the high streets to the beautiful natural environment of East Anglia, with the Waveney and several other rivers running through it, Waveney Valley is a fine example of picturesque and historic East Anglia. The ancient market town of Diss is mentioned in the Domesday Book; Bungay has a Norman castle; the towns of Eye and Halesworth date back to Roman times; and Harleston dates back to the medieval period.

Creating a constituency that spans the county border of Norfolk and Suffolk was considered controversial by some, but personally I think it is an exciting opportunity to embrace cross-county working, and much of the constituency reflects a natural community around the Waveney. That said, there is one contentious question that some people put to me: which football team do I support? I am proud to be a lifelong Norwich City fan, but in football as in politics, I am not tribal, and I warmly congratulated Ipswich Town on their recent promotion to the premier league for the first time since 2002. It is a great thing for East Anglia, and I very much look forward to celebrating having two premier league men's football teams in East Anglia this time next year.

What really makes Waveney Valley special is its people—people who care about their community; who, like me, have a strong sense of local identity; and who demonstrate great ingenuity and care for their communities. I could cite many examples of that ingenuity, whether from farming, the third sector or local businesses, but to give just one example, the indoor marketplace in Diss opened last year in a former department store. It is a community initiative, giving local traders affordable small spaces to sell their crafts and goods in a shared space—a lovely boost for the local economy in a building that would otherwise have sat empty. What a great example of regenerating the high street.

People in Waveney Valley are rightly proud of our market towns and villages, but they also feel let down by the loss of local services and the degradation of our environment in recent years and decades, which has particularly affected our rural communities. As has been noted this week, we have

“the Sahara of dental deserts.”—[*Official Report*, 23 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 506.]

One of my constituents told me that they make a four-hour round trip to access a dentist. Over a quarter of the residents I surveyed over the winter said that they

are going without dental treatment, and like the hon. Member for Lowestoft—from whom we heard earlier—I have had examples in Suffolk of people telling me they have resorted to pulling out their own teeth. This cannot go on, and I welcome the new Government's commitment to reform the dental contract, which is the root cause of this issue and of the exodus of dentists from the NHS. I hope to hear a timetable for that plan as soon as possible.

We have also seen a decline in other health services in my rural constituency. People find it hard to get access to a GP appointment in many areas; we have had local hospitals close in market towns; and we also have rural isolation, with so many bus services axed or cut back, particularly in villages.

At the same time, we have the scandal of sewage in our rivers, which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) spoke about so eloquently, and which I know so many Members across the House feel extremely strongly about. People are horrified by this threat to people's health and to wildlife, and they rightly see it as a sign of wider environmental neglect. I very much hope that the restoration of nature and tackling the sewage scandal are made top priorities by this Government. Whether it is on the growing use of food banks, people suffering from flooding or the decline in our services, I want to see real action that genuinely accounts for the needs of our rural communities.

Because of their anger about the loss of local services and the decline in our environment, people in my area were determined to vote for a change at this election. They are used to having Green councillors standing up to represent them, and they voted for an MP to stand up for their area. I will press for the restoration of local services and the defending of the local environment.

It is my intention to serve the people of Waveney Valley by seeking to bring people and places together. I will work across political and constituency lines to get things done, scrutinise and constructively challenge the Government, and work to improve the lives of my constituents. As many other hon. Members have said, we have an opportunity with this new Parliament to put our politics on a more mature and civilised footing and move beyond tribal approaches, and I am confident that that is what the public expect of us. I have had thousands of conversations with local residents over the past few years, and I know that they want an active and visible local MP. I am determined to fulfil that role—to be Waveney Valley's voice in Westminster and not Westminster's voice in Waveney Valley.

I would like to set out how I am approaching an issue in East Anglia that has attracted a lot of interest from some right hon. Members and the media. I have been a climate campaigner for 25 years—that has been my primary passion since I was a teenager—and making a difference on climate and the environment has guided everything that I have done in my career, including spending the last decade leading national charities whose purpose is to support the renewable energy sector. I am the first to argue that we need to scale up all types of renewable energy, and there was much in the Minister's speech to welcome.

If we are to scale up renewable energy at the pace required to tackle the climate emergency, we need to take communities with us and make infrastructure decisions that are right for the long term. What I have called for in

relation to the infrastructure proposals that are currently on the table for East Anglia is a proper options assessment of the different ways in which the energy generated by new wind farms in East Anglia is connected to the grid. Today I have heard two hon. Members from two different political parties from mine refer to the fact that there are different ways in which we can connect that renewable energy to the grid. I think that simply calling for an options assessment is a very reasonable approach. I am also calling on the Government and the planning process to account for the points raised by wildlife trusts, local councils and communities about the impacts of the current infrastructure proposals.

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero has set out that there is a planning process to be followed, which the Government should not prejudice, and the Prime Minister has said that he wants to reset the tone on the political debate—something I very much welcome. In that spirit, I ask that we move beyond some of the comments that have been made in this Chamber on the particular infrastructure proposal that I have referred to; that the Government commit to working with communities to ensure that infrastructure decisions are made in a way that properly accounts for the issues raised by wildlife organisations and local communities, and genuinely look at the options that different Members are highlighting; and that if a version of the current proposal does go ahead, the mitigations proposed by organisations such as Mid Suffolk and Babergh district councils, and the wildlife trusts, are properly taken on board and full compensation is put in place that accounts for the impact on farmers' livelihoods and on others affected.

On the wider subject of today's debate, I welcome the creation of Great British Energy and much of what the Minister shared in terms of scaling up renewable energy. I politely point out, though, that to get to net zero we have to move away from fossil fuels as well as increasing renewable energy. To that end, I would ask the Government to place a strong emphasis on energy efficiency measures. The Minister referred to home insulation, but what I have heard so far will only scratch the surface of the home insulation measures needed to keep bills down and homes warm.

I also urge the Government to reconsider the Rosebank oilfield, which will have carbon emissions equivalent to 28 low-income countries, and to ensure that carbon capture and storage projects are never allowed to be an excuse for millions of tonnes of carbon pollution.

I have two other points on climate. First, with significant climate change already happening around us, or already locked in as a result of emissions to date, far more public policy attention needs to be given to how we adapt to a changing climate, as well as to mitigating the worst excesses of climate breakdown. We need to look at those things together, and I look forward to returning to this issue on another date.

Secondly, the decline of climate and nature must be seen as equal and twin problems. I stand ready to work with those from across the House to shift the UK from being one of the world's most nature-depleted countries to getting on track to meet environmental targets, including on nature recovery.

It is an honour to be here to represent the people of Waveney Valley. I have set out my guiding principles as a Member of this House, which are to stand up for our

rural communities, for the restoration of public service and for the most vulnerable in our society, and to press for the urgent action needed on the twin climate and nature emergencies. I will play a constructive role in this House by supporting the Government and working with other parties where I agree with them, and in pressing the Government to be bolder on restoring nature, responding to the climate emergency and rebuilding our public services. And I will always speak up for the people of Waveney Valley.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Dr Zubir Ahmed to make his maiden speech.

12.36 pm

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate hon. Members on discharging their responsibilities and delivering their maiden speeches, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—I am sure he will correct my pronunciation and give me some honest feedback. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), to the Front Bench. It is timely that I am making my maiden speech on a day when we are discussing how Scotland might shape the energy needs of these islands for many decades to come.

I thank and pay tribute to my predecessor, Chris Stephens, for his dedicated service to our community over the last nine years. His commitment to social justice and workers' rights is inspirational and will leave a lasting impact. I am particularly thankful for his advice and counsel during the handover process that is currently taking place.

Glasgow South West is a synthesis of many different communities, each with recurring contributions to the 850-year-old second city of empire. If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will give the House a short synopsis of the place where I live, work and play.

We start in Darnley, Deaconsbank and Pollok, much of it occupying the old Pollok estate, the laird of which—Sir John Stirling-Maxwell—was a Member of this place and founded the National Trust for Scotland in 1931. In more recent times, these areas have demonstrated the transformative possibilities of their co-operative spirit through the Rosehill housing co-operative and the Pollok credit union.

Moving north, the ruins of Crookston castle come into view. Built by the Stewarts of Darnley in the 1400s, it is the only medieval castle standing in Glasgow, and it is possibly where Mary, Queen of Scots, was betrothed to Lord Darnley. It remains an underutilised community asset, but I commend the friends of Crookston castle for their efforts to bring this space back into the service of the people of Glasgow.

A short distance from the castle, the wonderful communities of Mosspark, Dumbreck and Cardonald are nestled around the great expanse of Bellahouston Park, which has played host to numerous music concerts, papal visits and the empire exhibition of 1938.

As we head further north, we come to Ibrox, which is synonymous with Rangers football club. Now, I must stress, Madam Deputy Speaker, that other Glasgow football clubs are available; my hon. Friends the Members

[Dr Zubir Ahmed]

for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) and for Glasgow East (John Grady) can take you for a tour around them. Govan is the birthplace of Sir Alex Ferguson, a footballing legend, but also a friend to Members on the Labour Benches; he has often given wise counsel to my party. It is also the location of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, formerly known as the Southern General, one of Britain's largest hospitals and the place where I honed my skills in surgery and practice as a transplant surgeon. My research leads me to conclude that I am the first transplant surgeon to be elected to this place.

Govan's shipyard history is, of course, world famous, and the Fairfield Heritage Trust and Govan Workspace have brought that to life. More importantly, it continues to serve the defence of our realm even in the modern day, and to be part of Glasgow South West's story; we have BAE Systems and Thales, alongside fintech and medtech companies such as Barclays and Cohesion Medical, as well as award-winning TV and film companies such as Firecrest Films. We can see the kind of high-quality jobs of the future that can be available to local people. These are the kinds of jobs I want to grow as part of this Labour Government.

As we head towards the edge of the constituency, we find the BBC Scotland headquarters. The BBC has an important function in the fabric of our national life, not only in informing, educating and entertaining, but as a beacon of our soft power on the world stage—something I wholeheartedly support. Just as national broadcasting is important, so is the local, and nothing encapsulates that better in Glasgow South West than Sunny Govan radio station. It provides an eclectic mix of music, but also, more importantly, runs sobering stories and is a source of comfort on some of the challenges in our community.

We end our Glasgow South West journey in Pollokshields, an area my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) knows well. It is a true melting pot of cultures and ideas, and the place where my father's one-month road journey from Pakistan ended in April 1963. He would go on to drive buses in the city, and then black cabs—he is in his 80s and he still does.

In the undergrowth of this rich history and potential, however, there are some worrying signals. There is the weariness of working ever faster and longer just to stay still, the anxiety of wondering how secure that work is, and the trepidation at the end of a day of work that you may not be able to pay for the odd treat that makes life worthwhile, or even the essentials. It is against that backdrop that we on the Labour Benches were sent to this place to make the economy work for working people, and to restore the intergenerational covenant—the promise that the lives of the generations after us will be better in every sense than our own. Politics for me is not, therefore, about the indulgent combative tweet, or even the theatrical amendment. It is about seeing the world through the long lens. It is about having the stamina for diligent analysis, the patience to articulate policy and then, when in power, the discipline to deliver enduring change. That has always been the Labour way.

Every Member elected to this place recognises it for the singular honour that it truly is, but it also takes a village to be elected to this place. That includes, of

course, the tireless staff and activists who are in many ways the DNA of our democracy, but there are also, for all of us, those who shaped our life and now shape our politics. When I reflect back, I think of my parents and my extended family, who, from a cradle in a Govanhill tenement, instilled in me the raw ingredients to do my utmost in every walk of life. I think, too, of my teachers and my mentors, who moulded those ingredients into the art and craft of a widely practised surgical career, and of my wife and children, who keep me connected to the earth and in contact with reality, particularly when it is much needed.

Out of all those people, I think of my maternal aunt, Matloob Mohammad, who stands out. She had no children of her own and considered us her children. Like too many in our Labour family, she was taken by glioblastoma—as was my father-in-law, Tony—in 1997. Her patient journey through our NHS inspired me to become a doctor and then a surgeon. She also, in many ways, inspired my political journey. She quite inadvertently introduced me to this place 29 years ago. After queuing outside, we found ourselves in the Strangers' Gallery watching a combative Leader of the Opposition by the name of Tony Blair taking on the then Prime Minister. If she were here today in that Gallery, she could not fail to notice the changes in the make-up of this Parliament reflected back up at her.

We have our challenges in modern Britain, but it is important to be unashamedly proud of the fact that we are demonstrably the most successfully ethno-religiously diverse legislature in the world. In these volatile times, I believe the world looks to us in this place, the mother of Parliaments, for guidance, and for the solace that democracy can still deliver. I am confident that it will.

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

12.46 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I congratulate you on your election to the Chair, and commend the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) for his passionate and touching maiden speech.

South Northamptonshire—one of the few constituencies to have two geographical terms in its name—comprises the majority of the seat held by Dame Andrea Leadsom; parts of the former Daventry constituency, which was held by Chris Heaton-Harris; and parts of Wellingborough constituency, recently held by the hon. Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen).

As is tradition, I must start by paying tribute to my immediate predecessor. Dame Andrea Leadsom was a powerhouse, a tour de force, not only in industry, but in Parliament, where she served the people of South Northamptonshire for 14 years. She served as City Minister, Leader of the House, Secretary of State for the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and, latterly, Minister for public health, start for life and primary care.

As Leader of the House, Dame Andrea spearheaded the creation of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, which has helped many Members and staff across the House. She is wonderfully compassionate

and has been an incredible mentor to me since my selection to stand. She was a strong advocate on issues to do with early years. In her start-for-life role, she opened family hubs in 75 local authority areas. Her determination to open the first family hub in South Northamptonshire will support so many local families in giving their child the best start in life. I know that she is determined to continue that work in the years to come, and she has my full support in her endeavours.

Although my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) may have an opportunity to speak to the legacy of Chris Heaton-Harris, I cannot let this opportunity pass without paying tribute to Chris, as he was such a dedicated statesman. He spent 10 years in the European Parliament and 14 years as the Member for Daventry, including as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a crucial role—all the while still finding the time to be an active qualified football referee, officiating at games at different levels for more than 42 years. Chris supported me during my campaign. I saw the warmth with which he was greeted on the doorstep, and how highly regarded he was by his constituents—a role model to follow.

In their maiden speeches, both former Members paid tribute to their predecessor, the now Lord Boswell of Aynho, who represented South Northamptonshire for 23 years and whom I also had the pleasure of meeting during my campaign. They both noted that he had been described in *The Daily Telegraph* as a saint. During my hustings, one of my opponents, noting my apparent “road to Damascus” conversion from commercial property lawyer to campaigner against inappropriate development, dubbed me “Saint Sarah on the road to Silverstone”. While I am not expecting a call from the Pope any time soon, as a jibe I quite liked that one!

South Northamptonshire is a constituency with a rich history—from Bozeat to Brackley, both of which were mentioned in the Domesday Book, and from Harpole to Deanshanger, the latter being the location of one of the 703 miracles that Thomas Becket performed, which led to his canonisation. We seem to be truly blessed. We have Lactodorum, or Towcester as it is now known, in the centre of the constituency, and the Saracens Head public house is mentioned in Charles Dickens’ “The Pickwick Papers”. We even have Sulgrave Manor, the ancestral home of the family of George Washington, the first President of the United States of America. Having grown up in Rutland, I have to remember that the River Nene is pronounced “Nen”, not “Neen”—I was frequently quizzed about that on the campaign trail.

In recent weeks, I have suddenly become very popular with many Members, and while I would love to think that it was because of my friendly nature, it turns out that many have realised that I have the world-famous Silverstone in my constituency, and they would love to address their need for speed. I am incredibly proud to represent the home of the Grand Prix, and this year to witness the victory of our British talent Lewis Hamilton. It is safe to say, given that King George VI has been the only reigning monarch to attend a British motor race, that I would love to extend the invitation to His Majesty the King.

I chose this clean energy debate for my maiden speech because it is an important issue that will have a big impact on my constituents. While there is no doubt that we need to look at renewable and diverse energy sources

for our future energy security, destroying thousands of acres of prime agricultural land cannot be the solution to this ongoing question. In our area, we have already seen the solar farm application made at Greatworth, and now the Green Hill solar farm, proposed for a location near Grendon and the surrounding villages in my constituency, would take over 2,000 acres of productive farmland and convert it to solar panels and associated battery storage.

The fact that the Government have so quickly—in a matter of days—signed off proposals for over 6,000 acres of solar farms is of great concern to me because of the precedent that it will set. Schemes like this will jeopardise our food security and scar our beautiful countryside, when there are other sensible solutions. We should be looking to industrial rooftops and transport corridors at a minimum. The Minister talks of community benefit, but there is no engagement with the community who have to live alongside and with these panels. It is a case of “marry in haste, repent at leisure”.

Disagreeing with the Government’s approach to this matter leads me to mention one of my key priorities for my time in this place. I firmly believe that in all our debates we can disagree agreeably, and that was a message I advocated during my election campaign. Discussions nowadays are too polarised, too black and white, and far too hostile. We need robust debate and discussion, and we need to take the heat out of difficult issues so that we can reach the best resolution. I want to ensure that we adopt a fair and balanced approach, seeing both sides of the issue but settling on that which resonates most, and that is always my promise.

I also want to be a champion for those with hidden disabilities, such as diabetes. Having myself been given the shock diagnosis of late-onset type 1 diabetes just three years ago, I understand the difficulties of adapting to life with a hidden condition. Technology has enhanced our quality of life, but it is still difficult to access that technology, and I want to help in whatever ways I can and to champion this cause, as Lady May has over the years. One upside is that I will always be carrying some form of sweets for low blood sugar, so Members know where to come if they are in need!

Before I end my speech, I want to take a moment to note my inspiration for entering politics: my father Kenneth, who is now an honorary alderman of Rutland as a result of his 20 years of service and his dedication to helping his community. That dedication extends to my family too, in his marriage to my beautiful mother Maria; they celebrated 51 years together in May. Their love and dedication to each other is a model to follow, and I am privileged to have them as my parents. I also would not be here in this Chamber without the support of my siblings—my sister Lorraine, her husband Richard and their children Joshua, Dominic, Jonty and Olivia, and my brother Matthew and his wife Barbara. I say, “Thank you beyond words.” When my parents first brought me to visit Parliament when I was about 10 years old, I could only have dreamt that one day I would be standing here addressing the House—and, indeed, them in the Gallery. Dreams really can come true.

The honour to stand here today is and always will be mine. I say thank you to the people of South Northamptonshire for placing their trust in me and allowing me to champion their causes. I am here to serve them, regardless of political persuasion.

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

12.54 pm

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate on energy policy—a subject of great importance to my constituents and people across the UK. I congratulate you on your recent election.

I pay tribute to other hon. Members who have taken an early opportunity to give their maiden speeches, including the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool). It is the first time I have followed someone on the road to canonisation—[*Laughter.*] I would also like to thank my colleagues from Scotland who are speaking today, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), and to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) about how good it is to hear so many Scottish voices on this side of the House.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister said that this Government will be one of service, and it is an honour to speak in the Chamber as the Member for Central Ayrshire—the place where I was born and raised, and where I live. It is a privilege to be in Parliament and in government, and to be here in the service of the community where I grew up.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Dr Philippa Whitford, who was a popular and assiduous local MP, whose public service included a much celebrated career as a consultant breast cancer surgeon. I also pay tribute to two previous Labour MPs, Sandra Osborne and Sir Brian Donohoe. Sandra is known as a champion of women's rights, and a campaigner against poverty and for peace in the middle east. Brian is better known to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as the chairman of the Members' pension fund. He uses his voluminous knowledge to good effect but, having spoken to him at some length this weekend, I do not recommend individual consultations at this time.

I also thank my husband. The spouses and families of politicians sacrifice a lot for our careers. Damien has been at my side around the world, and I am grateful to him for his support.

Many hon. Members have spoken of their constituency's beauty, while inviting other Members to visit. I do not feel the need to make that invitation, as I was happy to see Members from this place, the other place and the Scottish Parliament in Troon last weekend for the final days of the Open. They were there not just for one of the best coastlines in Scotland, great seafood and wonderful pubs and hotels, but to see a world-class golfing competition that sold more than 250,000 tickets and will deliver more than £200 million to the local and Scottish economies.

Central Ayrshire is blessed with great towns and villages, and people who work daily for our communities. Earlier this month, I met the Friends of the Broadway Prestwick, who are working tirelessly to raise millions of pounds to bring a 1930s cinema in the heart of the town back to life. Their passion and commitment is inspiring. I visited the Troon lifeboat station and was told that from 1871 to today, 668 lives have been saved by its brave volunteers.

In Irvine, each year the Marymass festival, also known as Murmuss, sees tens of thousands of people come to enjoy our parade, the crowning of the queen and teams of people trying to climb the greasy pole. If new Members need help in that area, I am happy to invite the winning team of this year's competition in the autumn. Marymass includes horseracing on Irvine moor, at which my dad has been known to commentate. On the same moor in 1887, Keir Hardie gave his first recorded political speech in which he emphasised the need for working class representation in Parliament.

Much of Central Ayrshire has a connection with Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard. Burns lived in Irvine for a time and co-founded the Bachelors' Club in the village of Tarbolton. Lochlea, in Craigie, is one of Scotland's newest distilleries and is on land that Burns once farmed. It will be for my hon. Friends the Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart) to tell more about the man and the myth.

I might remind the House of a prominent American who also made a visit to the constituency. On 3 March 1960, Sergeant Elvis Presley spent a precious two hours in Prestwick airport. I think we can say that the rest was history for that man's career after some time spent on our precious soil. If hon. Members are looking at me today, they may see a whole lotta shakin' goin' on here too.

Prestwick is today a centre of the Scottish aerospace sector, with big ambitions. I was delighted to welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to meet GE Caledonian during the election campaign to hear about the tens of millions of pounds of investment it has already secured. NATS in Prestwick—helpfully not the Nats from the Opposition Benches, but the UK's leading provider of air traffic control services—employs 600 highly skilled people at its centre and ensures that the 2.5 million flights to and from the UK each year arrive and depart safely.

Spirit, one of the UK's largest aerospace manufacturers, announced recently that its Prestwick operations, with over 1,200 people, would be better served by a third-party owner, following an acquisition by Boeing. I have had assurances from the company that Prestwick is an integral part of the Airbus supply chain and will continue to be a key supplier to Airbus under any new owner. Aviation is critical to UK and Scottish GDP, and we should all be proud that it is an industry where the UK leads. I am proud that so much of it is in Central Ayrshire, where there is the potential to do much, much more.

I come from an ordinary working-class family from my constituency. My mum progressed from working in a factory to representing people at mental health tribunals as a lay advocate. My dad lost his job in the '80s and became a council binman—a job he was proud of. With great teachers and support, I have had incredible opportunities, including a life-changing chance to study piano at the junior school of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, and latterly being the UK's trade commissioner in south Asia, working with brilliant British, Indian and Bangladeshi colleagues to bring some tens of thousands of jobs to the UK and billions of pounds of investment. With the Scotch Whisky Association, I helped secure a 50% reduction in tariffs on Scotch in the state of Maharashtra. I was delighted to find out that Ardagh Glass in Irvine makes much of the glass that the Scotch whisky market exports around the world.

But on returning to my community to stand as their MP, I was shocked. Far too many people were struggling, including the woman in Springside who said she turned off her freezer and cried every night from hunger, the man in Girdle Toll who said that he spent much of his life savings on knee surgery rather than waiting in agony, and the family in Troon who have been waiting two decades to access social housing and have given up hope. Grandparents and parents were asking from where their children's jobs would come.

I blame failed policies and failed politicians for this poverty and lack of opportunity. That is why I was proud to campaign for a Labour Government led by my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister to deliver jobs and bring down bills with GB Energy, increase funding to our NHS and schools, and ensure that the lives of working people across the whole country improve. From sport and culture to trade and enterprise, this Government will turn struggle into hope and hard work into real opportunity.

I have seen the difference that having opportunities makes. I was particularly happy this week to address a group of young people from north Ayrshire who had been inspired by Parliament's Education Centre and by the chance to stand as an MP in this place—I just hope that not too many of them will do it soon. I thought that representing the UK around the world was the best job I could have had, but representing the families of Central Ayrshire will be the privilege of my life.

1.3 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I welcome you to your position. I congratulate the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) on his first contribution to this House; it already sounds as if he has made a huge contribution to the UK around the world, and I am sure his constituents are looking forward to him acting for them.

I will begin by echoing the words of my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) and for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) about the impact on agricultural and rural land of the Government's plan to cover them with cables, pylons and other energy infrastructure. The sheer concentration of this infrastructure on prime agricultural land in communities such as New Deer, Maud, Turriff and Leylodge in my constituency and the apparent lack of ability for communities to engage in meaningful discussion on this will in no way bring the public along on this crucial national endeavour.

However, I am going to focus on the key issue for my constituents and those across north-east Scotland, and that is the oil and gas sector: the jobs, expertise and investment that we will be putting at risk if the Government rush towards their green energy agenda. No matter how much the Minister may wish otherwise, we cannot and will not have a green energy revolution without the existing oil and gas sector, its skills and, crucially, its funding. The companies that make their money from oil and gas developments now are the key investors in our renewable energy sector and carbon capture projects—that is undeniable. We must make the UK an attractive place to invest in all energies in order to attract and keep multinational companies here, and to keep them investing

here in the future. We have to draw only a very short line to realise that if we dismiss, alienate and penalise the traditional oil and gas parts of energy companies, the boards of those same companies will turn their backs on the UK for more sympathetic and attractive investment opportunities elsewhere. We would lose not just the current investment in oil and gas, but the potential for investment in renewable energy.

Does the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero or the Minister expect that we will have stopped using oil and gas by 2030? Of course not, so why are we banning new oil and gas licences and cutting off our own domestic energy supply? Why are the Government happy to see tens of thousands of home-grown jobs put at risk, and why are they happy to increase our reliance on imports of oil and gas produced with a higher carbon footprint from more volatile markets overseas? If there is a reason other than simply to fulfil their narrative of being a “green energy superpower” I am yet to find it.

The UK, thanks largely to Aberdeen and the north-east, has long been an energy superpower—an oil and gas superpower. That status, built over half a century, has led to the energy sector's skills, expertise, companies and workforce being honed and housed in north-east Scotland—not just the subsurface and technical skills of the likes of geologists and engineers, but, crucially, the experts in supply chains. Those will be vital to the renewable energy projects of the future. Our workers in the oil and gas sector know how to deliver huge, multinational, high-budget projects—exactly the skills that will be needed to deliver the Government's green energy revolution. Again, the Government risk losing those crucial skills by moving too fast and not planning for a jobs and skills transition alongside the energy transition.

Labour idly calls the investment allowance aspect of the windfall tax a “loophole” and plans to remove it and increase the tax rate to 78%; indeed, it boasts about doing so. Yet there are estimates that the combination of no new licences and changes to the windfall tax will cost £20 billion in tax revenues and risk up to 100,000 direct and indirect jobs. Last year, the leader of the GMB union said that Labour's plans to end new oil and gas licences are “self-defeating”. I agree.

Mr Holden: Does my hon. Friend agree that while windfall taxes can be levied on oil and gas that is extracted in the UK, we will not get those revenues for decades if we do not have oil and gas exploration in the North sea? We will see windfall taxes going to foreign Governments across the world but none coming here. Does she agree that it makes no sense at all, for jobs in Scotland or for the UK Exchequer, not to have oil and gas exploration in the North sea?

Harriet Cross: I absolutely agree. It is so important for all those reasons—for jobs and future tax revenues—that we retain our domestic supply of oil and gas. Alongside the leader of the GMB calling the Government's plans “self-defeating”, the former leader of Aberdeen council quit Labour last year, saying its plans were a “brutal attack” on the sector. Again, I agree.

Just as Rome was not built in a day, the experience and expertise of the oil and gas sector—the energy sector—did not develop in a day. However, the vital

[*Harriet Cross*]

skills and investment that we will rely on to deliver the transition to cleaner, greener energy will be lost in no time at all if the Government do not listen, appreciate them and act to protect them. The warning signs are there, and we must not ignore them. Without the existing workforce, the energy transition will take longer, be more expensive, and be less efficient—truly an unwanted trilogy for any Government.

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

1.10 pm

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to make my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for St Helens North during this important debate. Before my election to this place, I was the leader of St Helens borough council and the Liverpool city region lead member for net zero, so this debate is on a subject that I care deeply about, and one that I hope to contribute to in the years ahead. If the House will indulge me briefly, we are at the end of the school year in England, so speaking also as a former teacher, I put on record my thanks and respect for teachers, teaching assistants and all school staff. I know the challenges they have to overcome, how hard they have to work, and the difference they make as a result. I hope that they all have a very well-earned break in the coming weeks and that, if they are not already by a pool, they are very soon.

I congratulate all new Members who have made their first contributions in this place so far. The previous maiden speech was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell); with his constituency's connection to Elvis and his own piano lessons, I hope he will be joining the new parliamentary rock band, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) is keen to get set up. If they need a roadie, I am available. All the maiden speeches so far have set a very high bar, and it is great to be a Member of a Parliament that looks and sounds like the country that we represent. It is diverse, and it is strong as a result. I also thank all parliamentary staff who have worked so hard in recent weeks, helping me and all of us to find our way around.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Conor McGinn. He served St Helens North and the country with dedication, helping to secure significant funding for our town centres and delivering Helen's law and equal marriage in Northern Ireland. There are many people on both sides of the House who worked with him and will miss seeing him around the place, and I know they will join me in wishing him, his wife Kate, and their children the very best.

It is the honour of my working life to be elected to serve St Helens North as its Member of Parliament. I grew up in the constituency, in the former mining village of Haydock—a person from Haydock is known locally as a Yicker, and I am fairly certain that I am the first Yicker elected to this place. I grew up there in the 1980s, raised by my mum and dad, who themselves grew up in Blackbrook and Parr. Growing up at that time in St Helens, I could not help but be aware of politics. Decisions taken in this place by the then Conservative Government deeply affected my community and the people in it, and not for the better. I had to wait until

I was 17 to experience a Government who demonstrated that they cared about communities like mine and people like me.

My own children are now 11 and seven, and as their dad I am relieved for them that they will grow up under a Labour Government who are passionate about improving life for them and their generation, creating opportunities, and rebuilding Britain brick by brick. I thank the voters of St Helens North for giving me the opportunity to prove that government and politics can be a force for good. I owe a huge amount of thanks to my family, especially my mum and dad, and above all my wife Helen and my two children. Members in all parts of the House will know that you cannot do this job and do it well without the support of your family, and that is certainly true in my case.

My home of St Helens North is made up of historic, distinctive villages around and including the towns of St Helens and Newton-le-Willows. The industrial revolution and all the advances made by our country in the 1800s and beyond simply would not have happened without the toil and ingenuity of working people in the communities that I am now proud to represent. From the railways to chemicals and canals, from coal to glass and farming, it was the people of my constituency and many other similar areas across the north of England who built and shaped the 20th century.

My constituency and the wider borough of St Helens are now home to thousands of businesses, from multinational brands to innovative and hard-working small and medium-sized companies. We are also home to Parkside in Newton-le-Willows, a former colliery site that—thanks to the hard work of previous MPs, the Labour council, our partner Langtree, and the city region—is now being regenerated and developed into one of the most significant employment and investment sites in the north-west of England, with huge potential for rail freight and advanced manufacturing. We need to make sure that young people have the skills and opportunities to access the jobs that this development and others will create in the years to come. This week's announcements about Skills England are therefore extremely welcome.

My constituency is also a hotbed of sport. Boxing, darts and numerous amateur clubs thrive in St Helens North. We are home to Haydock Park racecourse, the world's oldest open rugby club at Liverpool St Helens, which was founded in 1857, fantastic cricket and football clubs, and St Helens rugby league club—three-time rugby league world champions. Although the ground is technically in St Helens South and Whiston, it does live in the hearts and souls of many people in St Helens North, including mine.

We are also home to a magnificent and hard-working charity and voluntary sector. Our churches and community groups work all year round to support the most vulnerable, and this, to me, is what lies at the heart of what I love most about my home and the people I share it with. I had the responsibility of leading the local council through the pandemic, working hand in hand with many fantastic local organisations, as well as public and private sector partners. The kindness and strength that my community showed during those times was overwhelming, as it was, I know, in most of the country. At the start of the pandemic, we set up a campaign

called St Helens Together to co-ordinate support, and I am proud to say that that ethos is still with us, as we work to collaborate on tackling the challenges we face. In my role as MP, I am excited to continue supporting that work and the many fantastic people and organisations involved.

Once proudly Lancastrian, and to many of us still exactly that, my constituency, and the wider borough, is now also a leading member of the Liverpool city region, working to deliver the jobs, transport, skills and clean energy that St Helens North and the region needs—which brings me to the subject of this morning’s debate. As I mentioned at the start of my remarks, I was the Liverpool city region lead for net zero before my election to this place, and I had the privilege of being involved in projects such as HyNet, and Mersey Tidal, which has the potential to power 1 million homes and create thousands of high-skilled jobs, and in St Helens we are delivering Glass Futures, which is a world-leading project that will decarbonise the global glass industry—no small boast.

Our metro mayor, Steve Rotherham, and local leaders, including our new St Helens Borough Council leader, Anthony Burns, are ambitious for what we can achieve. Just as we led the world in the first industrial revolution, so we can lead it in the green industrial revolution. The threat of climate change is real, and it is urgent, but the mission to tackle it and the journey to net zero, if done in the right way, can also be an opportunity for new jobs, new investment, new skills and new opportunities for workers and for businesses—growing our local and regional economy and at the same time protecting our energy security in a volatile world. Great British Energy is just one vital and exciting part of Labour’s broader agenda for government, and it is why I was proud to vote for the measures in the King’s Speech.

Since those votes earlier this week, there has rightly been a lot of attention on child poverty, and, as someone who has been concerned about this for almost all my working life, and who has tried to raise the issue for years, I am delighted that it is finally being talked about. The previous Labour Government lifted children out of poverty, and I have no doubt that this Government will too. But, if we are going to lift children and their families out of poverty, it has to be a whole-Government approach. Everything is connected to everything else.

We need the child poverty strategy, and action to follow it urgently, but we also need economic stability and a strong focus on inclusive growth. We need Great British Energy and affordable energy. We need new social and genuinely affordable homes. We need new jobs and the new deal for working people. We need investment in our town centres and high streets, investment in public services and the staff who provide them, and high aspirations for every single child, starting with a properly funded, properly resourced, broad education. Those are the manifesto commitments I supported this week.

It will not surprise anyone to hear that, as a former teacher, I am a firm believer that there is no greater tool for social mobility or personal fulfilment than education, and I am evidence of it. I was a shy and quiet working-class kid at school, and it was not until I went to sixth-form college, and particularly university, that I eventually gained the confidence to believe in myself and stand up in front of others and speak—and I would never have dreamed that I would be doing it here in this place.

I would not be here today if it had not been for that experience of higher education, and I think we should resist at all costs any of the growing arguments that some degrees and time spent learning are worthless, or that too many young people are doing degrees. What I suspect some of those behind such claims mean is, “too many of the wrong people”. Well, if it is good enough for the children of the wealthy, it is good enough for working-class kids like me and those to come.

All children deserve those opportunities, including those with special educational needs. There is a crisis right now in the system, which is leaving too many children and their families waiting far too long for assessment, and then, when they are assessed, they too often do not get the support they need, despite the best efforts of their schools and school staff. Whether they are children in mainstream education with dyslexia or autism, or children in special schools with more complex needs, every child deserves to be able to access a full and vibrant curriculum with adequate support and adjustments to help them achieve their best. The parents of these children are every bit as ambitious for them as any other parent, just as parents of state school pupils are equally ambitious as those who can afford private schools. All they ask, like any parent or any child, is for a fair chance.

I am encouraged to hear our new Government talking about these issues already, and about the challenges that our schools, pupils and their families face. I intend to do all I can to help deliver the change that they, and we, all need. If young people are to access the jobs of today and tomorrow—in AI and life sciences, clean energy and more—we must be focused on opening every possible door, not closing them.

In conclusion, we have been sent to this place with a mandate to change the country and to change lives for the better. There is a huge amount to do, but Labour’s plans for the country are ambitious and, most importantly, deliverable. For as long as I am in this place, I will do all I can to help give all our children and young people the tools and opportunity to reach their potential, and to ensure that the benefits of the change we will bring are felt by people in St Helens North, as well as the country as a whole.

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

1.20 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your appointment to your new role. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Helens North (David Baines) on his maiden speech and election to Parliament. He is right to remind us all about the role of aspiration and all children seeking to do their best. I must pay tribute to my parents: to my father for sparking my interest in politics, and my mother for telling me, when I was 17, “If you don’t try, you’ll never know what you can do.”

It is truly the honour of my life to take my seat in this place. I am the fourth person to serve Mid Sussex since the constituency was created in 1974. I thank my predecessor, now the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), who has already given her time and support in relation to urgent issues affecting children in both our constituencies. It would be amiss

[Alison Bennett]

not to acknowledge the noble Lord Soames in another place, who is held in high regard by the good people of Mid Sussex.

Due to the vagaries of boundary changes, I had to go back some 50 years to the maiden speech given by the late Baron Renton to find the original and only maiden speech made by a Member of Parliament for Mid Sussex. On reading that 1974 maiden speech, I briefly considered a simple copy-and-paste job, such is the relevance of his speech echoing through the decades to the moment we find ourselves in today. He raised concerns about the expansion of Gatwick airport, about housing growth without vital infrastructure, and about doctors and teachers not being able to afford a house. All those things are important to people in my constituency, as well as to the Liberal Democrats.

Of special note was Baron Renton's call for more generous attendance and disability allowances, so that people can be properly cared for by loved ones in their own home. The importance of having a care system that truly works and genuinely supports carers is critical to ensuring that we live in a civilised society, where regardless of someone's life stage and their physical or mental health, they can live the best life possible and achieve their potential. We must care about care. We must make that a priority of this new Parliament.

A significant proportion of Mid Sussex, and the area that is my home, was formerly—given the most recent boundary changes—part of the Arundel and South Downs constituency. I thank the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) for his courteous and prompt handover of casework. I probably owe a bigger debt of gratitude to his predecessor, Lord Herbert of South Downs. The noble Lord might not realise it, but he played a hand in lighting the touchpaper on my political journey that has led me to be here today. During the EU referendum campaign, the noble Lord was chairman of Conservatives for Reform in Europe. He kindly agreed to come to my village one afternoon to join a cross-party stall for remain that I was organising. It might be said that he inspired me. As a Liberal Democrat, I will always advocate closer ties with our European allies and neighbours. We believe that, in a world this unstable and dangerous, we are stronger when we turn to face our closest friends and neighbours. Co-operation, not antagonism, is the best way of tackling the challenges that our planet faces.

What of Mid Sussex? I feel confident in asserting that I and all my predecessors agree that the stunning beauty of our corner of England is spectacular. With the High Weald area of outstanding natural beauty in the north, and the South Downs national park in the south, we are truly blessed. I have felt truly blessed to call Mid Sussex my home for the past 12 years, not only because of its beauty but because of its brilliant people. It is a place where extraordinary things can and do happen because people pull together and step up. If it is not extraordinary enough that Mid Sussex, which had a Conservative majority of 27,000 back in 2012, has just elected a Liberal Democrat, just this week former England player Gareth Barry signed for Hurstpierpoint football club—a village football team—and Nathan Hales is competing in the shooting at the Paris Olympics. We are all rooting for Nathan and the whole of Team GB.

However, it is about more than individual effort; it is about local collective determination. The village of Cuckfield has a proud identity, and it even made a unilateral declaration of independence in 1966 over the venue of the annual donkey grand national. The Bentswood Hub in Haywards Heath helps people young and old with their mental health, bills and housing. The Burgess Hill Pantry is trying to find a way to break the cycle of food bank dependency. This weekend, local charity Kangaroos is celebrating 30 years of helping children with learning disabilities and their families.

There are also incredible groups working to tackle the climate crisis, which brings me to the subject of today's debate. Fairer World Lindfield, Hurst Rethink, and Greener Hassocks and Ditchling are tireless advocates and campaigners for the idea of starting something to tackle the climate crisis rather than waiting for the Government to get on board. Greener Hassocks and Ditchling has put solar panels on the roof of Downlands community school in Hassocks. The Bolney wine estate has, in conjunction with the Brighton Energy Cooperative, put a solar array on the roofs of its winery, which now generates over 50% of the energy required to produce half a million bottles of wine.

However, local groups can only do so much; they need the Government to create an environment in which it is easy to make the energy transition. Speeding up grid connections, for example, can currently take up to three years. We need to make better use of space that has no other purpose—industrial rooftops or the sides of railway lines—including for solar arrays. The will is there in Mid Sussex and, I am sure, right across the country. We need to do more and we must make it easy. Our communities, our constituents, our children and as yet unborn generations demand nothing less.

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

1.28 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and may I congratulate you on your elevation to the Chair?

I am grateful for this opportunity to make my maiden speech, especially during this debate, given that Scotland is at the heart of the Government's plans to make the UK a green energy superpower. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), who gave such a fantastic tribute to her constituency, and indeed all other hon. Members who have spoken with such passion and eloquence during their maiden speeches, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) and for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton)—I am glad that he is no longer in the Chamber to hear my mispronunciation.

I extend my gratitude to all parliamentary staff and those involved in the induction processes. Their limitless patience and understanding, and the wealth of information that they provided, have made a daunting process much easier to navigate, and they have done it all with welcoming smiles on their faces, so I thank them.

As many mentioned yesterday, this is no ordinary job, and there are no 9 to 5 hours. It would be impossible to do this without the love and support of our families, friends and campaign teams. To my husband and our three children, our parents and friends, including those in our Labour family, I say, “Thank you for your patience, your encouragement and your steadfast faith in me.”

It is an incredible honour and privilege to serve as the first representative of the new constituency of Bathgate and Linlithgow. I must thank my predecessor, Martyn Day, for his service to the former constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk. He served as a Member of this place for nine years and, prior to that, as a councillor representing his hometown of Linlithgow for 16 years—a remarkable quarter century of public service, for which I thank him. I must also pay tribute to the former MP Michael Connarty, a friend and colleague who is always on hand with advice and support.

Campaign trails can be tough, with long hours, many miles walked, thousands of doors knocked and mountains of Haribo consumed—other brands are available. One of the greatest pleasures of my campaign was meeting so many people who shared personal and heartwarming accounts of the help they received from the former Father of the House, Tam Dalyell, or who simply knew him as “Tam.” The affection and respect in which he is held to this day is something to which I can only aspire, and I will endeavour to live up to his example of dedicated service to constituents. I cannot confirm or deny whether this will involve being awkward.

I am not a Bathgate bairn. I chose to make Bathgate my home almost 17 years ago, leaving behind Scotland’s greatest city, Glasgow, to lay down roots for my family, and I could not have made a better decision. With the beauty of the Bathgate hills on my doorstep, as well as the Beecraigs and Polkemmet country parks, the Kinneil local nature reserve and the shorelines at Bo’ness and Blackness, I am never far from stunning and tranquil countryside. We must seek to protect and preserve this natural beauty for future generations.

Key to this are our efforts to reach our net-zero targets and combat climate change, which is causing significant damage to our environment, but let us be clear that our natural environment also has a key role to play in achieving our goals, so it is in our interests to do all we can to protect it.

With the passion and commitment shown by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero and his team, ably represented today by the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), and the ambitious plans that they have set out, including on support for community energy projects, which I welcome as a co-operator, I am confident that we will leave a legacy for future generations to enjoy.

Our landscape also tells the story of our industrial and manufacturing heritage. From the shale bings across the constituency, and the former brickworks and foundries, to the former British Leyland site, Plessey Semiconductors—now Whiteside business park—and the Pyramids business park, which once housed Motorola, the people of the Bathgate and Linlithgow constituency have always embraced change and technological advances. The constituency has a highly skilled and flexible workforce, with opportunities attracting workers from across the

central belt, including the Glasgow overspill, which is still referred to as such today, despite many living in the area for almost 50 years.

I recall my first visit to Aldo’s chippy in Bathgate, when the lady behind the counter, recognising my accent, asked if I wanted salt and vinegar rather than salt and sauce, which is a topic of heated debate between Glasgow and Edinburgh colleagues—of course, the correct answer is salt and vinegar.

However, the story of the constituency has not always been one of prosperity. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the miners’ strike and the subsequent closure of Polkemmet colliery after the pit pumps were switched off, flooding the galleries. The smouldering slag heap has been removed, and new houses have been built as part of one of the biggest regeneration projects in Europe, but the town of Whitburn and the surrounding communities were devastated, with many families enduring severe hardship.

The mistakes of the past must not be repeated. Lessons must be learned about the impact of such loss on individuals, on families and on entire communities. That is why I support the fight to keep Grangemouth working and to keep the jobs on which many of my constituents rely, particularly in Bo’ness and Linlithgow. I thank my hon. Friends on the Front Bench for their proactive approach to working towards a sustainable future for the site; I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), who has been steadfast and vocal in his support for the campaign.

While we honour our history and the traditions of the past, we look to the future with hope and ambition. We are situated at the heart of Scotland, with easy access across the central belt via the M8 and M9 and rail routes to our great cities and beyond—with the unfortunate exception of Winchburgh, which still awaits its train station. More people are choosing to live in the constituency, and more companies are choosing to locate there to do business, including in manufacturing, technology, communications, logistics, retail and hospitality.

Tourism also drives our local economy, particularly in the royal burgh of Linlithgow. With the royal palace set aside the loch and the peel, St Michael’s church and its newly refurbished crown of thorns, the Union canal, the historic canal basin it passes through, and other treasures, there are plenty of reasons to linger longer in Linlithgow. In Bo’ness, we have the steam railways museum, the motor museum, the restored Hippodrome theatre and numerous places of interest.

We are also seeing a growth in tourism as a result of the increase in TV and film production in the area. The Blackness Bay distillery, set in the picturesque village of Blackness, is one example: it is benefiting from the increase in visitors to the castle as a result of the success of “Outlander”. I can tell those who have not visited yet that they will receive the warmest of welcomes from Sheena and Colm at the distillery. I also want to mention the major historic house attractions of Kinneil House, Hopetoun House and House of the Binns, the ancestral home of the Dalyell family, as places to visit.

As a Labour and Co-operative Member, I see the opportunities to expand the co-operative economy, putting power directly in the hands of local people for the benefit of local communities. I look forward to working with fellow co-operators to do just that.

[Kirsteen Sullivan]

Although jobs and opportunities are on our doorstep, too many people still face barriers to employment and many are not earning enough to get by. That creates huge demand on local food banks and other vital support services, including those offered by our local third sector organisations, which do a tremendous and invaluable job. Child poverty is a scandal that blights communities across the country and in my constituency, but it does not exist in a vacuum. Low pay, high rent, high mortgages, exorbitant energy bills and the rising cost of food all contribute to severe financial pressures on families. That is why I welcome the announcement of the child poverty taskforce, which will bring together voices inside Government and those of outside experts to take a holistic and targeted approach to tackling this scourge and ensuring that every child has a chance to achieve their goals, irrespective of their background.

With more people choosing to live in the Bathgate and Linlithgow constituency, we are seeing increased pressure on vital local services, which are significantly underfunded, as well as pressure on GP surgeries and on our local infrastructure. Both the Avon gorge junction and the Burghmuir junction are in serious need of upgrading. With under-investment in bus transport at a Scottish level, our more rural communities, such as Greenrigg, Newton, Philpstoun, Bridgend, Torphichen, Westfield, Blackridge, Seafield and even the town of Blackburn, are struggling to keep connected. It is crucial that investment in vital services and local infrastructure keeps pace with development, and that is something that I will champion in my constituency.

As a young girl growing up in the small village of Lennoxton at the foot of the Campsie hills, never did I think that I would be standing here in the House of Commons as one of 263 female MPs, the highest ever number of women representatives. That did not just happen; we are here only because of the women who forged the way for us, such as the incomparable Harriet Harman, who I had the pleasure of meeting for the first time at last year's Edinburgh festival. It is empowering to see so many incredible Labour women take their rightful place on our Front Benches. Their example will let young girls today know that they can be here one day, too.

While the increase in women Members to 40% of this place is hugely welcomed, we still have much work to do to achieve 50:50 representation. As a councillor, I worked to remove barriers to participation, doing my bit to ensure that council chambers started to reflect the communities that we represent. I pledge to continue that work with hon. Members in and across this Chamber.

Finally, I think most people here would agree that our politics has been mired by division and scandal in recent years, and that has undermined public trust in politicians. We have a duty to restore that trust, which is key to our democracy. In Scotland, there has been far too much finger pointing, with representatives retreating to their respective trenches and endless constitutional debates that ultimately deliver nothing for the people of Scotland. I welcome the new approach of working with the devolved Governments, and the response from the Scottish Government on issues such as the tobacco and vapes Bill and, hopefully, a UK-wide deposit return scheme. This relationship reset will be further strengthened

by the new council of nations and regions, which will facilitate a return to constructive engagement and co-operation in the interests of the people we are all here to serve.

For my part, I will work with hon. Members in this place and with elected representatives in all chambers to deliver for the people of Bathgate and Linlithgow. My constituents have bestowed their faith on me, and for that I thank them. It is a responsibility that I will carry every single day, and I pledge to be the champion and advocate they need and deserve.

1.43 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is my pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan). I congratulate her on her eloquent and passionate speech, and particularly on her call for gender balance. I am sorry to tell her, though, that her use of the native tongue appears to have brought the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) back to the Chamber. Whether that is to congratulate her or correct her, I am not quite sure.

Moving swiftly on, the area that I am privileged to represent has been at the heart of the UK's energy production for 50 years and more, and it is now poised to be at the forefront of a renewable energy revolution. Frankly, we could and should be much further along the road to energy transition, but we are where we are. The Government have said that they want us to become a clean energy superpower, but I regret that they have scaled back on their original ambitions to invest £28 billion in order to realise that goal. Nevertheless, I hope that they will chart a pragmatic and constructive way forward.

The journey to net zero is well under way in Scotland, with estimates suggesting that the renewables sector already supports around 42,000 jobs. The UK, though, is behind schedule when it comes to investing in the infrastructure, including the grid infrastructure, that those projects will require. The unrealistic pricing of contracts for difference has held back the development of offshore wind. The new Government need to address that issue with the same urgency with which they are moving on other matters.

The north-east of Scotland has been the European capital of oil and gas for many decades. Now we have the opportunity to be the net zero capital. We have enormous potential to capitalise on offshore wind generation and the development of green hydrogen. These are time-limited opportunities, especially as we have ambitions to develop lucrative supply chains, as well as technologies and manufacturing that have significant export potential. In the longer term, that would be the prize for our economic future.

I want to impress on Ministers today the case for bringing the HQ of GB Energy to the north-east of Scotland. Just look at a map: the bulk of offshore renewables production will be within a 100-mile radius of Aberdeen. The ports that will be essential to servicing the sector, most notably Peterhead and Fraserburgh in my constituency, are on the east coast, close to the Moray Firth. There are also important potential roles for smaller ports. We already have a workforce with relevant skills and unrivalled experience. We also have the most to lose; according to research published last

year by Robert Gordon University, around one in five jobs across north-east Scotland is in the oil and gas sector. I do not want to see a repeat of what the Thatcher Government did in mining and steelmaking communities across Scotland and elsewhere. Perhaps as much as 80% of skills in oil and gas are crossover skills. We must support that crossover.

Successive UK Governments have used the North sea as a cash cow. Some £10.6 billion flowed into the Treasury coffers in 2022-23, but there has not been a great deal to show for it in Aberdeen city or Aberdeenshire, in terms of infrastructure or investment in that crucial transition. I hope that can change going forward.

As we debate the need to address climate change, improve energy security and deliver a fairer deal for consumers, it is important to acknowledge the reality: we will continue to need oil and gas for some time to come. Many of us are still using gas to heat our home. Fuel poverty is very real. High standing charges and a cold climate is a brutal combination that pushes thousands upon thousands of households into energy poverty. Most of us still use cars that run on petrol or diesel. In areas like mine, where distances are greater, public transport is more limited. Colder winter temperatures mean electric vehicles work less well and the use of traditional vehicles is accentuated. Our reliance on fossil fuels is falling, but it is not about to disappear. Oil and gas will continue to be part of our energy mix for some time, which is why it is important that ongoing production is in line with climate compatibility criteria, and is managed in a way that does not lead to a premature winding down of production in the North sea. However, the current fiscal regime for North sea production has created a very real and present risk. It has the potential to cost thousands of jobs and saddle the Treasury with cumulative decommissioning costs.

I ask Ministers to look at the impact that the energy profits levy has had on jobs and productivity, consider the role of the energy security investment mechanism, and acknowledge the importance of investment allowances. Why? Because the fiscal regime in the North sea is holding back investment in energy transition. We need to recognise that North sea operators are, in many cases, those who are making the biggest investment in renewables. If the Government really want to unlock the potential of the renewable energy sector, they need to work with those who can invest on the scale required and over the necessary timeframes, and who already have an experienced, expert workforce at their disposal. I would welcome the Minister's comments, in his summing up, on the Government's plans for a fairer fiscal environment across the energy sector.

I will make one final point, on carbon capture and storage. We need to press on with projects such as the Acorn project at St Fergus precisely because they are cutting edge and have tremendous potential to create new technology, knowledge and expertise. We have a globally competitive subsea supply chain in the north-east of Scotland. We excel in developing solutions to technical challenges. We see challenges as opportunities, and we seek to be leaders in innovative new technologies. There is the potential to deliver fair energy prices for consumers, improve energy security and help us to meet our international climate obligations. The north-east of Scotland and communities in my constituency in particular will be at the centre of the changes ahead. I urge Ministers

to make good on their promises, and deliver a managed and just transition for those workers and communities on the frontline.

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

1.49 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make my maiden speech to the House in this debate on making Britain a clean energy superpower. I congratulate you on your elevation.

It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), who always speaks with great eloquence and passion. It is also a privilege to speak in a debate led by the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks). I offer him my warmest congratulations as he takes up his position, and I wish him well, as I am sure we all do.

I recognise the great honour that has been bestowed on all of us to be in this House, and I am so proud and fortunate to represent my constituency of West Dunbartonshire. It contains three very distinct communities, the Vale of Leven and the towns of Dumbarton and Clydebank, the latter of which is my home town. I have lived in Clydebank with my family all my life, and I pledge to work tirelessly in this place for all my fellow residents.

My constituency can best be described as stretching from the banks of the River Clyde to the shores of Loch Lomond, from industrial Clydeside to the gateway to the highlands. I therefore can boast of the unrivalled natural beauty of Loch Lomond and Dumbarton castle, one of Scotland's royal castles. The town of Dumbarton is the ancient capital of Strathclyde, granted royal burgh status by Alexander II in 1222, and it was home to Denny's shipyard, which built the Cutty Sark. The Vale of Leven is renowned for its Turkey red dyed and printed cottons, exported across the globe. Singer's factory in my home town, where my late father worked, made the famous sewing machines, and there was a time last century when virtually every home in the land possessed a Singer sewing machine.

Clydebank is synonymous with John Brown's shipyard, where the Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mary, the QEII and the Royal Yacht Britannia were built—a history we are rightly proud of. However, in doing that, we gained an unwanted legacy as the European hotspot for asbestos-related industrial illness and death. It is on that cause, among countless others, that I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Martin Docherty-Hughes. Martin was a powerful advocate in this place in the pursuit of truth and justice for the victims of asbestos-related industrial death and for their families in the fight for fair compensation. I know how closely he worked with the Clydebank Asbestos Group, and it is now incumbent on me to pick up the baton. Martin Docherty-Hughes conducted himself with great dignity before and after the general election, and I wish to thank him for his nine years of service and the generosity and courtesy he extended to me throughout. I wish him the very best in his future endeavours.

[Douglas McAllister]

The great honour of representing West Dunbartonshire is emphasised yet further when I reflect on my other predecessors who served with great distinction in this House, including Gemma Doyle and my great friend Tony Worthington, who represented the former constituency of Clydebank and Milngavie. It is truly humbling to follow them and, of course, the Lord Speaker, Lord McFall of Alcluith, who is also renowned for his chairmanship of the Treasury Committee in this place.

Many of the great industries of the Clyde are sadly gone, consigned to history, and while as a Bankie I am rightly proud of our history, it is to our future that I look. I was elected by my constituents to deliver change, and I am determined to do that and to play my part in ensuring that all communities across West Dunbartonshire can look forward to a dynamic and prosperous future. The work of the regeneration of Clydeside and the town centres of Clydebank, Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven will be my priority. The Government have the ambition to grow the economy, make work pay, and create jobs and new employment opportunities for our young people, and I have great confidence in the abilities of the youth of West Dunbartonshire to match those ambitions. Providing them with the same life opportunities as children in any other constituency across this great nation of ours will be my driving mission.

I pledged during the election campaign to fight to ensure that everyone in my constituency has access to that very basic of rights: a safe, warm and affordable home. My local authority of West Dunbartonshire declared a housing emergency in May, amid unprecedented pressures on the ability to meet the needs of those in social housing or seeking a council property. I welcome my Government's ambition to unlock the barriers to building more homes, but it is essential that they are affordable so as to tackle that injustice and insecurity. That is why we campaigned for a publicly owned GB Energy company headquartered in Scotland. It is therefore particularly satisfying to make my maiden speech during this debate. GB Energy will cut bills in West Dunbartonshire, deliver energy security and put Scotland at the forefront of the clean energy revolution. It will be publicly owned and will utilise our extraordinary natural resources.

That brings me back to the natural resources of the River Clyde. The yards may have gone, but the future is with clean energy. On the site of the former John Brown's shipyard, to which I referred earlier, is now the West Dunbartonshire energy centre, a groundbreaking project featuring Scotland's largest water source heat pump installation, which takes water from the River Clyde and uses it to generate heat. This publicly owned district heating system is truly groundbreaking, helping West Dunbartonshire to transition towards a net zero future. Crucially, it also allows us to address the fuel poverty of my fellow residents. I will be delighted to welcome the Minister to visit the centre in the very near future.

In taking my place in this House, I stepped away from 25 years of appearing daily in courts throughout Scotland. As a solicitor, I represented some of the most vulnerable members of our society. As I step away from the profession to take my seat in this House, I do so with a heavy heart. I leave behind a demoralised profession ignored by successive Governments, who failed to recognise that a

properly funded legal aid scheme is the bedrock of a fair society. My experience is with the Scottish courts, but I understand that south of the border the system is in similar peril. I am sure the House will recognise that upholding, respecting and promoting the rule of law requires us to ensure access to justice, fair representation and a widening of the scope of legal aid eligibility, and also to recognise that the courts are as vital a public asset and as much of a foundation stone of society as schools, social services and hospitals.

I also leave 21 years of unbroken service to local government as a councillor at West Dunbartonshire. Local government is on its knees, starved of vital funding, the last of the low-hanging fruit long since picked. Frontline services are under serious threat, and I wish for this House to recognise those across all political parties and in all public offices at local government level, and all the highly dedicated staff who share the same desire as we all do across this House to advance the wellbeing of our local communities. They deserve greater support from us.

My constituency is supported in this endeavour by a wealth of local charities and community organisations. As provost of West Dunbartonshire, I gained unique insight into this vital support chain, which includes groups such as Mentor Scotland that provide mental health support, as well as the Men's Shed, local not-for-profit trusts such as Flourishing Faifley, Bags full of Love, Duntocher village hall, Antonine Sports and the Skylark IX Recovery Trust. These and the countless faith groups across my constituency providing food banks and shelter truly are the best of our society.

I cannot finish my maiden speech without recognising the NHS and all its staff. The NHS is in my DNA. My mother was a nurse and a midwife. In particular, I wish to thank the staff at the Beatson hospital in Glasgow. The NHS saved my life back in 2007 when I battled leukaemia. I appreciate that I am fortunate to be in this House, and I will not waste this opportunity to help save our NHS and to ensure that this Government improve our national health service—a service for all, providing care on the basis of need, regardless of ability to pay.

This son of a factory worker and NHS nurse, husband to Alison, father to Tom and Peter, gives this House a solemn undertaking that no matter how long or short my time in this place may be, my defining mission will be to fight for a fairer society for my constituents of West Dunbartonshire and be relentless in my duty to serve their interests.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I will start the Front-Bench wind-ups at 2.10 pm. I call James MacCleary to make his maiden speech.

1.59 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) for his excellent speech. He is clearly very knowledgeable about his area and I think he will be a hugely positive addition to this House.

It is a huge privilege for me to represent the Lewes constituency. It is my home and it is where I am raising, with my partner, our young family. I want to start there, with my family—my partner, Donna, and our two young children, Amelia and Elliott. I want to thank them for their support. In fact, Elliott asked me to bring you guys a message today: he says that if anyone is in the market for trading any Pokémon cards, he is open to a discussion. It has been a really long road, but they have been there every single step of the way and I genuinely could not have done this without their help.

I also want to thank the voters in my community for putting their trust in me. That includes those who lent me their support tactically in this election. I will always campaign for electoral reform so that everybody's vote really counts.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Maria Caulfield, who was the MP for Lewes for nine years. Lewes is a very old constituency that can be traced back hundreds of years, and Maria was the first woman to represent the seat. She served in the last Government as a Health Minister and Women's Minister. Among other achievements, she was instrumental in introducing baby loss certificates for parents who have suffered the death of a baby—an important and welcome initiative. We certainly had our differences, but they were political rather than personal, and I sincerely wish Maria and her husband, Steve, all the very best for the future.

Let me tell the House a little bit about my constituency. I will start in our historic county town. Every year, on 5 November, the town of Lewes hosts one of the largest and most anarchic bonfire celebrations. It is an annual manifestation of the town's fiercely independent spirit. The streets are packed with tens of thousands of visitors to see the magnificent effigies that are paraded through the town to the various fire sites. Often, they include prominent political figures, so please remember—I say this in particular to the new Government Front Benchers—that if you are sent an image or a video of an effigy of yourself being blown up in Lewes in November, it really is a great honour. Members will just have to trust me on that.

Down the road on the coast are Newhaven and Seaford, the latter being the largest town in my constituency. It is in desperate need of a new health centre, and I will continue to press for the redevelopment of the existing town centre site. It is also a former Cinque port, with a magnificent sweeping beach that retains the most complete example of a Martello tower on the south coast. Built in the early 19th century to defend the country against a Napoleonic invasion that never came, it is now home to the town's fantastic museum, which I really recommend that Members visit if they are ever there. The town has been represented in its time as a separate borough by not one but two former Prime Ministers, George Canning and William Pitt the Younger.

Seaford ceased to be a port when the River Ouse changed course after a violent storm broke through at Newhaven. Ever since then, Newhaven has been an important port town with a proud industrial heritage and varied history. It also happens to be where I live. Every day, visitors come through Newhaven to use the excellent ferry link to Dieppe and to visit our historic Palmerston fort—or, at least, they will when it completes its £5 million renovation. It is a town experiencing a renaissance after years of neglect, and it will see a new

health hub in the town centre and investment in our outdoor spaces and our fishing industry. It is also a town with some pretty unique claims to fame. Newhaven is the last known whereabouts of Lord Lucan, has a plaque dedicated to Ho Chi Minh, who is said to have worked on the ferry, and has a bench dedicated to the American rapper Eazy-E, for reasons unknown.

At the eastern end of the constituency are Polegate, Willingdon and Stone Cross. Known for their historic windmills, these communities have been at the sharp end of house building, without the necessary infrastructure to support it. I will work with the NHS and local councils to secure the funding needed for the promised new health hub in Willingdon and improvement to health facilities in Polegate. I will also be keeping a very close eye on the Government's proposals for planning.

Running through the middle of the constituency is the South Downs national park. The town of Lewes is in fact the largest town in a national park anywhere in the country. We are also home to the Seven Sisters country park, with its famous cliffs. We have award-winning vineyards and breweries, and a thriving arts and cultural scene that boasts the world-famous Glyndebourne opera house and the Charleston festival. We are lucky to have some picture-perfect villages with their own uniqueness, among them Ditchling, with its art and craft museum showcasing the work that made the village a creative hub in the 20th century, and Plumpton with its racecourse. There is also the giant white outline of the Long Man, who stands guard over Wilmington.

Some of our villages also have unique features. Alfriston is home to the Clergy House—the first property acquired by the National Trust, for £10 in 1896—while Jevington claims to be the birthplace of banoffee pie. We have two beautiful rivers, the Cuckmere and the Ouse, which flow into Seaford bay. Sadly, they have been used by Southern Water as a dumping ground for sewage, and have had sewage discharges in recent weeks. I look forward to seeing the proposals brought forward by this Government to take on sewage dumping.

Moving on to today's debate, it is encouraging to hear support from many Members for ramping up renewable energy. Our constituents, the business community and the UK's international allies are carefully watching this new Government and Parliament to see if we are serious about once again making the UK a leader in the transition to a clean, safe and inclusive low-carbon economy. I hope we will work together in a constructive spirit to show that we are indeed serious and that fine words will be matched by bold action.

Locally, we have seen the benefits of community energy and heat networks. We must ensure that communities that are taking on renewable energy facilities, such as for solar power, can directly benefit. That should include community ownership of smaller-scale schemes. It is not just about energy generation; it is about transmission. Other hon. Members have mentioned delays in renewable energy schemes getting off the ground because of connectivity issues to the grid.

I congratulate the new Minister on his appointment, and I would be delighted to welcome him to my constituency at some stage to discuss the important role that community energy and microgeneration can play in our future energy mix, and introduce him to some of the people working hard on the ground in my community to make it happen.

[James MacCleary]

On a larger scale, we have the major offshore wind array, which is serviced from Newhaven port. The Rampion wind array generates enough energy to power 350,000 homes and was signed off by the then Secretary of State for Energy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). Many hon. Members are parents like me. We all need to be able to look our children in the eye and say that we did everything we could to secure their future and that of all future generations.

Doing the best for our children—for all children—is one of my personal political priorities, particularly through the early years. We need to start treating childcare less as a cost to the taxpayer and more as an investment in the future of our country. In a previous job, I worked in deprived communities across the country to support improving literacy for young children. The transformative effect of supportive learning in the first five years of a child's life is immense. I am pleased to hear the Government talking more about free and subsidised childcare, but that must be matched with a real commitment to funding nurseries and other early years settings properly. Thousands of nurseries have closed down in recent years, and we have to think about supporting early years providers as well as parents.

I am proud to represent my constituency, humbled to sit in this House and determined to make the most of every day that I have to be the best possible MP for the people of Lewes. The last Liberal Democrat to hold the title was the formidable Norman Baker, and I too intend to work hard for every corner of the constituency. In the five years since the last election the country has been through a lot. The highest public offices have, at times, been degraded, and trust in politics remains low. We have an opportunity and a responsibility to get our politics and our country on to a better, fairer, greener and more prosperous path. I look forward to working constructively with the Government and other Opposition parties to help deliver just that.

2.8 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): Not a day goes by when the consequences of our inaction are not hideously illustrated. The wildfires in Canada today should shock us all into action, with 25,000 people having been displaced from their homes. The previous Government continually poured fuel on the fires of the climate crisis, entrenching our reliance on volatile international markets, but this Government have plans to totally turn the corner.

Our journey to becoming a clean energy superpower is not only an environmental imperative but a chance for economic growth and to address the cost of living crisis while making Britain energy-independent. That is why I welcome the Government's plan to launch Great British Energy, a publicly owned company funded by making big oil and gas pay their fair share from the incredible windfalls they have been receiving. This initiative demonstrates a strong commitment to cutting carbon emissions and embracing renewables. It is a crucial step to lowering our bills through a zero-carbon electricity system.

It is so important that we ensure that this step is co-ordinated, working with new initiatives such as Skills England to ensure that across the board we are increasing

training opportunities, especially in key areas such as maritime apprenticeships, which will help with our offshore wind efforts. It is also incredibly important that we unlock the potential of community energy, which has a vast untapped potential for smaller scale renewable schemes that could be owned and operated by local communities, building that resilience into our communities directly. Realising that potential would bring clean, affordable and secure energy to local people.

I very much look forward to working with the Front-Bench team on these issues, and supporting the Bill as it makes its passage through this House. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

2.10 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulate Members from across the House on their wonderful maiden speeches. I had 20 minutes of praise for them, highlighting every aspect of their wonderful speeches, but unfortunately time is limited, so I shall have to give a quick analysis of praise for them all. I am secretly delighted that I do not have to try out my Scottish Gaelic—[*Interruption.*] I know, it is sad but true; that might be for the next debate.

It was wonderful and heart-warming to hear from hon. Members across the House, from East Thanet to every part of Scotland, including the highlands and Glasgow South West, and from South Northamptonshire, and with all Members caring about their local communities and representing all the people who matter and who elected them. That is what matters in this place. I feel that now I am an expert in all things Scotland—never have I been so afraid to talk about and name everything than when I had to do a Burns night toast. I hope that someday I can visit all those wonderful constituencies. It made me realise that Scotland is a very inclusive, diverse and wonderful place, and I would like to sample the whisky and the hospitality from Loch Lomond to the highlands. I praise all hon. Members here today. I am someone whose contributions often make people think, “Gosh, that’s an unusual Beaconsfield accent”, so I am always delighted to hear sparkling speeches from voices less grating than my own—it is nails on a chalkboard, and you adjust over time—celebrating the diversity in the Chamber.

During today's debate we heard some superb maiden speeches from Labour Members, and so many of them! Even I was confused about who are the new Labour MPs—that is how many of them there are, so congratulations. I welcome the Minister to his position. He will definitely be going far, and my claim to fame will be that I got to debate with him first here in the House. He is also a Scottish MP, and I welcome him and congratulate him on his ministerial position.

I am also pleased to be shadowing a department led by a fellow London School of Economics alumnus, but disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here to respond to or open the debate. I know in what high regard he is held by the Labour movement. His high ideals and socialist principles are in the very best intellectual traditions of his party, but he is now in government,

and I fear that the changes he wants to bring about will make working people poorer and put our energy and food security in the hands of Russia and China.

In just three weeks, as my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) and for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) pointed out, the Secretary of State has ignored local communities; he has ignored planning professionals; he has ignored sound decision making; and he has ignored basic economics. He seems to be in a race to deliver higher bills and higher taxes for working people, and a poorer, less safe Britain.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joy Morrissey: I will give way in a moment, but I must make a little progress first, because I have only five minutes if I am to allow time for the Minister.

We on the Conservative Benches will keep calling these plans out for what they are: a dangerous experiment that will damage the British countryside, wreck the livelihoods of hard-working British people and drive up energy bills. Let us examine the progress of this experiment so far. During the election campaign, the Secretary of State got Labour candidates to claim that GB Energy would save £300 on energy bills, but that does not seem to be something that the Government are going to stand behind now. I would ask why that is, and what plans there are for the future in this regard.

The Government have formed an energy company that will not generate a single watt of energy, and will not bring down a single energy bill. They have taken £8 billion of taxpayers' money, and put a shiny brand on it called GB Energy. GB Energy is simply the Government subsidising high-risk projects for the private sector on one hand, while decimating our oil and gas industry with the other. They have set up a new company and claim that it will make profits in five years, with nothing but 14 pages of a hot-air founding statement—with no business plan, no financial forecast, and nothing else.

Wera Hobhouse: Is the shadow Minister not aware it is exactly that negative narrative from her party that has held us back on the path to net zero?

Joy Morrissey: I know that the hon. Member is a strong advocate for her local community, and that is an important cross-party awareness; but we are in this position now, and I say to the Government, "You won, and we are here to hold you to account on your new endeavours. We wish you all the best, but it is our job to hold you to account."

If GB Energy were a private company, no investor would touch it with a bargepole, yet the Government get to play with the money of hard-working British taxpayers while simultaneously hitting them with higher taxes and higher bills in return for that privilege. The Secretary of State doubtless thinks that he is courageously saving the planet, but he is not quite courageous enough to go to Aberdeen, or to be here today, or to speak to those in the North sea who will lose their jobs.

This is now serious. It is serious because the Government are writing cheques that the British people cannot afford and Ministers will never have to pay; it is serious

because they are betraying the trust of local communities; it is serious because they are putting at risk our energy and food security at a time when both have never been more vital; and it is serious because those who will suffer for their net zero purity are working people. These are not plans for a clean energy superpower. They are plans for a weaker, poorer Britain.

2.17 pm

Michael Shanks: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will respond to what has been a very wide-ranging and—until that last speech—a mostly positive debate. I thank all those who have contributed and have brought us their ideas and their huge experience, not just in relation to the green energy transition but in relation to everything from the care system and child poverty to vital matters of public discourse such as what we should put on our chips. That was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), and, for the record, what she said was absolutely right.

I want to say something about the maiden speeches that we have heard today, because it has been genuinely incredible to sit on the Front Bench and listen to them all. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) said a moment ago that they had given her quite a lot to reflect on. I have 20-odd pages of notes here on those wonderful maiden speeches, but I have only 10 minutes in which to sum up. It was not so long ago that I gave my own maiden speech—less than a year ago, in fact—and the same trepidation that I had when I stood up then is with me now. I have to say, on reflection, that I am glad I was the only person giving a maiden speech, after a by-election, because this field of maiden speeches was just a little too good: they were fantastic. The House often comes in for criticism for no longer being the place where we take the moral course or talk about the high values of public service, but in every single one of those maiden speeches, from every part of the House, we heard the real dedication of Members to their communities and the passion with which they want to fight for those communities. I think that this Parliament, the Parliament of 2024, will do a huge amount to change people's lives.

I will turn now to the substance of the debate, but I will come back to some of the maiden speeches if I have time. In her opening remarks, the shadow Secretary of State said that the Conservative party can be proud of its climate record, and in so many ways, if we were to go back years, she would probably be right. But the rhetoric that we are now hearing from this Conservative party is a million miles from that David Cameron conservatism that said we should take the environment seriously. Language in this matter is important. It matters that we talk truthfully when we speak about the opportunities and risks. It matters, too, that we do not conflate issues when there are no grounds for doing so.

I wish to pick out just a few things from the debate today. The shadow Secretary of State and a number of Members raised the issue of bills. Having sat and listened to those contributions, I do wonder where some Members have been for the past few years. There can scarcely be a Member in this House who does not know of the thousands of people up and down this country struggling in fuel poverty, and the millions who are still facing higher bills.

[Michael Shanks]

The reason that we are on this journey is not because of some sort of ideological commitment to net zero, but because we know that it is the only way to deliver the energy security that we need to reduce our dependence on volatile gas prices and to deliver the cheaper energy that we know will bring down bills. The commitment that we made throughout the election has not changed in the slightest. We will bring down people's bills in the long term to avoid those shocks that have cost people so much in their household bills.

In what I thought was a great speech, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) pointed out that this cannot be about growth versus green, which is really important. The two go hand in hand. It is a key part of both our economic strategy and our environmental strategy that we move forward. She also made the point about co-ordinating across Government, which is also important. It is why the Prime Minister himself is chairing these mission boards, so that we can bring together all Departments of State and internal and external voices to drive forward the change that is needed across Government.

On the oil and gas transition, the hon. Members for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) and for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), who are perhaps not surprisingly on the same side in criticising this Government, made a number of points about the North Sea, which are important and which I take on board very seriously. None the less, the suggestion that the North sea is going to close overnight is nonsense and it has to stop being peddled by Members across the House, because it creates unnecessary uncertainty. There will be decades of work in the oil and gas industry in the North sea, whether or not we issue new licences. And, as has been mentioned, the skills, the experience and the infrastructure that is vital for a net zero transition are important. That is why we need to start the just transition now. It is why we should have started it years ago, frankly. We cannot simply bury our heads in the sand and hope that the economic reality of the future will be the same as the past. The North sea is declining as an oil and gas basin. We need to tackle what the future of that looks like now.

On the issue of scaremongering, the various contributions that have touched on solar could mark a really worrying change in the discourse that we are going to have in this House if we carry on the way that we are. The genuine questions about planning are important, and it is right that Members of Parliament are robust—indeed I would be myself as a constituency MP—in the defence of their constituents on these issues. None the less, there is such a thing as nationally important infrastructure, which is important for the whole country. Saying that there is going to be food insecurity because of these solar projects is incredibly dangerous language from the Opposition.

Indeed, the National Farmers Union, responding to some of that scaremongering, said that solar farms do not in any way present a risk to the UK's food security. Solar farms make up less than 1% of the land use in this country. Even if we reach the target that we want to get to, they will still make up a tiny amount of our land use, and they are an important part of our energy infrastructure.

Greg Smith: I accept that the figure at the moment is 1%, but the volume of solar applications coming forward literally every week in my constituency alone means that the cumulative impact will be a hit to food security. I gently ask the Minister to look at the projected numbers for the future, not what we already have.

Michael Shanks *rose*—

Carla Denyer: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will make some progress, because I have only four minutes. If I have time, I will come back to the hon. Lady.

The hon. Gentleman has repeated the point about food insecurity, despite me just saying what the National Farmers Union—which I think is an expert on this topic—has said about it. He has also made a point about the amount of infrastructure in one given area, which is why it is really important that we co-ordinate that infrastructure much better than we do at the moment. That is why the spatial energy plan is so important; the previous Government commenced that work, and we will continue it, because we need a holistic view of all this energy infrastructure so that individual communities do not become saturated with one particular type of infrastructure.

However, I say gently to all hon. Members that at some point we have to accept that some of that infrastructure is nationally important and will have to be sited somewhere. Even if we have offshore cables, that infrastructure, by its very nature, has to come onshore at some point. There will have to be a recognition of the need for infrastructure in communities, but I take the point about the importance of it being well planned.

Mr Holden: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will first give way briefly to the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer).

Carla Denyer: The hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) raised a concern about solar threatening our ability to grow our own food in this country. I respectfully suggest that he checks out the recent research by Exeter University, which shows that we could increase the amount of renewable energy we generate in this country 13 times over using, I believe, less than 3% of the UK's land, and none of the highest-grade agricultural land—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call the Minister.

Michael Shanks: That is a helpful contribution, and I thank the hon. Lady for it. Even if we reached our solar target by 2030, it is a very small amount of land that would be used for what is an important part of our energy infrastructure.

A number of other points were made in this debate that underline how complex some of these decisions are going to be, but also the huge opportunities we have. A number of Members spoke about the industrial opportunity that will come from this green transition, and a number offered up examples from their own constituencies relating to the role of skills, which is going to be so important.

The sense that this is the mission that we need to be on together as a country is also important, because it will take all of us—with all of our expertise, and the challenge that comes from the Opposition—to make the right decisions so that we can have a long-term plan that delivers the net zero future that we need.

Before summing up, I will return to some of the maiden speeches. In particular, taking advantage of being at the Dispatch Box, I want to highlight my colleagues from Scotland who have been returned to this Parliament, who made some fantastic speeches. It was brilliant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) speak in Gaelic during his contribution, which was fantastic. I am disappointed that more of our Lobby colleagues were not in the Chamber to hear him do that, but I am sure they will catch up. The point he made about the importance of involving communities in this future was also made by a number of hon. Members. That needs to take two parts: it needs to be consent and consultation, but it also needs to be a recognition of what the rewards for those communities should be. There are a number of options, because not all communities are aligned on what they think that reward should look like, but it is going to be a critical part going forward.

There were a number of quotes that I will look up in *Hansard*. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar talked about being seasoned with salt, which was wonderful. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) spoke about seeing the world through the long lens: having the discipline to look at some of these difficult, challenging public priorities and recognising that some of the benefits of what we are doing now will not be seen in the next five or 10 years,

but it is none the less important to start the work, is something that we in this place can all bear in mind.

To conclude, since the summer recess is fast approaching, I could not help but notice that as a result of all the maiden speeches, we have produced something of our own staycation guide as we have gone around the House. Very quickly, I will just mention my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), the lido and the safari; the Turner art gallery in East Thanet; Barra, the jewel of the Hebrides with its whisky and salmon in Na h-Eileanan an Iar; the Norman castle in Waveney Valley; Bellahouston park in Glasgow South West, which I know well; one of Becket's miracles—fantastic; I am going to see the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) about that, and also because I now know that she is the one in the Chamber with sweets, which is very helpful—and the Open championship in Central Ayrshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Alan Gemmell) has the privilege of representing the constituency that I was born in, and he made a wonderful speech today. I will also mention Aldo's chippy in Bathgate, Dumbarton castle in West Dunbartonshire, and the delight of being burnt as an effigy in Lewes. I thank the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) for concluding the debate.

With the 15 seconds that I have left, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in the debate. I hope that this is the first of many for them, and that there continues to be a genuine exchange of ideas across the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of making Britain a clean energy superpower.

Pharmacy Provision: Hampton

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

2.30 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I start by congratulating you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your election? It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I also congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We have worked closely together in recent years in the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, so I have no doubt that he will do an excellent job. I suspect that young Lyle is very proud of his granddad right now.

I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate. You might be surprised to learn, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is the first I have managed to secure since my election in 2019, so I want to use this exciting opportunity to bring to the Minister's attention the impact of pharmacy closures on the local community in the Hampton area of my constituency, as well as the immense financial challenges facing community pharmacy right across England. I will also raise concerns about the impenetrable bureaucratic processes, which need overhauling, in new pharmacy licence applications and pharmacy closures.

Let me set the scene. Last autumn, two Boots pharmacies in the Hampton area were closed. One of those pharmacies was in the Hampton North ward, one of three wards of relative deprivation in the London borough of Richmond upon Thames. The west of the ward is within the 20% most deprived areas of the country; it is densely populated with a significant amount of social housing. As a result of that closure in Tangle Park, the entire ward is now without a community pharmacy.

Hampton North is poorly served by public transport: there is no station, and the two bus routes serving the area are notoriously unreliable. The nearest pharmacy is now a mile away on foot, a distance that is difficult to cover for the elderly and those with mobility issues. It is certainly more than a 20-minute walk away, which is the measure that previous Ministers liked to use to highlight pharmacy accessibility. Predictably, those closures have put a lot of pressure on the nearest remaining pharmacies, which face queues and stock issues. Again, that is not exactly convenient or practical for elderly and vulnerable patients.

At this point, I pay tribute to Mike Derry and Healthwatch Richmond for their brilliant work championing local patients and giving them a voice. Healthwatch undertook a survey of some 700 residents in the Hampton area at the start of the year to demonstrate the impact of the closures. One person said:

"I have gone without medication as I can't stand very long. There are queues—I have waited over half an hour."

Healthwatch England highlighted the plight of 87-year-old Gill. She used to just about be able to get across the road from her house to the Tangle Park pharmacy. Now the nearest pharmacy is over a mile away, and Gill, who does not drive, cannot access that service because of the distance that she would have to walk to get there. She even paid the nearest pharmacy to deliver her medicines to her home each month, but in the eight months since she purchased the delivery service, it has shown up only twice. Her carer has to travel to collect the medication in person for her.

Hampton is not unusual in losing pharmacy provision. I am sure that the Minister is aware of the crisis facing the community pharmacy sector. Data from the Community Chemists' Association shows that there has been a net loss of over 1,200 pharmacies—1402 closures and only 179 openings—since 2015. More than a third of those losses have been in the most deprived areas of the country. The National Pharmacy Association reports that the number of pharmacies that have closed so far this calendar year—the equivalent of 10 pharmacies a week—is nearly 50% higher compared with the same point in 2023. As well as independent pharmacies, big chains such as Lloyds Pharmacy and Boots have significantly accelerated closure numbers over the past 18 months. A big driver of these closures is a significant real-terms reduction in funding for pharmacy; that funding has dropped by around 30% since 2015.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Is my hon. Friend aware of the issue of overwhelmed surgeries referring increasing numbers of patients to local pharmacists? I have seen it in my Lewes constituency. Does she agree that this will only contribute further to closures?

Munira Wilson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I congratulate him on his excellent maiden speech. I completely agree with him. We want doctors to use community pharmacy more to alleviate the pressure on other parts of the health service, but frankly, if the pharmacies are not there, the remaining ones will be overwhelmed. I talked to local GPs in the Hampton area following these closures, and they were desperate to see more provision. They thought about trying to set up their own community pharmacy provision, but they just could not make the numbers add up because of the funding shortfall.

The Company Chemists' Association estimates an average funding shortfall of £67,000 per pharmacy. That is based on an analysis of data published by the Department of Health and Social Care in a written parliamentary answer at the beginning of last year. Many pharmacists are left out of pocket, as they are reimbursed less for a number of medications than the price they pay, and there are stories of some using credit cards and overdrafts to purchase medication.

These funding pressures are coupled with major workforce challenges. When I met Boots following the news that it is closing two branches in Hampton, it cited a lack of pharmacists as a major reason for closing some 300 pharmacies across the UK, although commercial pressures were clearly the main driver. Layered on top of these issues are regular medicine supply shortages, which add more work and create more stress for already overstretched pharmacists. Community Pharmacy England reported last year that 92% of pharmacies were having to manage supply issues daily.

It is a perfect storm for community pharmacy at a time when we need preventive healthcare and self-care more than ever. The potential of community pharmacies to improve patient health and reduce the pressure on NHS hospitals and GPs is immense, yet they are closing in their hundreds every year. We should be relying on pharmacies even more to keep the nation healthy. The previous Conservative Government's announcement of the Pharmacy First initiative was very welcome in its ambition, but if pharmacies are not even funded for the

basics right now, with big gaps in provision opening up all over the country, it is hard to see how Pharmacy First's ambitions will be achieved.

The Liberal Democrats would like to see the Government building on the Pharmacy First principle and giving pharmacists more prescribing rights and public health responsibilities. As in so many areas of public health, the "invest to save" argument is compelling, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on what the new Labour Government will do on funding to enable community pharmacy to not just survive, but thrive and grow as an essential part of our primary care infrastructure.

Having addressed the causes of these closures, I will spend some time exploring the processes involved in local communities being informed of pharmacy closures, and their input, or lack thereof, in them, as well as discussing the complete lack of transparency or accountability in relation to applications for new pharmacy licences. For starters, only those organisations designated as "interested parties" in the regulations are informed of new applications, and only their feedback has to be taken into account. Anyone else who is interested, such as me as a local MP, needs to make a freedom of information request, unless someone in the local health community passes on the information. My views, and the views of other people in the community, can be ignored.

To describe the bureaucratic process that sits around new applications as byzantine would be generous. I hope the Minister, Madam Deputy Speaker and other hon. Members will bear with me while I try to explain what happened in Hampton. We are part of the South West London Integrated Care Board, but NHS England has delegated the pharmacy market entry function for the whole of London to the North East London ICB, which is on completely the opposite side of the city. Officials have no local knowledge of our area, no understanding of local transport links and no relationships with the local health system.

Let me start with the closures. The Minister will be aware of the statutory three-month notice period for pharmacy closures; last August, Boots would have had to give NHS England three months' notice of its intentions in Hampton. That information was not passed by NHSE to the Richmond health and wellbeing board. I find that utterly staggering. The first that local councillors, the local health community in the area and I as the MP knew about the planned closures was when Boots placed signs in its windows to inform customers, and concerned constituents started to contact me about the likely impact of the closures.

At the end of August 2023, while this was going on and we were all in the dark, the local health and wellbeing board published a pharmaceutical needs assessment, but it was inaccurate and failed to identify an imminent future gap in need in the Hampton North area because it had not been notified of the closures. The Tangle Park Boots subsequently closed in late October. The Priory Road Boots, which was directly opposite a busy GP surgery, closed in early November.

In November, an application was received for a new independent pharmacy licence on the Tangle Park Boots site. Once again, the local health and wellbeing board was not notified of the application—this time, for two whole months. During this period of complete

silence, the health and wellbeing board issued a supplementary statement to the local pharmaceutical needs assessment, which identified the gap in Hampton. However, because the application for a new pharmacy was made in November, and it referred to the original needs assessment that was made before the supplementary statement was published, it was rejected, even though the application itself identified the gap, which was officially made clear in the supplementary statement subsequently published in December. Not only that, but it took the North East London ICB a full eight months to issue the rejection; that happened earlier this month, even though the decision used evidence received in December to justify the rejection.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you and other hon. Members are still managing to follow this sorry story, I hope you will agree that this decision is utterly perverse. It is also utterly unreasonable that timely applications to open pharmacies in response to multiple closures should be inherently prevented in this way. The delays in sharing information with the local health and wellbeing board and the delays in decision making are unforgivable. During the lengthy delay, the local authority received a planning application to change the Tangle Park pharmacy site into a fast food outlet. Thankfully, that was rejected earlier this month after representations from the public health team and councillors, but I am sure the public health Minister will agree that it would be unfortunate, to put it mildly, if a pharmacy were replaced with a fast food outlet.

One local official told me yesterday that the systems architecture is too complicated, and that there is a need for clearer responsibilities and accountability. Amen to that, I say. Healthwatch Richmond has demanded answers from the North East London ICB, but it has received a frankly woeful response that does not address the substantive question of why the application was so badly handled. The response passes the buck and blames regulations. To be clear, Healthwatch and I are not qualified to comment on the merits of an application; what we are doing is challenging the unfathomable process.

I say to the Minister that the huge funding challenges facing community pharmacy are pressing. I appreciate that they may be extremely difficult for him to address, given that the Chancellor has an iron fist as far as any additional public spending is concerned, but the Minister must wage a campaign to improve the funding situation. It makes financial sense. We will not grow the economy without improving the nation's health. In that campaign, he will have cross-party support from Members on the Opposition Benches.

Revisiting the regulations and how NHS England is implementing them will cost next to nothing. There should be proper consultation with and involvement from the local community on closure notices, and changes in the process for new licences could ensure that we can quickly plug pharmacy gaps when they open up in areas such as Hampton. Crucially, those powers need to be delegated to the local ICB, with full involvement from the local health and wellbeing board. They know their communities and their geography best—trust them.

Finally, if the Minister could step in on the specific issues in my constituency—the application that has been rejected and is going NHS Resolution on appeal—simply to ensure a common-sense approach, the residents

[Munira Wilson]

of Hampton North and I would be very grateful. We desperately need a new pharmacy for our community. I look forward to his response.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Minister.

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): May I start by welcoming you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? I congratulate you on your election earlier this week. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) on securing a debate that is absolutely crucial, not just given the specifics of the case in her constituency, but for the precedent that it sets as we plan community pharmacy provision across England. I assure her that although Lyle missed out on his week in London for Whitsun half-term, because somebody called a general election, he is on his way to London as I speak, with Allison, so that we can do London as tourists this weekend.

I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), who leads in this area. I start by paying tribute to pharmacists. It is a credit to them that surveys show that nine in 10 people who visit pharmacies feel positive about their experience. Colleagues appreciate how accessible pharmacies in towns and villages across our country are, but for too long, Governments have failed to recognise their essential role in safeguarding the nation's health, not least in my constituency of Gorton and Denton. This Government know that people who work in pharmacies are highly trained specialists, and we are committed to helping pharmacists and pharmacy technicians reach their full potential.

Pharmacies already provide vital advice on prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines and minor ailments, but they do not just dispense medicines and proffer advice, important though that is; they must do much more than that. Many already offer blood-pressure checks, flu and covid-19 vaccinations, contraception consultations and treatment for the seven conditions covered by the Pharmacy First service. I supported Pharmacy First when I was in opposition, as I think the hon. Lady did, and my party pledged to build on the programme by making prescribing an integral part of the services delivered by community pharmacies. For that reason, in the next two years, we will ensure that every newly qualified pharmacist has a prescribing qualification, while we train up the existing workforce.

This year, NHS England is working closely with all integrated care boards on pilots to test how prescribing can work in community pharmacy, because like the hon. Lady, we want pharmacies delivering services that help patients to access advice, prevention and treatment more easily; services that ease the pressure on general practice and in other areas in the NHS; and services that unlock the knowledge and expertise that our pharmacists have to offer. This Government take the view that pharmacies can and should play an even greater role in providing healthcare on the high street. That is why we stood on a manifesto that promised to shift resources to primary care and to community services over time. Community pharmacies will play an important

part in moving our health service from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention. But we have only been in office for three weeks; this cannot happen overnight, and colleagues have been absolutely right to raise concerns with Ministers about the closure of pharmacies.

As we speak, well over 10,000 pharmacies in England are dispensing medicines, offering advice and delivering care, and despite closures, access to pharmacies remains good across most of the country. Four out of five people live within a 20-minute walk of their local pharmacy, but as we have heard in this really important debate, that is not the case everywhere in the country. I know, having listened to the hon. Lady, that in Twickenham it is higher than four in five, but in other parts of the country it is below one in two. In the most deprived parts of England there are almost twice as many pharmacies—a good thing—than in the least deprived, but we need better access across the country. To take the example of my own constituency, where access to pharmacies is fairly good, almost the entire population is within a 20-minute walk from a pharmacy. However, in certain rural areas, and in a growing number of urban areas because of the closure programme, that is not the case. In those rural areas, there are dispensing doctors who can supply medicines to patients, and patients across the country can access around 400 distance-selling pharmacies that deliver medicines to patients' homes free of charge. It is true that experiences vary depending on where people live, but I am aware of the specific problem in Hampton following the closure of the two Boots pharmacies that she described.

Munira Wilson: On the point about the 20-minute walk and the four in five statistic, does the Minister recognise that a 20-minute walk for me or him is actually much longer for an elderly person or somebody with multiple health conditions or mobility issues? We have to work out what measure we are using. Yes, the Twickenham constituency may have many pharmacies, but we must look at that highly localised level. That is why we need the local authority and local health boards to be involved, because actually in Hampton, as a community, the transport links are terrible.

Andrew Gwynne: I completely understand the case the hon. Lady is making. I ask her please to understand that she is pushing on a bit of an open door. It is a completely different subject, but I have had exactly the same arguments about bank closures in my constituency. I am told that as long as the nearest bank branch is half an hour away by public transport, that is acceptable. Unfortunately, computer says no when it is two buses that do not meet up in between. I agree with her that there are complexities around drawing up arbitrary limits, but generally access to pharmacies is good. We need to maximise the use of the pharmacy network so that we get more pharmacists coming in.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I welcome the Government's support for strengthening the pharmacy sector. The Minister talks about the workforce. Residents in my constituency have raised concerns about the pressure on pharmacists to take on more and more services that might traditionally have been provided by primary care. What assurances can he give me that he will make sure that the workforce plan for pharmacists is robust enough to cope with the extra demand?

Andrew Gwynne: We are very committed, as I hope the hon. Lady knows, to the workforce plan being as robust as it can be, so we do not just get the pharmacists of the future but the doctors, nurses, healthcare workers and so on too. On the journey to a national health service that is much more community focused and much more aligned to prevention rather than to curing sickness—we want to prevent people from becoming ill in the first place—we must ensure that at its heart is how we can deliver medicines and treatments closer to where people live. Having well-trained capabilities in the pharmacy sector to do that is very much a priority for this Government.

Returning to the issue of the two Boots closures in Hampton, the Minister for Care is aware of the closures. He asked me to communicate to the hon. Lady the fact that he will keep a very close eye on what is happening on the ground in her area.

On the hon. Lady's specific point about bureaucracy, I assure her that the regulatory framework is always under review, and as a new Government we are keen to make improvements wherever we can. I am sure that my officials will have heard the case that she has made.

After the hon. Lady kindly reached out to me prior to the debate, I instructed officials to ask her ICB to consider her concerns again. I hear that she has had a reply that was not particularly helpful. Again, I hope that her ICB is watching this debate, and listening to her case and to me as the Minister saying from the Dispatch Box that we take these issues seriously. Good access to pharmacy services is important to her constituents and to the constituents of Members right across the House. We need to make sure that the network is protected and enhanced.

On funding, NHS England has commissioned an economic analysis of the cost of providing pharmaceutical services. That work is happening right now with the pharmacy sector and we look forward to seeing the outcome. Previous Governments dithered and delayed on finding a sustainable and long-term solution. The

consultation around this year's funding and contractual arrangements with Community Pharmacy England did not make it over the line before the election was called, so we as Ministers are looking at that as a matter of urgency.

All that we are speaking of today is against the backdrop of the most challenging circumstances since the second world war. That is why the Chancellor is carrying out an urgent assessment of our spending inheritance and will be presenting the results to Parliament before the summer recess, so that the findings can inform every spending decision we make.

In the meantime, I am afraid that I cannot update the House on this year's arrangements. I understand that that will be frustrating to the hon. Lady, but the Prime Minister has asked me and every Minister of this Government to be honest and open about the state of the nation's finances. I intend to keep that promise, but I look forward to working with pharmacy stakeholders to discuss not just how we solve these problems, but how we seize the opportunities for transformation in the sector, and how we deliver health and social care in the community, closer to where people need it, providing the new, innovative treatments from pharmacies where that is appropriate. This Government will always put patients before politics.

In the spirit of the friendship that we have developed over the years, particularly over the kinship issue, I look forward to working with the hon. Lady on this and other health-related issues, and on making our country a better, fairer and more equal place for her constituents and mine, with better access to health services, including community pharmacy. I hope to work with her in the years to come, and let us hope that we can improve the pharmacy services for Hampton and other parts of England.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 26 July 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Digital Trade Agreement: WTO Joint Initiative on Electronic Commerce

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The Government are ready to lead on the global stage and use every lever at our disposal to tear down unnecessary barriers and give British businesses the access to international markets to achieve economic growth. We are committed to establishing a global trading system fit for the modern era and underpinned by digital technologies to ensure trade is as seamless and efficient as possible.

Today, I am delighted to announce the UK has joined the first global digital trade agreement: the joint initiative on electronic commerce, negotiated with 90 other countries at the World Trade Organisation.

The economy-wide agreement, covering trade in goods, services and information, is set to deliver new growth opportunities for the UK, with global digital trade already worth £4 trillion and growing strongly. The JI will deliver new growth opportunities for the UK economy and our businesses, workers and consumers, and recognises the importance of supporting developing and least-developed countries to deliver growth and prosperity for all.

Global trade is becoming increasingly digital, and harnessing its potential is central to growing a strong and resilient economy in the UK. The UK is at the forefront of digital trade and has a comparative advantage in digitally-delivered services such as finance, professional business services, creative industries, engineering and much more. UK trade is driven by digitally-enabled businesses, with exports of digitally-delivered services amounting to £252 billion in 2021, or 77% of total UK services exports.

However, until now there has been no common set of global digital trade rules. The G7 digital trade principles brokered under the UK G7 presidency in 2021 set out shared commitments of G7 countries, but there was no rulebook covering binding commitments for the world. This has led to fragmented approaches to digital trade regulation, resulting in increased barriers for businesses, workers and consumers.

As a comprehensive, economy-wide agreement, the JI will boost global trade in goods, services and information and unlock a wide range of benefits for UK businesses, workers and consumers. Global adoption of digital customs systems, processes and documents, even with partial uptake, could represent a boost to UK GDP. Improvement in trade facilitation can increase the probability of a small business starting to export by up to 3% and increase the value of small business exports. Protection for workers and consumers online will increase their trust and confidence in digital trade.

Key benefits of this agreement include:

Cheaper, faster and more secure trade for businesses trading goods and services around the world through digitalising interoperable customs systems, processes and documents.

This will in many cases end the need to print off forms and hand them over at customs, a slow, expensive and old-fashioned way of working.

Recognition of electronic contracts, invoices, signatures and authentication, and facilitation of secure, trustworthy electronic payments.

Permanent ban on customs duties on digital content among JI participants to provide the certainty businesses need to trade openly in the new global digital economy and avoid the price increases the introduction of such tariffs would cause.

Protection of personal data of workers and consumers in line with the UK's high data protection standards.

Protection of consumers buying goods and services online from online fraudsters, misleading claims about products and deception.

Facilitating competition in the telecoms sector through financial independence of telecoms regulators and improved access to telecoms infrastructure.

I expect the process to incorporate the JI into the WTO legal framework to commence shortly. Once incorporated, the JI will be laid before Parliament, in line with usual practice, for domestic ratification.

The Government are committed to rebuilding and strengthening global partnerships and standing up for the rules-based international order. This agreement is an important step in modernising the global trade rule book and furthering co-operation in the WTO.

[HCWS23]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Regulation

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Government are committed to ensuring this country develops the skills we need to deliver sustained economic growth and improved prosperity and living standards for working people. Our world-leading higher education sector is a key engine at the heart of these growth plans and today I am announcing some of the first steps we are taking to ensure a stable future for higher education, with strong regulation that means students can thrive.

First, today will see the publication of the report for the independent review of the Office for Students, "Fit for the Future: Higher Education Regulation towards 2035", which will be made available on gov.uk.

The review found that the case for bold regulation of higher education is clear but that the OfS should more sharply focus on key priorities, which include monitoring financial sustainability, ensuring quality, protecting public money and regulating in the interests of students.

I would like to thank the lead reviewer, Sir David Behan, for conducting a rigorous and thoughtful review, and all those in the higher education sector who supported and contributed to the review process.

The Government accept the core analysis of the review and, as set out in our manifesto, we recognise that strong regulation is a crucial element of a stable, world-leading higher education sector that delivers for students and the economy.

I will deposit a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the resignation of Lord Wharton as chair of the OfS earlier this month, I also wish to announce that Sir David has been appointed as interim chair of

the OfS. His role will primarily be to work with the current executive to implement the recommendations of the independent review. The process to appoint a permanent chair has started and will conclude next year.

Lastly, I have written to colleagues separately about my decision to stop further commencement of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, in order to consider options, including its repeal. I am aware of concerns that the Act would be burdensome on providers and on the OfS, and I will confirm my long-term plans as soon as possible. To enable students to thrive in higher education, I welcome the OfS's plans to introduce strengthened protections for students facing harassment and sexual misconduct, including relating to the use of non-disclosure agreements in such cases by universities and colleges.

[HCWS26]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Sizewell A Nuclear Site: Direction to Nuclear Decommissioning Authority

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): I am today laying a new designation direction to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority in respect of the Sizewell A nuclear site, which amends the existing direction. The direction has been given in accordance with sections 3 and 5 of the Energy Act 2004, with the consent of Nuclear Restoration Services Ltd, which controls the site.

This direction will end the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's responsibilities under the Energy Act 2004 for specific land and buildings on the Sizewell A nuclear site, so that the land can be sold to EDF and become part of the Sizewell B nuclear site. This will facilitate the development of new nuclear at the Sizewell C nuclear site.

[HCWS25]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Care Quality Commission

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Today I wish to update the House on the publication of the interim findings of the review into the operational effectiveness of the Care Quality Commission that is being conducted by Dr Penny Dash. I have asked Dr Dash to publish these interim findings, as I wish to share with the House and the public the serious failings they expose.

Getting regulation right is critical to ensuring that health and social care is not only safe but also high quality. If the way we regulate is not fit for purpose, it means that people are not properly supported in their choices about health and care, and there is a lost opportunity to deliver improvements. Dr Dash's interim findings demonstrate that the CQC, as the regulator of health and social care in England, is exactly that: not fit for purpose.

Dr Dash's report has given people across the health and social care system, including from within the CQC, the opportunity to speak up about what I believe are systemic and cultural problems. I commend the report for creating an environment in which people have been able to speak up; to fix the NHS we must create a culture that values and listens to the voices of those who can see where the problems are.

Dr Dash has heard major concerns from significant groups of stakeholders. There are failings in the way that the CQC assesses organisations relating to the single assessment framework, which means that we cannot be confident that inspections are looking at all the things the public should rightly expect. There are also concerns about how ratings, which both the public and service providers depend on, are calculated. These failings are compounded by a further finding that the CQC does not have appropriate sector-level expertise throughout the organisation. Dr Dash is clear that all of these concerns mean that the CQC has lost credibility.

As recommended by Dr Dash, the Department of Health and Social Care will work with the board of the CQC to address the issues raised. The board will have my full support in ensuring the right leadership is in place to drive through the changes that are needed.

While this is an interim report, I would like to highlight four immediate steps that I will be taking with the CQC.

First, the CQC have asked Professor Sir Mike Richards to review the single assessment framework. This is an important step in addressing the concerns Dr Dash raises about how the safety and quality of hospitals is assessed. Sir Mike is an eminent and highly regarded clinician who was the CQC's first chief inspector of hospitals. The fact that the CQC has asked someone with Sir Mike's significant experience to give detailed and thorough consideration to improving the framework shows that the CQC is now taking seriously the concerns raised in the report and is acting swiftly to address them.

Second, I have asked the CQC to urgently improve the transparency of its ratings. This will include being clearer about what evidence has been considered in reaching the ratings, as well as setting out clearly the dates of the inspections that a rating is based on. This is to address the report's finding about the historical practice of combining inspections over several years to produce a rating. This is important so that members of the public can have confidence that they know what a rating actually means. The action I am taking is a first step to bring in greater transparency, but more work will be required as the CQC looks in more detail at its assessment framework.

Third, the Department of Health and Social Care will increase the level of oversight of the CQC, including the frequency and seniority of that oversight. Over the summer, I will be looking at what is needed to ensure that the recommendations in the interim review are acted upon. This arrangement will continue once the final report is published. Ultimately, the Department's objective must be to ensure that improvements in the delivery of CQC's core functions are achieved for service users and service providers across health and social care. I have requested firm assurance from the chair that effective and credible appointments are made for a permanent chief executive and chief inspectorate of healthcare.

Fourth, the CQC sits within a complex landscape of bodies with responsibility for safety. Pending completion of her final report in autumn 2024, I am asking Dr Dash to undertake further work and make recommendations on how we can maximise the effectiveness of key bodies, individually and collectively, within that landscape. Terms of reference will be determined in due course.

Only by ensuring that we have a health and social care system that works as a whole will we be able to restore the public's confidence in the safety and quality of care and, most importantly, put the voice and experience of patients and service users back at the heart of our regulation and oversight of the whole health and social care system.

The interim findings of the review have been published on gov.uk. I will provide a further update to the House once Dr Dash's final report has been published.

[HCWS27]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

AI Opportunities Action Plan

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): Artificial intelligence has enormous potential to drive economic growth, through productivity improvements and technological innovation, and to stimulate more effective public service design and delivery. These are opportunities the United Kingdom cannot afford to miss and that is why AI, alongside other technologies, will support the delivery of our five national missions. Through targeted action this Government will support the growth of the AI sector, enable the safe adoption of AI across the economy and lead the way in deploying it responsibly in our public services to make them better.

Today, I am setting out our plans to create an ambitious AI opportunities action plan, and our next steps on the regulation of frontier AI systems.

I have appointed tech entrepreneur and chair of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, Matt Clifford CBE, to develop the AI opportunities action plan. It will set out how Government can support the growth of the AI sector and compete on the global stage, while

also including actions designed to boost the responsible adoption of AI across all parts of the economy. This plan will identify ways to accelerate the use of AI to improve people's lives by making services better and developing new products.

The action plan will also address key AI enablers such as the UK's compute and broader infrastructure requirements; how this infrastructure is made available to industry as well as researchers; and how to develop, attract and retain top AI talent. To develop the action plan, Matt Clifford will engage with academic, industry and civil society experts.

Matt Clifford will deliver a set of recommendations to me by September. To support implementation of the action plan, an AI opportunities unit will be established within the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Delivering the plan will play a vital role in driving up productivity and kick-starting economic growth. Estimates from the IMF show that while the exact economic impact hinges on the wider development and adoption of AI, and realisation could be gradual, the UK could ultimately see productivity gains of up to 1.5% annually.

While AI has the potential to boost our productivity, unlock new sources of growth, and improve the quality and efficiency of our public services, we know that advanced capabilities also present risks. In the King's Speech on 17 July, the Government set out our intention to legislate in line with our manifesto commitment to place requirements on those working to develop the most powerful artificial intelligence models.

This legislation will place the AI safety institute on a statutory footing, providing it with a permanent remit to enhance the safety of AI over the longer term.

Our proposals will be highly targeted and will support growth and innovation by ending regulatory uncertainty for AI developers, strengthening public trust, and boosting business confidence. They will avoid creating new rules for those using AI and will instead apply to the small number of developers of the most powerful AI models with a focus on the AI systems of tomorrow and not today.

We will shortly launch a consultation on these legislative proposals, to harness the insights and expertise of the AI industry, academia and civil society.

[HCWS24]

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