

Thursday
17 October 2024

Volume 754
No. 30



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 October 2024

House of Commons

Thursday 17 October 2024

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Visitor Levies

1. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of visitor levies in Scotland and Wales on inbound UK tourism. [900668]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Responsibility for tourism levies is devolved, but we want to watch what happens in Scotland and Wales with close interest. One of my main hopes is to increase the number of international visitors to the UK, and ensure more and more visitors come not only to London and the south-east, but travel across the whole United Kingdom.

John Lamont: Imposing taxes on tourists will only discourage people from enjoying the best of what the Scottish Borders and Scotland have to offer. Many small, rural businesses are struggling to sustain themselves, so I fear the extra tax proposed by the Scottish Government will be the last straw. Does the Minister share my concern about the impact that will have on tourism in Scotland? Will the Government undertake an impact study on the effect the tax will have on tourism, not just in Scotland but across the UK?

Chris Bryant: Despite having been a Member of the Scottish Parliament, the hon. Gentleman does not seem to understand the basis of devolution. This is a matter for the Scottish Government to decide. We want to have a very positive relationship with the Scottish Administration and, for that matter, the Administration in Wales. Of course we will look at this. The UK Government have no plans to introduce visitor levies at the moment, although there are potential benefits that might accrue to local communities, if they could be got right, but the idea of us investigating what the Scottish Government are doing would be completely wrong.

Filming Locations: Scottish Highlands

2. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps the Government is taking to promote the Scottish Highlands as a film location for movies and television. [900669]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): This Government are taking a fresh approach to our relationship with the Scottish Government and with our cultural partners across Scotland. We are seeking a far more consistent and constructive relationship than the previous Government. I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that the Prime Minister last week convened the first ever Council of the Nations and Regions, and this Government are putting the creative industries in every nation and region at the heart of our economic strategy.

Jamie Stone: I wholeheartedly welcome that answer. Scotland has great potential; if I say that “The Traitors” was filmed at Ardross castle in my constituency, the Secretary of State will know what I am talking about. I take the point that these matters are devolved, but Mr Angus Robertson seems to flip-flop when it comes to funding the arts, so I would be grateful for everything the Secretary of State can do to get Netflix, or whoever, to look hard at the Highlands.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw attention to Scotland’s huge cultural assets. I was pleased to meet with my Scottish Government counterpart when I visited the Edinburgh Fringe over the summer. I know from the international investment summit, which the Government convened earlier this week, that partners like Netflix, and many other international investors, see the enormous value of Scotland and the attraction of investing there. This Government will do everything we can to support that, and we will put rocket boosters under the creative industries in Scotland.

Multi-sport Grassroots Facilities

3. **Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support multi-sport grassroots facilities. [900670]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): This Government are committed to providing high-quality, inclusive facilities that provide opportunities for everyone to get active and healthier. That is why we are investing £123 million across the UK in our multi-sport grassroots facilities programme.

Louise Jones: Access to those facilities is vital for mental health and community cohesion, no more so than in the small towns and villages that make up my constituency. Does the Minister agree that even in places like that we must have equal access to such facilities?

Stephanie Peacock: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I was pleased to visit her constituency a few months ago; I represent a similar area, with a collection of towns and villages. Wherever communities are, across the country, we want to ensure they have access to local facilities. It is so important to get people active, particularly for mental health and wellbeing.

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

Dame Caroline Dinage (Gosport) (Con): The Minister will know that grassroots sports venues play a key role in improving the nation’s health. The UK will host the

T20 women's world cup in 2026, and cricket will join the Olympic family of sports in 2028. The previous Government committed a £35 million investment into 16 grassroots cricket hubs and cricket domes. Will the Minister commit this Government to fulfilling that promise?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for her important question. I was pleased to meet the England and Wales Cricket Board a few weeks ago, and I will be doing a visit with its representatives in my own constituency tomorrow. We absolutely see the benefit of cricket and, indeed, all sports across the country, but I am obviously not in a position to make spending commitments ahead of the spending review.

Grassroots and Non-league Football

4. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to support grassroots and non-league football. [900671]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I set out in a previous answer, the Government are investing £123 million through football partners in grassroots facilities up and down the country.

Tom Gordon: I recently visited Knaresborough Town AFC in my constituency and met fantastic people who do more than just football. They share the club's facilities with groups such as Rainbow Care, which provides a lifeline to other people, not just those interested in football. Due to the weather, the pitch is often waterlogged, and there is a lack of 3G pitches in the area. Will the Minister meet me to talk about how we can do more to support Knaresborough Town and, hopefully, get a pitch down the line?

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am pleased to hear that he visited his local club, and I would be delighted to meet him. Ahead of that meeting, though, I will ask my officials to link him up with the Football Foundation, which supports grassroots communities to get new pitches. I pay tribute to all the volunteers to whom he refers for their fantastic work in the community.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Blyth Spartans in my constituency are arguably the most famous non-league club in the UK, but they are now up for sale, with the current chairman failing to deliver on his promises and to engage transparently and openly with the supporters. Does my hon. Friend agree that non-league football clubs are at the heart of communities and that engagement with supporters is critical to their survival?

Stephanie Peacock: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and I completely agree. Now that he has put it in *Hansard*, perhaps Blyth Spartans are the most well-known club in the country. I echo his comments about fan involvement at every level of the football pyramid and, indeed, in grassroots football.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): From grassroots to professional, the number of women's teams has more than doubled over the past seven years. Cheltenham Town Women have a thriving team, with junior and adult sections. Sadly, one place above them in the table this season are Lewes FC, who are running the "Equal FA Cup" campaign. Does the Minister agree that it is time for equality of prize money across the men's and women's FA cups?

Stephanie Peacock: I am incredibly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking such an important question. The Government are fully committed to supporting and growing women's sport, and to ensuring that it is on an equal footing with men's sport. The ambition to have equal prize money across sport, where possible, is absolutely right. I know that the Football Association took steps last season to double the prize fund for the women's FA cup, and we will pay close attention to see what happens next.

Youth Services

5. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the impact of youth services on levels of antisocial behaviour in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituency. [900672]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her work to support young people in her constituency over many years. It is a source of national shame that youth funding decreased by 73% under the last Government—one of the deepest cuts made to any of our public services—and that there was no real strategy for a generation of young people. This Government are determined to get a grip on this issue to ensure that young people in towns such as Grimsby have the opportunities that they deserve.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. A shining example of youth services and their positive impact is the Haven Centre in Osborne Street in my constituency, where a dedicated team offer diversionary activities through sports and crafts and give essential mentoring and support. Since opening, the Haven has played an important role in reducing antisocial behaviour, with reported incidents down by 35% in the town centre over the last year. Will the Secretary of State join me in commending the staff at the Haven and all the youth providers across Grimsby and Cleethorpes, and recognise the vital role that they play in providing safety for young people and giving them access to new skills and facilities that they otherwise would not have?

Mr Speaker: Order. That was a very long question.

Lisa Nandy: I would be delighted to pay tribute to youth workers up and down this country, who have done incredible work. They have been a lifeline for young people in what has been a very bleak landscape for too long. I was very pleased to work with my hon. Friend and the East Marsh United group in her constituency, and she has done incredible work to support the community over many years in order to facilitate Grimsby's OnSide youth club, of which we have a fantastic example in Wigan. I very much look forward to working with her to develop this work.

Mr Speaker: There is one in Chorley too.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for a bit of Grimsby, I share the support of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) for the excellent work carried out in the area. However, the Secretary of State rightly criticises the last Government for reducing the resources made available to the youth sector. Can she reassure me that this Government will actually increase those resources?

Lisa Nandy: We are determined to grip this issue. One of the things the new Government discovered when we opened the books is that, although there are several funding sources within my Department and across Government, there is no youth strategy at all. We are determined to set that right. We will develop and co-produce a strategy for a generation of young people, working alongside them and with the incredible youth workers at The Haven, the OnSide youth zones and many other places, including in Chorley, to support a generation to succeed.

Creative Industries: Artificial Intelligence

6. **Mrs Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with representatives of the creative industries on AI. [900673]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I have had many meetings with the creative industries, which have raised AI at every single one. I make it absolutely clear that human creativity deserves remuneration. Wherever we end up, the rights of artists, musicians, publishers and journalists need to be protected while we garner the significant benefits of artificial intelligence.

Mrs Russell: AI-generated creations that mimic real people—deepfakes—can lead to financial and reputational damage for musicians and other creatives. However, as the domestic violence charity Refuge pointed out last year, the most common AI-generated deepfakes are non-consensual sexual depictions of women. How do the Government plan to ensure that creatives, as well as women and girls, are adequately protected from the misappropriation of their voice, image, name and likeness?

Chris Bryant: I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this important issue that affects many people. In the words of Stephen Sondheim, “art isn’t easy,” and neither is the legislation in this area, but we are determined to look into it. It is already a criminal offence to share an intimate image without consent, whether real or synthetically generated, and we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to ban the creation of sexually explicit deepfakes.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Shannon—at least he’s not fake.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am the real thing, Mr Speaker.

The creative industries in Strangford and across Northern Ireland are very important. In responding to the point raised by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell), it is important that Northern Ireland has similar consideration. Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland

Executive to ensure that anything that happens here to protect women and ladies also happens in Northern Ireland?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Although some of the areas we are discussing are, of course, devolved, we want to make sure that the whole UK moves forward in the same direction. I am keen to talk to my counterpart in Northern Ireland about this subject.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is an honour to stand at the Dispatch Box for the first time, although I have to admit that it is not how I pictured it. I will do my best not to be a pain in your neck, Mr Speaker.

In a nutshell, the creative industries are worried that the Government will essentially give away their intellectual property. I am pleased to hear the Minister’s response, but the growing concerns were raised by the Chair of the Select Committee following comments by a Minister in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. With that in mind, will the Minister confirm that he will not give away IP through an exemption? Will he assure the House that he will not implement the EU’s approach, given its flaws? Finally, will he commit to holding a summit between the tech and creative industries to explore licensing and other models?

Chris Bryant: It is absolutely essential that we protect intellectual property, which is one of the key things this country has to sell. We have already had two meetings with representatives from the creative industries and tech companies, and we are keen to move forward.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman on his *décolleté* first appearance at the Dispatch Box. However, I gently push back on his suggestion, as I think the previous Government had embraced Bucks Fizz more than anything else:

“Don’t let your indecision take you from behind.”

The previous Government did absolutely nothing in this territory. We are determined to get to a proper resolution that satisfies the needs of both the creative industries and artificial intelligence.

Grassroots Athletics Clubs

7. **Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support grassroots athletics clubs to maintain their facilities. [900674]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Grassroots sports clubs are at the heart of communities up and down the country. We know just how important they are, which is why we are committed to continuing to support high-quality, inclusive facilities to get people more active.

Connor Naismith: Crewe and Nantwich athletic club, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, is home to the only competitive-standard athletics track in south Cheshire. However, the track is in desperate need of improvements so that the club can continue to flourish and support the young people who use its facilities. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what support might be available to deliver those crucial improvements?

Stephanie Peacock: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question and congratulate Crewe and Nantwich athletic club on half a century—what a great achievement! Such sports clubs are crucial to helping our young people to pursue their sporting passions. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter, but in the meantime I will ask my Department to link the club up with England Athletics and other bodies for further discussion of the support available.

English Football: Financial Sustainability

8. **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the financial sustainability of English football. [900675]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important issue. Football is one of our greatest exports and is a source of joy to people across the country. For too long, however, robust protections have not been in place to ensure that every town, village and city can share in that success.

May I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the former Sports Minister Dame Tracey Crouch for her work leading the fan-led review of football governance? The Government committed in the King's Speech to the football governance Bill and we expect to introduce it shortly.

Yuan Yang: I associate myself with that tribute and thank the Secretary of State for her reply. My constituency is the proud home of Reading football club, which managed to stay up last season against the odds but which has been the victim of financial mismanagement by absent owners. We desperately need the Government's football governance Bill, which will set up a regulator to safeguard clubs like Reading and prevent future abuses. Will the Minister meet local fans and me to discuss what we can do to protect the club?

Lisa Nandy: The Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), will be absolutely delighted to do so. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and to the three Reading MPs for their work to protect something that is so incredibly important to their town. I know from my experience of the work we had to do to save Wigan Athletic that when a football club is under threat from mismanagement or poor ownership, it is absolutely devastating for the generations of fans for whom the club is part of their civic inheritance. We look forward to introducing the football governance Bill without any further delay and to working with my hon. Friend and colleagues to ensure that we introduce the strongest possible protections to put fans back at the heart of the game, where they belong.

Gambling: Harmful Effects

9. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the harmful effects of gambling. [900676]

11. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle the harmful effects of gambling. [900678]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The Government are committed to strengthening protections to ensure that people can continue to enjoy gambling as a pastime without the harms that can ensue from problem gambling. We have a dedicated Minister for gambling, Baroness Twycross, who has met representatives across the industry and those affected by problem gambling to seek the widest range of views and ensure that the Government have a robust policy in place.

Jim Dickson: Many of us in this House have encountered harrowing stories from constituents of the devastating impact of gambling suicide. The Gambling Commission estimates that 2.5% of the population meet the threshold to be categorised as suffering from problem gambling and in need of NHS treatment. My constituency is considered a high-problem gambling area, which means that we have a high number of people who meet the threshold. Are steps being taken to progress towards an independent statutory levy on the industry to fund the gambling treatment and independent information that so many people urgently need?

Lisa Nandy: The Government are committed to reviewing all the available evidence and listening to the first-hand constituency experience of Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friend. That way, we can strike the right balance and ensure not only that the industry, which brings joy to many people, continues to thrive, but that we have the most robust protections in place to prevent problem gambling. I will update the House soon on the Government's strategy, and Baroness Twycross will be happy to discuss the issue with MPs on both sides of the House who have personal experience and evidence that we will want to consider.

Elaine Stewart: I am sure that the Secretary of State will join me in praising local community groups, such as those in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, that support people facing problems with gambling. At a time when financial resources are limited, and with a black hole left by the Conservative Government, have the new Government considered the fiscal cost to society of gambling, and particularly online gambling, which has a higher risk of harm?

Lisa Nandy: We are very aware of the issues that my hon. Friend raises and would be pleased to discuss them with her, as part of ensuring that we have the most robust protections in place, particularly in relation to online gambling. We are acutely aware of the problems that can ensue from gambling, but we also know that this is an industry that brings joy to many people. For example, more than half of all adults have participated in some form of gambling over the past year. We know that we must grasp this thorny issue, and we are committed to working with her and other colleagues to get it right.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The horseracing industry, which is a British success story, is dependent on income from responsible gambling. I was glad to hear what the Secretary of State said about responsibly enjoying a flutter. This is nothing like some of the problem gambling that we see online, and the proportion of bets on horseracing that are deemed to be problematic is comparable to the proportion of problematic users of

the national lottery. What plans does she have to reform the betting levy and the affordability checks that have been in train for some time?

Lisa Nandy: I should tell the House that the Tote is headquartered in my constituency of Wigan, which gives me an insight into the industry, which I have had a relationship with for many years. There will be a debate on horseracing next Thursday in Westminster Hall. This industry is worth £4 billion to the UK economy, so this Government certainly take it incredibly seriously. Baroness Twycross is having discussions with representatives from across the industry, and I am sure that she would be delighted to discuss this with the hon. Member as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): No one wants to see people caught up in problem gambling, but equally, no one wants to see businesses struggle and jobs lost. As the Secretary of State said, we want this industry to thrive, yet this week that was threatened after it was rumoured that the Treasury is planning a £3 billion tax raid. That has already seen £3 billion wiped off the value of bookies. Can the Secretary of State clarify whether she supports the industry or the Treasury? Did she raise her concerns about the rumour, and when will we see the gambling reforms brought forward with a timetable for scrutiny by this House?

Lisa Nandy: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that he should know, as we do, that we cannot believe everything we read in the papers. As he will have heard in my previous answer, we are determined to strike the right balance. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) a moment ago, we are aware of the value of this industry and of its importance, and not just for the UK economy but for the joy it brings to many people and the employment prospects it offers in every nation and region of the United Kingdom. We are also aware of the problems that can be caused by problem gambling. Like the previous Government, we are determined to talk to the widest range of partners and ensure that we strike the right balance between protecting people from the problems that can ensue and supporting a growing industry.

Secondary Ticketing and Dynamic Pricing

10. **Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con):** When she plans to launch a consultation on secondary ticketing and dynamic pricing. [900677]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): We want to put fans back at the heart of live events and we want to ensure that more of the revenues come to the creative industries. That is why we will be launching a consultation on the secondary ticket market soon—the piece of paper in front of me actually says “in the autumn”, but I am never quite sure when that is, so I am going with “soon”.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. I understand the need to look at secondary ticketing, but dynamic pricing is a contractual bargain between buyer and seller, based on supply and demand.

It actually gives us cheaper tickets as well as more expensive ones. Does he really want the Government to get involved there? I know that the Prime Minister wants everyone to be able to afford concert tickets, but what is wrong with the way that he gets them?

Chris Bryant: The truth is that dynamic pricing has many different forms and some of them are good. For instance, early bird tickets benefit many people, as does buying last-minute tickets for the theatre. We will not interfere with that, but we will have a call for evidence about how that works in relation to live events. On ticket pricing, the real scandal is that, for example, the face value of standing tickets for Coldplay at Wembley on 22 August 2025 is £96.23, but when I checked StubHub this morning they cost £17,633. That is the real scandal and that is what we are going to deal with.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: I call Bob Blackman—not here.

T2. [900687] **Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): After 14 years, this Government have opened the books to find a legacy of violent indifference and neglect of arts and culture that has created serious challenges for our proud creative industries. I am pleased to tell the House that the Government’s international investment summit this week put creative industries at the heart of our economic strategy. Thanks to the support of partners such as Netflix, Universal Music and Tate, we were able to welcome £63 billion of investment into the UK. Later today, in Downing Street, I will launch a new covenant with our civil society partners to reset what had become a needlessly antagonistic relationship under the last Government. We look forward to working with those across the UK to help fulfil the country’s enormous potential.

Jo Platt: The Wigan & Leigh short film festival, which took place last month, was once again extremely successful. It is a fantastic opportunity to gather like-minded creative individuals from the local area to celebrate and showcase up-and-coming talent from around the world. That is just one example of the enriched film and TV culture that is so vibrant in my constituency. I wholeheartedly welcome the Government’s announcement of tax reliefs to create jobs and boost our creative industries—

Mr Speaker: Order. Topical questions are meant to be short and punchy, not a big, long question, Jo. Minister, can you pick the best out of that?

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I completely agree with what my hon. Friend was about to say.

Mr Speaker: Which part: the first three minutes or the second? I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The Secretary of State believes that it is not good policy that counts, but good vibes: the violent indifference that led

to a booming creative sector is no longer; the culture war is over; and we, the vanquished, submit ourselves for re-education along with the rest of the public. The problem is that every DCMS sector tells us that they want more than vibes; they need decisions and they want a Budget that will deliver. Can she tell us whether she is among the panicked Ministers who have written to the Chancellor about the Budget and their spending asks, and which has she listed as her priority?

Lisa Nandy: I am not entirely sure what the “vibes” issue is, but I will say that I do not need to write to the Chancellor. Unlike under the previous Government, we have a very close relationship and we tend to pick up the phone when discussions need to be had. Alongside the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and the Prime Minister, I was pleased this week to welcome £63 billion of investment into the UK to put creative industries at the heart of our economic strategy.

Julia Lopez: I spoke to some of the DCMS stakeholders who went to the investment summit, and they came away worried. They see a Government who absolutely milk their stardust, but all they hear is new taxes, new employment regulations, other Departments riding roughshod over DCMS interests and delays to decisions. Can the Secretary of State be specific? When she says that she is “putting rocket boosters” under the creative industries, what does that mean in practice?

Lisa Nandy: As I announced to the House last week, it means introducing an independent film tax credit, which the previous Government talked about for several months and did absolutely nothing about. I have to say to the hon. Lady that after the legacy that her Government left, which has brought our proud country to its knees, it takes some brass neck to stand at the Dispatch Box and criticise this Government. We are fixing the problems that her Government created, and a little bit of humility might go a long way.

T3. [900688] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): In March 1974, a Turkish Airlines jet crashed while flying from Paris to London. More than 400 people were killed. Among them were 19 members of the Bury St Edmunds rugby club. It was the greatest disaster to befall the town in living memory. This year, 60 cyclists cycled from Paris to Bury St Edmunds, raising £200,000 in their memory. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating these bold cyclists?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I thank my hon. Friend for his important question. I congratulate the cyclists on completing their fantastic ride and on the impressive sum of money that they raised. I pay particular tribute to Austin Cornish, the organiser of the ride, whose father died in that crash.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Women are those most often criminalised for non-payment of the licence fee. The BBC charter review offers an opportunity for the Government to look at this issue again. Will the Government consider decriminalising non-payment of the licence fee?

Lisa Nandy: I thank the right hon. Member for raising this important issue. I am deeply concerned by the number of cases that have been brought to my attention since taking office of women who have fallen foul of this practice. I have personally had discussions with the BBC leadership about that. Obviously, the charter review, which we intend to start early next year, offers us an opportunity to look at these issues in the round.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going to have to get through the questions more quickly. We do not have much time.

T4. [900689] **Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I recently visited the fantastic Shinfield Studios in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and saw the huge value that our creative industries can bring to my constituents. Will the Minister please tell me what the inclusion of the creative industries in the industrial strategy and the huge investment delivered at the investment summit last week will deliver for my constituency and others like it?

Chris Bryant: It is great to see my hon. Friend here. First, we want to ensure that more international movies and blockbusters are made in the UK, and we want to increase investment. With more sound stages, we should be able to challenge Hollywood. I also want to ensure that every single child in this country can consider a career in the creative industries, whatever background they come from.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Eastbourne art galleries such as the Towner and Devonshire Collective VOLT—it made the tie I am wearing—contribute so much to our town and to our country, but the sector faces serious financial pressures. Will the Minister meet me and a delegation of art galleries to discuss them?

Chris Bryant: I will happily meet the hon. Member, who makes a very good point. We have hundreds of museums and galleries across the country. Some of them receive funding directly from Arts Council England. We want to talk to Arts Council England about how we can ensure that there is more support for our museums and galleries. Some of the funding comes directly from our Department. I am happy to meet him to discuss that.

T5. [900690] **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): I advise the House that my sister works for Rugby League Cares. The Minister will know that my constituency is the birthplace of rugby league. At a professional and community level, the game is really important to towns such as mine, but it has not always had the support that it deserves. The Rugby Football League has produced a national community facilities strategy, which states the level of funding that is needed for the game. What steps is she taking to support long-term investment in rugby league?

Stephanie Peacock: We know just how important the work of the Rugby Football League is in communities—I have seen it at first hand, as I know you have, Mr Speaker. It is one of the reasons the RFL has received

just under £1 million in funding from Sport England over the past financial year to help tackle inequalities and improve access. I look forward to working with the sport in the months and years ahead.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to the increase as well.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): When mobile providers started to turn off the 2G and 3G networks earlier this year, we were told that it would have no impact on existing services, but the experience in my constituency is the contrary, particularly along the M74 motorway network. Will Ministers investigate the impact of the switch-off to date, and ensure that necessary improvements are made so that we have a full network across the whole of the United Kingdom?

Chris Bryant: I think this is a hangover from yesterday's questions on telecoms, but the right hon. Member makes a very good point. One of the things that keeps me awake at night is worrying about what will happen to the transition for people with telecare devices, which rely on the old public switched telephone network. We are keen to have a safe transition. Exactly the same issues apply to 2G and 3G. I will happily meet with him, if that would help.

T6. [900691] **Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): In Southend East and Rochford, the Freight House and the Kursaal sit vacant. In times gone by, my community used those sites greatly. We cannot allow buildings with such cultural capital potential to sit vacant. Does the Minister agree that the regeneration of cultural sites such as the Kursaal and the Freight House is central to a prosperous community?

Lisa Nandy: I very much welcome the work that my hon. Friend is doing to champion his community, and offer him the Government's support for it. I am working with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government ahead of the publication of our forthcoming devolution plans to ensure that we give communities the tools to bring our proud heritage sites back into use, and to repurpose them for future generations.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I urge the Secretary of State and the ministerial team to take account of the listed place of worship grant scheme, which is particularly valuable to many churches up and down the country, and to not allow the Treasury to trim it back. It may expire at the end of March next year.

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that spending review issues are a matter for the Treasury—let us see what comes out of that review. I have had lots of representations, and he makes a good point.

T7. [900692] **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): My beloved Aston Villa made their first appearance in the European cup for over 40 years this season, but fans faced ticket prices of £94 to see that first-in-a-generation moment. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need greater fan representation on football boards, so that football remains accessible to all?

Lisa Nandy: I am pleased to offer my hon. Friend our support on that. The football governance Bill, which we intend to introduce shortly, will significantly advance the protection of fans. We are working with the widest range of partners, and we hope to command proper cross-party support, as the previous Football Governance Bill did before the election.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): East Devon district council is making available £207,000 for young people's sports facilities in Honiton. How can central Government contribute to that initiative?

Lisa Nandy: We are pleased to have announced investment worth £123 million in grassroots sports facilities for the coming year. Demand currently outstrips the pace at which such facilities can be created, but the Government are absolutely determined to work with the hon. Gentleman and partners across the House to ensure that we give our young people the facilities that they deserve.

T8. [900693] **Chris Ward** (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): Historic England recently announced a £750,000 commitment to rebuilding the beautiful Victorian arches of Madeira Terrace in my constituency, which the Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism visited with me during the election campaign. That commitment is welcome, but such projects are expensive and take time, so what can the Secretary of State do to support heritage projects around the country, and will she come to Brighton with me to see the work in progress?

Chris Bryant: I think my hon. Friend may be getting me again. It is a great delight that the arches will be sorted, not least because we launched his election campaign at that very site. Our heritage is a key reason why so many international visitors come to this country. If we can get the mix of historical and modern right, I am sure that we can challenge France for international visitor numbers.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Small Rural Communities

1. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to support parish life in small rural communities. [900656]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, as this is my first time responding to questions, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor as Second Church Estates Commissioner, the former Member for South West Bedfordshire, Andrew Selous, for his work in the role. I certainly hope to do my best in it for parliamentarians and commissioners.

Turning to my hon. Friend's question, the Church of England operates 16,000 parish churches, over half of which are in rural areas, along with Church schools. It provides the largest network of buildings in England that serve communities—buildings that are used for worship and education, as well as warm spaces and hubs for activities such as food banks, post offices, credit unions and other social and community initiatives.

Ms Minns: The parish of Bewcastle in the north-east corner of my constituency is perhaps best known as the home of the Bewcastle cross, probably the finest example of pre-Norman carving in England. Geographically, it is a very isolated community, but every single month, parishioners organise a vibrant community hub, which is critical in overcoming social isolation and loneliness. Next month will mark 1,350 years since the carving of the cross, so will my hon. Friend ask the Church Commissioners to consider additional funding for the parish to improve the village hall?

Marsha De Cordova: I congratulate all the volunteers in the parish of Bewcastle on their work to tackle social isolation and loneliness. I will look into the specific case that my hon. Friend mentions and see what advice can be given to support her. I also commend the work of the Good Shepherd multi-academy trust, which is in her constituency and supports children, families and communities to flourish.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Second Church Estates Commissioner to her place, and thank her for her answer to the previous question. As everyone knows, the purpose of any church is to tell the greatest story ever told—the story of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—but alongside that they have practical purposes, which the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) referred to. Those purposes include looking after the elderly, as well as children, through childcare and nurseries; and there is also the social media and the events that churches host. Those are the practical outpourings of the gospel in the lives of those whom we reach. What will the Church Commissioners do to ensure that those things happen, alongside the telling of the gospel?

Marsha De Cordova: As the hon. Member highlights, there is so much that the Church does by way of outreach in our communities. It also ensures that there is good infrastructure to protect all our communities, including children and young people.

Former Church Sites

2. **Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD):** What steps the Church is taking to support the development of housing on derelict former church sites. [900657]

Marsha De Cordova: When a church is closed, a formal legal process under the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 is followed. There are currently 127 cases in which a new use is being found for closed church buildings; only two are cleared sites, and they are waiting for disposal.

Josh Babarinde: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. Eastbourne declared a housing emergency last year, and the key thing we need to do to address that emergency is build our way out of it. The commissioners preside over a perfect brownfield site for housing: the site of the former St Elisabeth's church on Victoria Drive, just down the road from where I went to school. It has been derelict for 20 years, and since the church on the site was demolished four years ago, there has been no sign of development whatsoever. I urge the

commissioners to develop that site into affordable housing, and I appeal to the hon. Lady for an urgent update on the situation.

Marsha De Cordova: Since 2022, the Church Commissioners have been working with the diocese of Chichester to market the site and find a developer. I am pleased to say that a developer is in the process of agreeing to a conditional contract for a mixed-use development that will include convenience retail and housing, some of which will be much-needed affordable housing, which the hon. Member mentioned. That development will need planning permission, and that is being explored with the local authority now.

Access to Places of Worship

3. **Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con):** What steps the Church is taking with developers and local authorities to ensure that residents in new towns and villages have access to places of worship. [900658]

Marsha De Cordova: Local authorities are not currently required to consider the building of new places of worship, but under the national planning policy framework they are permitted to include places of worship among a range of community buildings in a development. Where local authorities include places of worship among community buildings, the Church Commissioners seek to promote these facilities.

Blake Stephenson: Development should be about building places and communities where people can live fulfilling lives, not just building houses, and places of worship play an important role in that. Will the hon. Member work with Ministers to ensure that the Government's new towns commission incorporates the creation of places of worship in new towns?

Marsha De Cordova: The Church Commissioners are very much invested in place-making; it is at the core of their approach to bringing forward new homes for communities across the country. They have sought a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to discuss the Church's strategic land, and the potential to build up to 70,000 new homes. The diocese of St Albans has several good examples of how the Church is contributing to community-building in the Mid Bedfordshire constituency, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman with further details.

Independent Safeguarding Board Review

4. **Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab):** What steps the Church has taken in response to the findings of Sarah Wilkinson's independent review into the Independent Safeguarding Board. [900659]

Marsha De Cordova: The General Synod of the Church of England considered the Wilkinson review at its meeting in July 2024. The synod has commissioned a detailed analysis of four options for the organisational structure of safeguarding independence. The intention is for them to be presented to the synod at the next meeting in February 2025, which I hope to attend.

Luke Myer: I welcome my hon. Friend to her role; she is doing a fantastic job. My constituent has been involved in that process. Can she help to secure a meeting with my constituent to discuss the findings and the work in more detail?

Marsha De Cordova: I will do whatever I can to secure a meeting. It is important to put on record that there has been much engagement with all the survivors, who have been involved throughout the process. I will certainly write to my hon. Friend to see what we can do to ensure that a meeting is secured.

Recognition of Positive Impact

5. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to recognise the positive impact of individual members of the clergy in the communities they serve. [900660]

Mr Speaker: I call Marsha de Cordova—you are earning your money today.

Marsha De Cordova: I certainly am, and so are my thighs.

At a national level, the contribution of local clergy and lay people is usually recognised through the Archbishops' medals or a Lambeth degree. Most dioceses also have their own awards. Clergy and lay volunteers are eligible for nomination to relevant orders, and for decorations and medals, and there are opportunities in the wider civil honours system where appropriate.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that answer. I am full of praise for the hard work and dedication of all our clergy, but sometimes an individual goes above and beyond. That is true of Reverend Canon David Williams, who on Christmas day will lead his last service at St Mary's, Princes Risborough, after 15 years' service to that town and the surrounding villages. His work includes having supported thousands of children through Lighthouse Princes Risborough, and his role as a trustee of the Princes Centre and other charities, including those supporting the homeless. Will the hon. Lady join me in thanking David and his wife Jo for their 15 years' service to Princes Risborough? What more can the Church do to recognise his and others' hard work?

Marsha De Cordova: I place on record my thanks, congratulations and appreciation of Reverend Canon David Williams and his wife—as we know, these things are always a partnership—for all their good work in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The Diocese of Oxford is thankful for the dedicated, pioneering and innovative work of the clergy and their great contribution to the Church's ministry and mission, and to our local communities. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will pass on my thanks, and that he will be present for the reverend's final service on Christmas morning, to congratulate him in person.

Interfaith Understanding

6. **Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): What progress the Church has made on developing interfaith understanding. [900661]

Marsha De Cordova: Some 85% of the global population have a faith that shapes their day-to-day life. The Church has been working at a global, national and local level to improve interfaith understanding and engagement. At home, it engages with national and local networks to support faith and civic leaders, mayors and MPs in building trust and resilience in their local communities, as they did during and after the most recent civil unrest.

Matt Rodda: I welcome my hon. Friend to her post; she is doing a fine job. Will she join me in congratulating the local faith communities across the diverse and tolerant town of Reading on their work to support one another, and to understand one another's faith? I associate myself with that tremendous work; it is wonderful to see different faith communities working together for the whole community. I also put on record my support for the retiring Bishop of Reading, Bishop Olivia, and pay tribute to her for her outstanding work to tackle knife crime in our community.

Marsha De Cordova: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those working across all faiths to ensure that there is good, strong community cohesion, and I congratulate the retiring bishop. That is important across constituencies that, like Reading, have diverse communities with diversity in faith.

Ordination of Women: 30th Anniversary

7. **Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to mark the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women. [900662]

11. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): What steps the Church is taking to mark the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women. [900666]

Marsha De Cordova: It is so important that we celebrate women who have been ordained. Tuesday 12 March 2024 marked the 30th anniversary of the first ordinations of women as priests in the Church of England, and about 6,500 women have been ordained since 1994. Women now make up about one third of the clergy in England, and obviously this proportion is growing. Many services of celebration have taken place across the country to recognise the considerable contributions that these women have made and continue to make to the Church. However, as we all know, there is still a long way to go and much more work to be done in this area.

Dawn Butler: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent job she is doing today, and on her appointment. I want to highlight one particular woman, Bishop Rose. In 2007, she was appointed chaplain to Her late Majesty the Queen, the first ever black female to hold that role. In 2010, she was the first ever black female appointed as chaplain—the 79th chaplain—to the Speaker of the House of Commons. Since 2019, the Right Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin has been the Bishop of Dover and the Bishop in Canterbury—Britain's first ever black female bishop. Will my hon. Friend join me in honouring Bishop Rose?

Marsha De Cordova: I take great pleasure in honouring the great Bishop Rose. As we all know, it is Black History Month, so there is double cause to do so. The diocese of London marked the anniversary, and there have been several services marking it across the country, in which

180 women have gathered to share their experience of ministry over the past 30 years. We all know what a difference Bishop Rose made to this place, including to me personally when I first came here seven and a half years ago. I should also pay tribute to Tricia Hillas, the Speaker's chaplain for a period of time, another great and amazing woman. I am so proud of the role that women are playing in the Church. They are breaking down barriers and smashing those glass ceilings. Long may that continue.

Rosie Duffield: I welcome my dear friend to her position, and I know she will be absolutely brilliant. I was thrilled to attend the 30-year anniversary of the first women ordained at Canterbury cathedral earlier this year. The service was conducted by our dear Bishop Rose, our much-loved former chaplain to the Speaker. Will my friend join me in congratulating those pioneering women, including my partner's mother, Canon Eileen Routh, who faced a degree of hostility when entering into their new vocations some 30 years ago?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I happily join her in congratulating the great Bishop Rose, but also in remembering all those women who faced hostility when starting out, including her future mother-in-law, Canon Eileen Routh; she faced a lot of hostility. As I say, there is still so much work to be done, but it is so important that we celebrate these achievements, because they will spur us forward to do even more.

Restoration Funding

8. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What estimate the Church Commissioners have made of levels of funding required to restore parish churches and cathedrals. [900663]

Marsha De Cordova: Churches and cathedrals are the treasure houses of our local culture and history. The Church of England manages the largest single group of listed buildings in England—over 12,200 grade I and grade II listed buildings. The value of the work needed to maintain these buildings is estimated at £115 million annually, and the backlog for church building repairs is approximately £1 billion.

Douglas McAllister: There are many places of worship in perilous condition, not just in England, but in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire. The listed places of worship grant scheme, introduced by former Chancellor Gordon Brown in 2004, is UK-wide. What efforts have the Church Commissioners made to ensure that the scheme is extended beyond March 2025?

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend will know that the Church does not receive any regular financial support from the state, and church buildings often rely on fundraising by local volunteers. The Government's listed places of worship grant scheme is extremely helpful for all our faith communities with listed buildings across the UK, reimbursing the cost of VAT spent on repairs to those listed churches. This year, more than 5,000 Church of England buildings received support through the scheme. That is transformational for local communities, and enables work on the vital fabrics of those spaces. It is important that that funding scheme continues. The

Church has written to the Treasury, along with others, and I hope that my hon. Friends in the Treasury will consider extending the scheme in the upcoming Budget later this month.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the hon. Lady to her new role, and I associate myself with her tribute to her predecessor. In recent times, the late noble Lord Cormack in the other place convened a meeting of MPs from cathedral cities and their deans, and there are plans to resurrect that meeting. Will the hon. Lady meet me to discuss how we can support her with plans to lobby the Treasury for capital grants for our great English cathedrals, including Salisbury, to maintain their presence in our country?

Marsha De Cordova: Yes, I am very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Access to Period Products

9. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): Whether the Commission is taking steps to increase access to period products on the parliamentary estate. [900664]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): May I say how glad I am to give my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) a break this morning? I also praise the former Chair of the Administration Committee, Sir Charles Walker; he has been a great friend and a great champion for this House.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for asking this important question. The House of Commons Administration is committed to providing period products for emergency use; they are available free of charge in selected toilets across the parliamentary estate. No one should be put in an uncomfortable situation due to lack of access to emergency period products.

Mary Kelly Foy: May I say how glad I am to be asking this question today, so that my hon. Friend can also earn his pay? Free period products in the workplace are essential items, but in far too many places of work they are seen as optional. I know there are a few places around the parliamentary estate where free period products can be accessed, but more places are required and we cannot leave out our constituency offices. Will he ensure that more period products are made available both here and in constituency offices around the country?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend makes a great point. The House service was asked a year ago to provide period products for emergency use, and it engages with groups, such as our workplace equality networks, to ensure accessible products throughout our House. On constituency offices, as Members of Parliament we are responsible for our staff, and away from this estate I would expect a Member, as an employer, to decide on what provision to arrange for their teams. However, I am happy to take that point back to the Administration Committee for further consideration of take-up and distribution, and I will contact my hon. Friend in good time on the matter.

Restoration and Renewal

10. **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress has been made on the restoration and renewal programme. [900665]

Nick Smith: Earlier this year, the Restoration and Renewal Client Board published the strategic case for the R and R programme, which sets out how to deliver the R and R works that will be developed in detail over the next year. This detailed work, which will include robust cost, timescale and risk estimates for all three options, is expected to be presented to the House in 2025 to enable an evidence-based decision on how best to restore our lovely Palace.

Dame Meg Hillier: It feels a bit like groundhog day—we have been talking about restoration and renewal for 40 years. Bits are falling off the building, there are leaks in every office I have had in this building and in each part of the estate, and we all know the problems of asbestos and the issues in the basement. My hon. Friend has given me the timetable, but can he say that he will champion this issue, and that we will finally get to a resolution before a catastrophic event in this place destroys this world heritage site?

Nick Smith: I know that my hon. Friend has been an advocate for this programme for many years. Together, as members of the Public Accounts Committee, we sought safety for all of us here on the estate, the modernisation of our facilities and value for money. Detailed designs are being developed and surveys continue. The work of the R and R programme has been continuing at pace over the past six months, following the work of the client board and the programme board. We will work together on this.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I apologise for not being here earlier. Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that we are spending more than £1 million a month on just the maintenance of this Palace? The long delay—there is no reason for it—over making these decisions lengthens the process and leads to the taxpayer paying more money, and it is leading to more degradation of this Palace as we sit here.

Nick Smith: The hon. Member is right about the importance of moving faster and reducing costs on this important programme. I do not know the detailed answer to the question he asks, but I will get back to him.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Communication with Diocese Leaders

12. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): What steps the Church is taking to help ensure that people can contact and communicate with the leaders of their dioceses. [900667]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): My hon. Friend's constituency is under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Coventry, and there is currently a vacancy for the diocesan bishop. However, all the contact details for the bishop's office, diocesan staff and cathedral staff are found on the website. Contact details for local clergy are also available on the website A Church Near You.

Jodie Gosling: I thank my hon. Friend for their response and welcome them to their new role, in which they are doing a brilliant job. Constituents in Nuneaton have raised concerns about finding available burial plots. Given the recent consultation from the Law Commission, can my hon. Friend please update the House on proposals to increase burial capacity in England?

Marsha De Cordova: The Church of England contributed to the proposals developed by the Law Commission, and they have developed those proposals sensitively to address the complex questions around burial and cremation law. All sides recognise the growing need and the pressure for burial space, and the challenges facing burial grounds and maintenance. Reusing grave spaces in churchyards in some circumstances is a long-standing and lawful practice in the Church of England, ensuring that existing remains are left undisturbed. However, some churchyards are declared full and are closed by law. They are unable to be reopened for new burials.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 21 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Employment Rights Bill.

TUESDAY 22 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and International Committee of the Red Cross (Status) Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 23 OCTOBER—Motion to approve the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2024, followed by a motion to approve the Iran (Sanctions) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, followed by a debate on a motion relating to the independent expert panel.

THURSDAY 24 OCTOBER—General debate on Black History Month.

FRIDAY 25 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 October will include:

MONDAY 28 OCTOBER—General debate—subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 29 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Great British Energy Bill.

WEDNESDAY 30 OCTOBER—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver her Budget statement.

THURSDAY 31 OCTOBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 1 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 4 November will include:

MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 5 NOVEMBER—Continuation of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

The House will rise for the November recess at the conclusion of business on Wednesday 6 November and return on Monday 11 November.

Chris Philp: May I start by paying tribute to Alex Salmond, a substantial figure in our politics and personally always very popular across the House? We will all miss him. We also fondly remember Sir David Amess, whose crest is on the wall opposite me, and who was cruelly murdered three years ago this week. Sir David and his family will remain forever in our thoughts and prayers.

I congratulate colleagues who introduced Bills yesterday. The Bill on terminally ill adults has attracted particular interest. Getting the details right will be critical. If the Bill proceeds, will the Government commit to providing the time needed in Committee and on Report for full debate and votes?

We have just heard that the Budget will be delivered in 13 days' time. There was not much enthusiasm from Labour Members when the Leader of the House announced

that—I cannot imagine why. Labour solemnly pledged in its manifesto that it would not raise national insurance, so raising employer's NI would break that promise, as well as hitting working people and destroying jobs.

But hon. Members should not just take my word for it. Paul Johnson of the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies said that Labour's NI plan is "a straightforward breach" of its manifesto commitment. The Federation of Small Businesses said it would be "a clear manifesto breach" and will "hit working people". UKHospitality said it is "a tax on jobs". The British Chambers of Commerce said it will

"hobble growth and lead to...less money to invest"

in workers. The Institute of Directors called it

"a poll tax on business"

and said that

"the costs will be borne by workers."

My final witness is Rachel, from Leeds, who apparently used to work briefly at the Bank of England. In 2021, the Chancellor herself admitted that a rise in employers' national insurance is, in fact, in her words, a "tax on working people".

Now, Labour Members could have been honest in the election and made the argument for the increase, but they were not honest; they pretended that they had no intention of increasing NI, to trick people into voting for them. However, this is not just about Labour's election dishonesty. In a Radio 5 Live phone-in yesterday, I spoke to a man who is closing down his business and leaving the country because of the high taxes and increased regulation proposed by this Government. Another man phoned in to say he was closing down too. This Government are driving businesses to close and making successful people leave the country. Their policies will destroy jobs and reduce the amount of tax collected. I say to them sincerely that there is time in the next 13 days to stop and think again. I appeal directly to Labour Back Benchers, whom the Prime Minister is more likely to listen to than me, to please appeal to their Prime Minister to think again. Otherwise, his personal poll ratings—already minus 36%—are likely to plummet further.

Speaking of the Prime Minister, will the Leader of the House arrange a statement on the special police escort for Taylor Swift? It is reported that the police decided initially that no special escort was needed. Apparently, the Home Secretary, the Attorney General, the Mayor of London and, inevitably, Sue Gray then pressured the police into changing their mind and providing one, violating the police's operational independence. We now know that among the many freebies that the Prime Minister has eagerly scrounged for himself were tickets and a backstage pass to that very concert. And it was not just him: the Home Secretary, the Science Secretary, the Culture Secretary, the Health Secretary, the Education Secretary, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Minister for School Standards and the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary all had free tickets too. What were they doing? Having a Cabinet meeting at the concert? Does the Leader of the House understand how bad this looks? The Government initially denied that the Met was pressured, which now appears to be untrue. Will the Government finally come clean and tell the truth about exactly what pressure was put on the Met and by whom?

Finally, will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on illegal immigration and asylum accommodation? It emerged this week that the Government are seeking even more hotels, at huge expense, to cater for the large number of illegal arrivals. Over 13,000 illegal immigrants have crossed the channel by small boat since the election. The Government must now regret cancelling the Rwanda scheme before it had even started. The deterrent effect would by now have kicked in. We have seen the same approach work in Australia. We have seen the deterrent effect work with returns to Albania. Even the European Commission is now looking at a Rwanda-style scheme. Will the right hon. Lady therefore consider reinstating the scheme, given that the European Commission itself is now looking at it? And why have the Government closed the Bibby Stockholm, leaving them instead frantically renting expensive hotels? The Government are failing on illegal immigration. The country and the House need answers.

Mr Speaker: Order. Shadow Leader of the House, you get five minutes. Please do not take advantage. If you have good points to make, please make them earlier.

Lucy Powell: I join the shadow Leader of the House in paying tribute to Alex Salmond, a great parliamentarian who has sadly passed away. I also pay tribute to the late Sir David Amess, as this week marks three years since his awful murder. We still miss him greatly in this House. I also send condolences to the friends and family of Liam Payne. One Direction was loved by millions across the world, and this was a tragic end for someone so young.

I would like to draw the House's attention to the Modernisation Committee's call for views on its future work, which has been published this morning. I am hoping to hear many views, and I thank the shadow Leader of the House and other Committee members for their constructive engagement so far.

As the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, the private Member's Bills were presented yesterday. I know that many colleagues want to ensure that proper time and consideration are given to the important matter of assisted dying. As a Member of this House who was present last time we considered this issue, I know that these debates of conscience bring out the very best of Parliament in respectful and considered debate.

I am sure that we all welcome this week's news that inflation is now lower than the Bank of England's target, for the first time in three years. After so much political instability, economic turbulence and rising bills, it will be a huge relief for families. But it is just the first step in securing the economy. Given the state of the public finances we inherited, there is a long road ahead.

The Conservatives do not like to hear it, but they left the country's finances in a very sorry state. They ducked the decisions on things that they knew would explode after the election, and were grossly irresponsible: pay deals left on Ministers' desks with no money allocated; this year's pay rise for teachers not funded, and last year's not either; a hospital building programme that was a work of fiction, not worth the paper it was written on; out-of-control expenditure in Departments, like the billions spent on asylum hotels; reserves for this financial year spent three times over; waiting lists at a

record high, with industrial action ripping through the NHS; and prisons on the verge of collapse. It was a Government who knew they were about to lose, and left us to pick up the pieces.

This is not about not just the £22 billion black hole that we have now; it is a black hole year after year. Doing nothing is not an option. If we do not deal with it, markets lose confidence and the cost of borrowing goes up. We saw two years ago what happens, did not we not? The poorest in society pay the highest price when the economy tanks. We are all still paying higher mortgages and higher costs after what the shadow Leader of the House did when he was the Chief Secretary of the Treasury in Liz Truss's Cabinet.

I will not be discussing the measures that may or may not be in the Budget. The Chancellor is working night and day to deliver economic stability. We stand by all our manifesto commitments, and we know that we need to live within our means. I have said it once and I will say it again: I will not take the right hon. Gentleman's advice on economic stability, if he does not mind.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the Taylor Swift concerts, inevitably. Let me say to this House [*Interruption.*] No, I was not there. The concerts generated £1 billion for the UK visitor economy this summer. Surely people welcome that. I know that he is interested in quoting other people; he might want to read what the Conservative peer Andrew Lloyd Webber said in *The Times* today: the continued attention on this concert by the Conservatives is "ludicrous". It is about time they "Shake it off", quite honestly—someone had to get it in.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the Rwanda scheme. Frankly, more Home Secretaries from his Government went to Rwanda than illegal migrants. We are fixing the mess that the Conservatives left behind, as we are across all policy areas. We are restoring confidence and governing for the long term. Just this week, our investment summit attracted record private sector investment—twice as much as was attracted by the same conference under his watch last year. Businesses are coming to Britain; a vote of confidence in Labour's handling of the economy, turning the page on the instability and infighting that happened in the past.

Just this week, we have gone further: we have published our industrial strategy; unlocked thousands of new homes on brownfield sites; kept our promise to veterans on voter ID; tackled spiralling car insurance costs; taken our first steps on Martyn's law and on removing hereditary peers, which Conservative Members were against; published our Employment Rights Bill; taken action on carer's allowance overpayments; increased independent film tax credits; and, today, opened funding applications for school-based nurseries. That is the difference that just one week of a Labour Government can make, unlike the Tories.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): This weekend, I had the great and fun privilege of attending the Windrush celebration at All Saints church in my constituency. It was as much a discussion as a celebration. Will the Leader of the House provide either a Government statement or Government time for a debate on the Windrush compensation scheme and the improvements that will hopefully be made under this Government?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; she is absolutely right. The scandal of the Windrush generation still scars our country. Those injustices are being furthered by the delays to the compensation scheme, which this Government are taking quick action to put right. I am sure she could raise these matters in Home Office questions next week.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank the Leader of the House for the helpful clarity she has provided in giving notice of three weeks' worth of business. We very much hope that this is how she intends to continue going forward. I also join her in sending my condolences to the family of Liam Payne, who has passed away so tragically.

It was with enormous sadness that I learned just two days ago of a horrific murder committed in broad daylight in a residential area of my Chelmsford constituency. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending condolences to the victim's grieving family at this terrible time. As Essex police are now conducting an ongoing major incident investigation, I cannot comment much further on the specifics, except to say that I understand that this was a vicious attack with three male suspects spotted leaving the scene wearing balaclavas. I encourage members of the public who have any information to get in touch with Essex police.

My thoughts also go out to the brave police, paramedics and other first responders who have to attend such awful scenes across the entire country. I thank them for the incredible work they do and send them assurances from the Liberal Democrat Benches that we have their backs. We will never stop campaigning for the funding and resources they need to support them, which the previous Government did not prioritise, leading to the grave issues we see now in our beloved NHS and other emergency services.

Finally, Lake Windermere is England's largest lake. Its beauty is internationally renowned. It is home to countless species of wildlife and surrounding habitats, and it is a haven for swimmers and water sports enthusiasts. It is therefore shocking to read the BBC revelations that north-west water company, United Utilities, spent three years spewing over 100 million litres of raw sewage into Lake Windermere. The failures of United Utilities are clear for all to see, unlike the water it is polluting. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss the ongoing appalling behaviour of water companies?

Lucy Powell: I see trying to give the House as much forward business and as many recess dates as possible in order to provide certainty as a key performance indicator, and I thank the hon. Lady for her comments in that regard.

I am very sorry to hear about the murder in the hon. Lady's constituency, and I join her in thanking all the services—the police, the NHS and others—that do such an amazing job when it comes to these awful incidents.

The hon. Lady rightly raised the truly appalling scandal of discharges into Windermere. As a northerner, I am a frequent visitor to the Lake District, and I am aware of its beauty and its importance not only as a tourist attraction but as a habitat for wildlife. The Government have taken rapid action in dealing with our water bosses and cleaning up our waterways. In his

first week in the job, the Environment Secretary ringfenced infrastructure spending and empowered customers to hold bosses to account, and the Water (Special Measures) Bill is currently in the House of Lords and will come to this House soon. However, that is not all we have done: we have also launched a full review of water reform to ensure that we have the governance right and can take appropriate action, including sanctions, to prevent these discharges from happening again.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcomed the introduction of the Renters' Rights Bill last week, but many more of my constituents are social housing tenants than are private renters, and they are living in seriously overcrowded conditions, often with damp and mould. This is not always entirely the fault of the landlord, but the conditions in which people are living exacerbate existing problems. Will the Leader of the House grant us a debate in Government time about the real need for investment in social housing, which, according to the Government's own figures, is the best value for money for the taxpayer and prevents health and other problems?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right: in recent years this country has had a woeful record of building and creating social homes, which is fundamental for many people. I was struck by what the Deputy Prime Minister said once—that she had grown up in a council house, which at the time was seen as impoverishment, whereas today it is considered a privilege to get a council house. The Government are committed to building 1.5 million new homes, a great many of which will be new social and council housing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I look forward to meeting the Leader of the House next week to discuss the Committee's work. I have encouraged parties on both sides of the House to ensure that we get the names in so that we can get the Committee up and running, but given that we are not up and running yet, may I make a suggestion for the general debate on 28 October that the Leader of the House has announced?

Many of my Jewish constituents enjoy playing golf at Hendon golf club. Recently, during Yom Kippur, the most abhorrent antisemitic statements were raked into the bunkers. That is under police investigation, but may we have a debate on 28 October on how we can create measures to combat hate crime across all religions and all backgrounds, so that we can unite and show the House that we are determined to stamp out behaviour of this abhorrent nature in society?

Lucy Powell: I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman next week, and to working closely with him as the Backbench Business Committee gets under way in the coming weeks. I am extremely sorry to hear about the antisemitic attacks at Hendon golf club, especially as they took place during Yom Kippur. That really is something that we need to end in this country, and we must continue to speak up about it, as the hon. Gentleman frequently does in the House. He has made a very good suggestion for a debate, and I shall certainly speak to the Chief Whip and others about it.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): Many of my constituents face serious problems with antisocial behaviour and crime of various types. The Government are taking renewed action to tackle those problems, and I was pleased to hear some of the announcements from the new Home Secretary. Would the Leader of the House be able to arrange a debate in Government time on this very important matter?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. Crime and antisocial behaviour blights many communities and is frequently raised at business questions by the Members that represent those communities. That is why we are taking action to create more neighbourhood police, as well as bringing in respect orders and other actions to tackle antisocial behaviour. Home Office questions is next week and he may want to raise the issue then as well.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I reassure the Leader of the House that some of us feel that nothing is too good for the marvellous Taylor Swift, including, where appropriate, a police escort for her "Getaway Car". However, there can be no doubt that the terrorism threat is intensifying. Can we have a statement, as soon as possible, on the reports in today's media about the possibility that Russia is behind an incendiary device that was flown in on a plane to the United Kingdom, but fortunately did not ignite until it was in a warehouse in Birmingham?

Lucy Powell: We have seen many of those reports, and we heard from the head of the security services, in a key speech he gave last week, about some of the threats that our amazing security services thwart, which we often do not know about. Home Office questions is next week, but if the right hon. Gentleman does not get the answers he wants, I will encourage the Home Secretary to consider giving us a security update.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests. Many former miners who suffer from acute respiratory diseases are applying to the Department for Work and Pensions for compensation, but the default response is that the process takes 16 weeks. That is totally unacceptable for people with such conditions. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss and investigate why the DWP is taking so long to ensure that there is justice for people who suffer from such conditions because of their occupation?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter; I know he has raised it many times in the House. Many of the compensation schemes that we, as a Government, have inherited are still taking far too long. I will raise the matters he talked about with the DWP on his behalf. The subject would make a good topic for debate in the future.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The Labour and Conservative parties are getting down to the business of deciding who should serve on Select Committees. That is an important task and good luck to those who get those jobs. However, one group is effectively excluded from participating in cross-party scrutiny in this Parliament: Members of the smaller

parties of this House. For the first time since Select Committees were established, there is no place for Members of any of the smaller parties, except if the Government gift us a place through their largesse and generosity. We are effectively barred from participating in Select Committees. How can that be right or acceptable?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. As I hope he is aware, there is a long-established convention and practice that the smaller parties have representation on Committees, especially Members from the devolved nations on their relative Select Committee. That process is still ongoing. Some names are mentioned on the order paper today, but they only relate to some of the places that are to be allocated. Those conversations are continuing through the usual channels. It is my understanding that there will be places available on some of those Committees for Members of the Scottish National party and some of the other smaller parties.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate about how we can build more social housing and improve accommodation for homeless people? She is aware that there is a homeless hostel in my constituency called Bevin Court. St Anne's Community Services would like to improve and renovate the hostel, and pay for that by selling off some of the land and building social housing on it, which would require a change in the covenant by Government. Lawyers have spent 12 months arguing about this and got nowhere. I wrote to Ministers in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in the previous Government, but the matter was passed on to the Ministry of Justice. In this Parliament, I have written to the Ministry of Justice but it has been passed back to the Housing Minister. Will the Leader of the House intervene to try to get this important project off the ground, and simply get the change of covenant that the organisation is asking for?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important matter, and it sounds like that project is vital for creating more social homes in his constituency of Sheffield South East. I am really sorry to hear that he has been passed from pillar to post by different Departments, and this is exactly the sort of issue to raise in business questions. I expect Members to receive timely and helpful responses from Ministers, and I will raise the issue with the relevant Departments as soon as I leave the Chamber.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Labour manifesto contained a pledge to recognise Palestine. Subsequently, the Prime Minister has said that the Palestinians have an "undeniable right" to recognition, but something is holding him back. Could we please have a debate in Government time to examine the fact that all our Arab allies are saying that recognition is now a prerequisite for peace in the middle east, so that the House can vote to support the Prime Minister in taking this very significant step?

Lucy Powell: We absolutely do support recognising Palestine as a state, which is an indelible right of the Palestinian people. It is absolutely critical that we achieve a long-term, two-state solution in the middle east that recognises both Israel's right to exist as a safe and secure country, and the Palestinian people's right to

[Lucy Powell]

have a Palestinian state that is also safe, secure and free. That is what we are working towards internationally and with our allies across the world, and it is something that I know the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister spend a lot of their time dealing with. We have Foreign Office questions coming up next week, and I know that the Foreign Secretary is keen to come to this House as often as possible to update Members on what is happening in the middle east. I am sure these issues will be debated further.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): This week is Flood Action Week. In Calder Valley, where we have had several major floods in the last 15 years, my constituents are all too aware of flooding and its impact; indeed, we have spent much of the last few days under a flood alert. Although Yorkshire Water has been active in supporting anti-flooding measures, could we have a debate in Government time on how regulation could be used to ensure that flood prevention is part of the statutory role of water companies?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The issues of flood resilience and flood preparedness get raised in this session frequently, and I anticipate that as we get towards the winter months, when flooding becomes more frequent, they will be raised more often. We have launched our flood resilience taskforce to turbocharge the delivery and co-ordination of flood defences, but this issue would make a very good topic for a Back-Bench business debate or another debate.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): No one in this House was among those who went to the South Pacific in the 1950s and '60s to witness the first nuclear tests, but some of us have met the old men who did so as young men, unknowing of the dangers they faced. After a very long campaign, the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson agreed that those men should be granted service medals, and the current Secretary of State for Defence has agreed that the eligibility criteria should be widened because many of the people who went have not got their medals. Given that the Prime Minister, the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey)—with whom I have worked—my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and others are desperate to ensure that the men get what they deserve, will the Leader of the House arrange an urgent statement? We owe these veterans, many of whom are dying, that honour, a duty and our thanks.

Lucy Powell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. I have followed the issue of nuclear test veterans closely, and I know that it has been raised in this House many times. A recent documentary shone a light on these issues as well. I will certainly raise this matter with the Ministry of Defence, and we have Defence questions coming up soon. I will ask the MOD to come to the House and give us an update.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Last week I had the great privilege of visiting High Spennithorne primary school and Ryton junior school in my constituency, which have been working with local artists on projects

supported by Historic England. High Spennithorne school has launched a mural celebrating local women heroes in its former category D village, while Ryton has created an online game commemorating the lost village of Addison, another category D village. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the importance of our young people learning about their local history and the creative arts?

Lucy Powell: That sounds like a great project by schools in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I am sure they will be pleased that she has raised it in the Commons this morning. Engaging young people in the cultural, industrial and other aspects of the history of their local area is really important. She might want to raise that at Education questions, which are coming up soon.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Nearly half a million British pensioners across the globe had the level of their pensions frozen when they left the country. That includes 99-year-old Anne Puckeridge, a decorated world war two veteran who did not leave this country for Canada until she was 76. Despite having paid a lifetime of national insurance contributions, she has seen her pension diminish every year. Ironically, this mostly affects pensioners who have gone to Commonwealth countries, because people who go to the European Union or the United States, for example, get the uplift each year. Can we have a statement from the Pensions Minister on what the Government intend to do about this? Will the Leader of the House arrange a meeting with the Government for me and others who will be meeting Anne when she comes to this country in December to celebrate her 100th birthday?

Lucy Powell: I congratulate Anne on her forthcoming 100th birthday, and I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter. I am happy to try to facilitate a meeting for her with the relevant Minister. She will know that the policy on the uprating of UK state pensions paid overseas is of long standing. A key plank of it is that uprating is a reciprocal arrangement. However, I will definitely arrange a meeting for her, if that is helpful.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for the House to debate, celebrate and accelerate the roll out of life-saving defibrillators across the UK? As part of that debate, we could discuss the growing campaign to remove VAT from defibrillators so that the money raised by voluntary organisations in many of our constituencies might go a little further. Finally, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Mary Montague, the indefatigable provost of East Renfrewshire who has turned personal tragedy into a determination that defibrillators should be available to everyone who needs them in their time of crisis?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend describes a very good local campaign, led by his provost and others, to get defibrillators into local communities. All of us can relate to the importance of having defibrillators available in our communities. He will know that VAT relief applies to defibrillators purchased by local authorities, the NHS and certain charities. I will ensure that the relevant Minister has heard his call for that VAT relief to be extended.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, I met the representative of a business that is proposing a carbon capture project in my constituency. They stressed the importance of having a decision from the Secretary of State by the end of this year. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State to come to the House with a statement on the next stage of these projects?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Secretary of State recently updated the House on the huge investment the Government are putting into this new carbon capture technology, and on where some of that investment will be going. I know the Secretary of State has been expediting decisions to ensure that businesses such as the one that the hon. Gentleman describes can benefit from that announcement. I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Gentleman said and returns to this House when he has a further update.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Pie Factory Music in Ramsgate, in my constituency, serves more than 1,000 young people across east Kent, many of whom are in care or are young asylum seekers, refugees or struggling with ill health. Unfortunately, Conservative-run Kent county council has slashed support for Pie Factory Music and now wants to sell the building, preventing access to a safe, dedicated space for these young people. I am aware that our Labour Government are committed to a new network of youth hubs. In that light, will my right hon. Friend provide Government time for a debate on the importance of youth services, particularly in building resilience, tackling mental health issues and enabling young people to thrive?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for these issues in Ramsgate and East Thanet and has raised them with me before. I am sorry to hear about the fate of Pie Factory and its work. We understand the difficulties that local authorities and others are under, but we are launching a new Young Futures programme, which I hope will support facilities like Pie Factory's in future. I will certainly consider my hon. Friend's request for a debate on youth services.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): This week is Flood Action Week, an important opportunity to raise awareness of this crucial issue. This week, sadly, North Herefordshire has been subject to flooding: roads are closed, schools are closed and soil is washing off the fields into the roads and rivers. Unfortunately, climate change is making these events more frequent and more extreme. Does the Leader of the House agree that farmers are crucial partners in tackling flooding through natural flood management? Will she make time for a debate in Government time on the crucial issue of flood prevention and action?

Lucy Powell: The hon. Lady raises an important matter that has already been raised today. She and other colleagues are making a very good case for a debate on flood resilience and flood action. She is right to say that climate change is having a profound effect on those issues, which is why the Government are committed to becoming a clean energy superpower by 2030. I am sorry to hear about what is happening in her constituency; I have already taken note of the early calls for a debate.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Each year, 300,000 people come to Cleethorpes for our Armed Forces Day. Can the Leader of the House advise me how I can best communicate to the Ministry of Defence how much we would appreciate it if National Armed Forces Day in 2026 could be held in Cleethorpes? It will be the 10-year anniversary of the last time it was held there; perhaps we could extend Armed Forces Day to start at the wonderful but somewhat overlooked north prom.

Lucy Powell: I did not know that so many people come to Cleethorpes for Armed Forces Day—it sounds like a real occasion. I will certainly make sure that the Ministry of Defence hears my hon. Friend's plea. Cleethorpes sounds like a very good place for National Armed Forces Day in 2026.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): The Leader of the House may be aware that the Deputy Prime Minister has called in a planning application for the Marlow film studio, which had already been rejected by thousands of local residents, planning officers and the council. This is the wrong development in the wrong place, so will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on how the views of local people on planning can be retained before the Labour party concretes over the entire green belt?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry, but I disagree with the hon. Lady's characterisation. This Government are unashamedly pro-house building and pro-cutting the red tape that stands in the way of business and business investment in our creative industries, our technologies and our transport, but we are absolutely on the side of local people as well, which is why our planning reforms put local voice and local plans at their centre. We have had debates on the issue, and I am sure that we will have many more in the coming weeks.

Satvir Kaur (Southampton Test) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House, like me, very concerned about the trend of bank closures on our local high streets, including in my constituency? Recently, residents and local businesses received the disappointing news that Lloyds bank is leaving Shirley High Street; I am campaigning to save the branch. Does the Leader of the House agree that face-to-face banking is a vital part of our thriving high streets? It is essential for those with specific disabilities, for those who are digitally excluded, and particularly for the elderly. Does she welcome the Government's plans for banking hubs? Will she allow time to debate banking on our high streets?

Lucy Powell: That important issue is raised very frequently. Access to cash and financial services for our local community has been on the decline and is a real matter of concern. That is why we have committed to accelerating the roll-out of at least 350 banking hubs, so that people have access to cash and wider banking services. More than 80 are already open, and we expect another 100 to follow. I shall certainly arrange for the House to be updated on any progress in that area.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If we can keep questions short, I will do my best to get everybody in.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Blue-light escort decisions are rightly taken on an operationally independent basis by the police. Yet after the Home Secretary, the Attorney General and the Mayor of London met the police to discuss the escort for Taylor Swift, she was granted one. A few days later, the Prime Minister and his whole family met Taylor Swift and her manager back stage. Can we have a debate on the new Government's approach to breaches of the ministerial code?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry, but I totally reject the hon. Lady's characterisation of what has happened here. As she rightly points out, these issues are taken operationally by the police, which is absolutely right. As I said earlier, it is estimated that the Taylor Swift concerts have brought £1 billion into the UK economy. We should be attracting these kind of events and enabling them to happen. She will know that Taylor Swift was subject to a very serious threat to her safety only a few days before coming to the UK. I should not really have to remind the hon. Lady of this, but she will also be aware that Taylor Swift took a very close interest in what happened to those young girls in Southport who were at a Taylor Swift event when they were tragically murdered. The Prime Minister rightly wanted to thank her for all that she had done to support the families.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Long responses from the Leader of the House will mean that fewer colleagues will be able to get in.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I have received a great deal of correspondence regarding the assisted dying Bill. I welcome the fact that Back Benchers will have a free vote. However, an issue as complex as this requires detailed scrutiny. As it stands, I am worried that colleagues will not have enough time to properly debate the Bill. Will the Leader of the House relay the concerns shared by many across the House that the assisted dying Bill should receive Government time over several days, so that we can do it justice?

Lucy Powell: This issue gets raised a lot. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a matter of conscience. The Government's position is neutral, so Members have a free vote on the issues, and that is absolutely as it should be. The Bill will be given its Second Reading on Friday 29 November. As a Member who was in this place when these issues were last discussed many years ago, I can say that I think these moments provide a real opportunity for Members to think about the debate and to discuss these issues in a respectful and congenial manner and show Parliament at its very best.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Leader of the House will be familiar with the UK Health Security Agency's significant presence at Porton Down in my constituency, adjacent to the site of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the new Government's future plans for Porton Down? After the vaccine roll-out and all the work that was done there, things have changed since previous announcements were made. Many of my constituents are concerned and need

clarity on this matter. I am applying for an Adjournment debate, but I would welcome a statement as well because the matter is urgent.

Lucy Powell: I shall certainly make sure that the right hon. Member's question is heard by the Secretary of State. I do understand why he wants some clarity on the matter. I hope that he is successful in securing an Adjournment debate where he will get a ministerial response, but I am happy to consider other ways for him to get answers.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Last week, I had the opportunity to visit TMT First, a business in Newcastle-under-Lyme. It delivers technology lifecycle services for the circular economy, specialises in the repair, refurbishment and recycling of mobile technology, and processes more than 250,000 devices every year. But with the mountain of electrical waste estimated to grow to 74 million tonnes a year by 2030, we need to act and act fast. I invite the Leader of the House to visit TMT First in Newcastle-under-Lyme, as it is on her way home. More importantly, can we have a debate on how we can support our businesses to do more recycling and repairing of things, rather than simply replacing them? Our economy and environment need that.

Lucy Powell: I may well get off the train on my way home at some stage and visit my hon. Friend's constituency. I know that supporting and enhancing the circular economy is a key priority for the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Departmental questions are next month, but I will make sure my hon. Friend gets a good reply.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Can Government time be given for a debate on how to strengthen the Environment Agency's powers to ensure that operators of energy-from-waste facilities are forced to address exceedances and reduce overall emissions, and to look at the possibility of mandating carbon capture, usage and storage technology to mitigate the emissions produced from burning waste? I point to the Register of Members' Financial Interests as regards my role as a councillor in Sutton, as this challenge comes around often when we are looking to hold the operators to account.

Lucy Powell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, which I know has had some attention recently. I have one of those waste facilities in my constituency, so I am well aware of the impact on and some of the challenges for the local community. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman's question, but he may want to raise it in DEFRA questions on 14 November.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The combination of the cost of living crisis and the mental health crisis has led to a worrying increase in ketamine usage in my constituency. Some young people are now facing a lifetime with an urostomy bag due to ketamine bladder syndrome. Good work is being done by local charities such as Horizon, but those services deserve more support. Can the Leader of the House make time for a debate on how the Government can support long-term harm reduction in Blackpool South?

Lucy Powell: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an issue that is important to his constituency. Drug misuse and the rise in the use of ketamine and other substances is an issue of real importance, and it costs society greatly. I will make sure that the Home Secretary has heard his calls today—departmental questions are next week, if he wants to raise the matter then.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): We have had many important debates and statements about the Post Office Horizon scandal, but can the Leader of the House bring forward a debate in Government time about the future of the Post Office? In my constituency, we are struggling to recruit new postmasters to take over post offices in communities such as Eastriggs and Langholm, and in West Linton, where we currently have a post office, there does not seem to be any available support for it to continue.

Lucy Powell: This matter gets raised in business questions and elsewhere quite often because we are seeing too many closures and too many post offices struggling. I think the subject would make a popular application for a Backbench Business debate, and I encourage him to take that forward.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): Last week, Buckinghamshire council confirmed the demolition of the Gala Bingo hall, a former live music venue and cinema on Aylesbury High Street. Our town has a proud musical and cultural history and many residents are concerned that not enough effort was made to preserve this historic site. Will the Leader of the House allow time to debate the importance of recognising and preserving our historical and cultural assets as we regenerate our town centres?

Lucy Powell: Music venues, cultural assets and leisure services are vital to our town centre regeneration, and our high street accelerators programme will be looking at grassroots venues. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise these issues in Housing, Communities and Local Government questions in a couple of weeks.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I was contacted this week by a resident of Sidmouth whose parent was interned in a Japanese camp during world war two. She wrote to me about her father's affidavits, which are held by the Imperial War Museum, saying,

"They do not make good reading, but bear great similarity to what is happening in Gaza."

Will the Government make a statement about their stance on whether Israel's far-right Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir should be subject to UK Government sanctions? Also, will they offer support to the International Criminal Court as it seeks arrest warrants for the likes of Netanyahu and Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar?

Lucy Powell: The comments made by the Israeli Ministers, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, were "abhorrent"; disgraceful and unacceptable language was used. We are working closely with our allies internationally to bring an end to the horrors we are seeing in Israel and Gaza, which is why we need to make sure that everybody operates within international law. The Government are committed to that and to bringing about an immediate ceasefire so we can work towards a long-term solution.

Ben Goldborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): A constituent in Hethersett sadly lost her 17-week-old puppy Mini to the deadly parvovirus. This devastating disease takes animals' lives very quickly, but can be held at bay by vaccination. May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of people vaccinating their pet dog, and on the responsibilities of good owners?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I am sure that his question will help bring attention to the importance of people getting their dogs vaccinated; I was unaware of the virus. I am sure that it would make a good topic for an Adjournment debate, and he has rightly raised it on the Floor of the House.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Cafés are so important to rural communities in Hinckley and Bosworth and North West Leicestershire. I ran a favourite café competition, and a thousand constituents nominated cafés. In joint third place were JAFFLES@No3 and What the Fork; in second place was Libertéas; and the winner was Epicurean Lounge. Will the Leader of the House congratulate that café, and café owners up and down this country, because they are so important in our society?

Lucy Powell: I think the hon. Gentleman said that one of the winners was What the Fork. What a forking good idea his competition was. I congratulate the winners, and all his constituents on taking part. I look forward to a bacon butty, a cup of tea, and maybe a piece of cake in Hinckley and Bosworth at some point in the future.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I commend the work of five volunteers in my community who run Lichfield Community Media CIC. By operating a news website, they have prevented our area from becoming a news desert. Unfortunately, their posts are being blocked because algorithms on social media sites highlight them as spam. Does the Leader of the House agree that the issue of how independent publishers can access their audiences through social media would be a good topic for a debate?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a really important matter, not just for independent publishers but for national news publishers, who are subject to the whims of tech giants when it comes to algorithms, and finding important journalistic work and news. I think the topic would make for a very well attended debate.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): This week, we witnessed the unedifying spectacle of Scottish Labour MPs labouring under the misapprehension that if they put forward an idea that was to the benefit of Scotland, Ministers in the United Kingdom would take it forward. I am talking about the Scottish immigration visa system. Can we have a debate in Government time that lays bare the fact that when Scotland's ambitions are at odds, or even at variance, with those of England, Westminster will put Scotland aside—not just sometimes or most of the time, but every time?

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to say this, but the last time I looked, Labour MPs in Scotland won many seats in the recent election, and Scottish nationalist MPs lost many.

[Lucy Powell]

Labour Members who represent Scottish seats in this House have done a fantastic job in standing up for Scotland, resetting the relationship, and ensuring that the people of Scotland benefit from this new Labour Government.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): This week's public inquiry on the proposed toll increase for the Tamar crossings highlighted clear local opposition. This gateway to South East Cornwall is a vital link between Cornwall and Devon, and the crossings are among the only ones not managed by National Highways. The tolls place a burden on my constituents, who have no alternative to paying in order to access healthcare services over the river. Will the Leader of the House make Government time available for a debate on fair and affordable transport in areas such as mine?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which I know will be important to her constituents in South East Cornwall. I understand that there will be a final decision by the Transport Secretary once the inspector produces their report. I will of course ensure that the Transport Secretary comes to this House to tell my hon. Friend about that decision.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Just two months ago, Paul Reeves, a well respected farmer and agricultural business owner in my constituency, took his own life. Sadly, his story is all too common, with the many challenges that the industry often faces contributing to poor mental health. Farming families like Paul's are the bedrock of our country. Without them, we simply could not function, and when they are struggling we must support them. In Paul's memory, may we have a debate on improving mental health in our farming and agricultural communities?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear about Paul Reeves, and I send the condolences of the whole House to his family and friends. The hon. Lady raises the subject of the mental health of our farming community, and many Members across the House will relate to what she said. That community does an amazing job to keep this country fed and well cared for, and to support nature, among many other things. That issue would make a good topic for a debate, which would be a popular one.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Two of my constituents, Hayley and Craig Vaughan, sadly lost their son Archie to brain cancer three years ago. On one of his final holidays, they took him to one of his favourite places: a caravan by the seaside. Archie's parents have channelled their grief by setting up a charity called Archie's Caravan, which offers free holidays to children in Archie's position and their families. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to Archie, to his incredible parents, and to the amazing work that their charity does, and will she make space in Government time for a debate on the care received by children with cancer after their diagnosis?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Archie, his parents and the fantastic work of that charity. The Government are committed to supporting children and young people with cancer. We established

a children and young people taskforce earlier this year. I am sure that the Secretary of State will come to the House to update us on that.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Two days ago, the Conservative administration at Hertfordshire county council filibustered during a debate, preventing a Liberal Democrat motion on improving special educational needs and disabilities services in Hertfordshire from being debated at all. May we have a debate in Government time about the importance of scrutiny and constructive opposition at all levels of government, especially on the issue of SEND? In Hertfordshire, SEND services are failing children.

Lucy Powell: First and foremost, my job as Leader of the House of Commons is to ensure that issues are scrutinised and debated in this House, and that we do not filibuster and disrespect people's views, or topics that they want to raise. I hope that parties across local government respect that, too. The important matter of SEND, which the hon. Lady mentioned, is raised here a lot, so I am sure that if she applied for a debate, it would be well attended.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): From Stotfold to Shefford in my constituency, homeowners on new estates have been trapped by the growth of the leasehold scandal. They are left having to deal with unaccountable and underperforming management companies, and often pay twice for services that people normally receive through paying council tax. After my vociferous lobbying of the then shadow Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), I was happy to see in Labour's manifesto a commitment to addressing leasehold. May we have a debate on how we can work together across the House to take forward action on that important issue?

Lucy Powell: As the MP for Manchester Central, I know only too well about the absolutely appalling circumstances that many leaseholders find themselves in, with rising costs from managing agents and insurance, and other issues. That is why I was absolutely delighted to ensure that leasehold reform was in the King's Speech. We will get a draft Bill soon, and the Government are quickly implementing the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): An NHS foundation trust is advertising for psychologists to work with children with gender dysphoria. It says that applicants must practise in a gender-affirming manner. That runs completely contrary to what the Cass review said. May we have a statement from the Health Secretary on the implementation of the Cass review in the NHS?

Lucy Powell: I will ask the Secretary of State to come to the House with an update on the Cass review, but I think it important when discussing these matters that we do not raise issues that may not be quite as they seem. We must handle these issues carefully, as some young people and adults have real challenges with gender dysphoria that can cause them a great deal of mental upset. I will look into the matter that the hon. Gentleman raises and ask the Secretary of State to come to the House.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I welcome the Government's move this week to ensure that veterans, including those in my constituency, who were turned away when trying to use their veteran's ID to vote in the recent general election will be able to use that form of ID next year. It is not just veterans we need to support, but current servicemen and women and their families. May we have some Government time to talk about how we can support those brave men and women?

Lucy Powell: I, too, was delighted that this Government took quick action to deliver their manifesto commitment to ensuring that veterans' cards could be used as voter ID, and I am pleased to hear of my hon. Friend's reaction to that. As he will be aware, this Government are committed to an armed forces commissioner Bill. I can tell him today that that Bill is fairly imminent, and I am sure that we can debate some of these issues as we approach Remembrance Sunday, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Tsering Tso, a Tibetan human rights defender and tour guide, has repeatedly faced arbitrary detention and harassment by Chinese authorities for advocating for the rights of Tibetans to freedom of movement and equal treatment under Chinese law. Her most recent detention occurred in June 2024, following her public criticism of local authorities' discriminatory practices against Tibetan monks. Tsering has been subjected to administrative detention on multiple occasions, having raised concerns about racial discrimination and the unlawful detention of Tibetans—two monks were arrested while on a pilgrimage. What representations can His Majesty's Government make to the Chinese authorities on the detention and repeated harassment of Tsering Tso?

Lucy Powell: This Government stand firm on human rights, including China's repression of the people of Tibet. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Foreign Secretary is to make a diplomatic visit to China; I know that he will raise these matters in his conversations. I will ensure that he comes to this House to give an update on how that visit goes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To show us how it is done in one or two sentences, I call Steve Race.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Last night, the University of Exeter, the Met Office and Peers for the Planet launched the latest edition of "The Parliamentarians' Guide to Climate Change", which is a vital resource for us all. Will the Leader of the House welcome that report, as I do, and will she commend it to Members of this House and the other House?

Lucy Powell: I absolutely welcome that report, and of course I commend it to Members of both Houses.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The new rules on wine duty being implemented in February 2025 will be overly complicated and incredibly burdensome, especially for smaller, independent wine importers such as Canned Wine in Bath. The chief executive officer of that local business told me that the incremental duty rates will put incredible strain on their business. Can we have a debate in Government time on this important issue?

Lucy Powell: I know that the issue of wine duty is really important in the hon. Lady's constituency, and I am sure that we will have ample time to debate wine and other alcohol duties in the many days of debate that we will have on the Budget, which is coming up soon.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Recently in my constituency, I held a meeting with residents of Water Orton to hear how ongoing High Speed 2 works are affecting them. My residents are suffering from mental and physical health issues because of the air and noise pollution caused by those works. May we have a debate in Government time on those effects, and how we can improve them?

Lucy Powell: The ongoing mishandling and mismanagement of the HS2 project has been a bit of an embarrassment for this country, I am afraid. I am sure the Secretary of State for Transport will update the House on these matters soon, and of course, the HS2 hybrid Bill is proceeding through Parliament as we speak.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Rossington Main Ladies football club created a slice of history last weekend by qualifying for the first round proper of the Adobe women's FA cup. Will the Minister join me in congratulating captain Steph Prescott and the team, and wish them good luck against Accrington Stanley—who are they?—in the first round in November?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): No time for jokes!

Lucy Powell: I congratulate Rossington Main Ladies football club and their captain Steph, and wish them great luck against Accrington Stanley, who we all remember fondly from adverts.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): My inbox is full to the brim with complaints about Yorkshire Water's lack of investment, on issues from failed pumping stations to polluted rivers. Can the Leader of the House advise Members on when we can highlight the chronic under-investment in our nation's water supply?

Lucy Powell: It is a priority for this Government to take action against the water bosses, get the investment that we need and ensure that the costs are not all passed on to customers. My hon. Friend makes an important case.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Darent Valley hospital in my constituency needs significant expansion. Quarter 1 figures indicate that more than 32,000 people are waiting for treatment, and the hospital cannot cope with the new homes being built in the area. Will my right hon. Friend schedule a debate about the need to expand hospital provision in Dartford and across the country?

Lucy Powell: Waiting lists are at a record high, which is why the Government dealt immediately with the industrial action to get our doctors back on the frontline. We are committed to more GP appointments in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere. The Government's target is 40,000 more appointments a week, which we will deliver.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Many of my constituents are frustrated by rip-off car parking companies such as Hozah, which issue threatening letters and fines to people who have, in many cases, followed or barely breached the rules. May we have a debate in Government time on how we clamp down on those parking pirates to ensure that our town centres can thrive and our retailers can grow?

Lucy Powell: The Government will set out in due course our plans for the regulation of the private parking industry, which causes many problems, as my hon. Friend describes. I will ensure that the relevant Minister comes to the House to update hon. Members at that time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jim Dickson—*[Interruption.]* No, I call Andy MacNae. I am going so fast that I am losing my place.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I will try to be equally fast, Mr Speaker.

My constituents face dangerous speeding on the roads past their homes and schools every single day. When they raise deep concerns with the police or the council, they are too often told that not enough people have been killed or seriously injured. They rightly feel that that makes no sense. They know the risks—they see the close calls every day—so why should they wait for a neighbour to be killed before action is taken? Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the subject of prevention in road safety, using international best practice and new technologies?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Rossendale and Darwen, and for road safety issues in his constituency. We will soon deliver an updated strategic framework for road safety—the first in over a decade—and I will ensure that a Transport Minister comes to the House to update hon. Members.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House referred earlier to the Modernisation Committee. Can she update us on its work on the key issue of call lists, which worked well in this place during covid and work well in the other place every day, and on her wider efforts to make this place a more family-friendly Parliament?

Lucy Powell: The issue of call lists and the desire for a more family-friendly Parliament have been raised by many hon. Members, especially those who are newly elected, and I hope that a wealth of people will input to the call for views that the Modernisation Committee opened today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Alex Ballinger—your patience has been noted.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I recently met headteachers across my constituency to talk about the challenges they are facing after 14 years of Conservative mismanagement of the education sector. They raised several issues, but in the interests of time I will mention only curriculum reform, which they were particularly interested in. I ask the Leader of the House to schedule a debate in Government time on curriculum reform, so that we can consider the views of teachers in my constituency.

Lucy Powell: Last but certainly not least, my hon. Friend raises what I know is a big issue in Halesowen's schools. The Government are committed to curriculum reform. One of the first acts of the Secretary of State for Education was to establish an independent review of curriculum and assessment, led by Professor Becky Francis CBE. I know that the Secretary of State will be regularly updating the House on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is fantastic to get everybody in. I will focus more on names.

Criminal Justice System: Capacity

11.48 am

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on capacity in the criminal justice system. When this Government came to power, we inherited prisons on the brink of disaster, moments from total collapse. Had that happened, the consequences would have been apocalyptic: courts would have been forced to cancel all trials, the police would have been barred from making arrests, and we would have faced the total breakdown of law and order.

The last Government knew what had to be done. My predecessor, the former Lord Chancellor, begged his Prime Minister to act, but rather than have the bravery to do so, the now Leader of the Opposition chose to call an election instead. As a result, it fell to this Government to take the necessary but difficult action. While they say that to govern is to choose, my predecessors left me with no choice at all.

On 18 July, just two weeks into the job, I announced to this House that we had been forced to bring forward the release dates of some prisoners serving standard determinate sentences from 50% of time served in prison to 40%, serving the rest on their sentence on licence in the community. Make no mistake: the action we took prevented the immediate collapse of law and order in our country, but with our prison population still rising fast, there is more that we must do to address the capacity challenges our prisons face, and our task now is to ensure that a crisis like the one we inherited can never happen again.

Today, I can set out a measure that will begin to address a specific and acute cause of our prisons capacity crisis: the remand population. As this House will know, prisoners on remand are in our jails but have not yet been tried or sentenced. Because of the historical backlog in our Crown courts—another element of the woeful inheritance my predecessors handed to me—the remand population in prisons has soared. Today, it stands at a record 17,000, which is nearly one in every five prisoners. As some Members will know, remand prisoners are an especially acute problem as they are placed in so-called reception or category B prisons. Until they are tried and sentenced, they cannot be moved elsewhere in the estate. It is in our reception prisons that we face the most acute capacity pressure in the country. Unless we address our remand population, we could still see a collapse of the system, not because of a lack of cells, but because we do not have those cells in the places we need them. It is therefore crucial that we bear down on the remand population.

Magistrates courts have sentencing powers for only up to six months' imprisonment for a single triable either-way offence, and only the Crown court can hand down sentences beyond that. Between May 2022 and March 2023, the previous Government chose to extend magistrates court sentencing powers to 12 months. This enabled magistrates courts to retain more sentencing hearings and meant that they were heard more quickly. It also freed up capacity in the Crown court to hear more complex cases. However, magistrates' sentencing

powers were then reduced back to six months when, having failed to address the capacity crisis in our prisons, the pressure on prison places became too great.

This Government have now acted to relieve that pressure, so I can announce that we will extend magistrates' sentencing powers back to 12 months' imprisonment. On 28 October, I will lay a statutory instrument to that effect, which will come into force on 18 November this year. This change does not increase the maximum sentence for specific offences, and nor does it change the length of sentence that a defendant will serve. Instead, it expands which courts can hand down sentences of six to 12 months' imprisonment for a single triable either-way offence. It will enable the system to make more use of magistrates, who are an integral part of our court system, delivering justice swiftly across the country.

This measure will also allow us to begin to address the remand problem in our prisons, but it will do more than that. This Government inherited a record Crown court backlog. Waits for trials have grown so long that some cases are not heard for years. The impact on victims of crime is profound. For some, justice delayed is, as the old saying goes, justice denied, as victims choose to withdraw from the justice process altogether rather than face the pain of a protracted legal battle. By extending magistrates' powers, we will be able to make progress on addressing the Crown court backlog, and we will free the Crown court to take on more of the cases that only it can hear. This measure is expected to free up an equivalent of 2,000 sitting days within the Crown court each year, which will add capacity on top of the additional 500 sitting days that this Government funded on taking office.

This measure will, in total, see a slight increase in the overall prison population, but by bearing down on the remand population in our reception prisons, we will create capacity where we need it most. This measure allows us to manage our prison population smartly, and it means we can both address our prisons crisis and tackle the courts backlog.

When this Government came to power, we inherited a justice system in crisis. We took immediate action to avert a total breakdown of law and order. We are now beginning the work of ensuring that this country never faces this crisis again. There will be more that we must do. In the coming weeks, I will return to the House and set out our long-term plan for the justice system, but these new powers for magistrates mark an important step. They help us alleviate the capacity pressures caused by the historical remand population that we inherited, and begin to address the record Crown court backlog that my predecessors handed to me. In so doing, for victims across the country they will make justice swifter, and ensure that more criminals receive the punishment that they deserve. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

11.55 am

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I am grateful to the Lord Chancellor and her civil servants for their typical courtesy in giving me early sight of her statement. I am also grateful to magistrates, to whom I

[Edward Argar]

pay tribute. In many ways, they are the backbone of our justice system, and like juries they root our justice system in our local communities. Their service is hugely appreciated, as is the work of the Magistrates' Association, and I recognise their skill and dedication.

The Lord Chancellor highlighted the backlog as context. As she will know, in 2010 the backlog that we inherited in the Crown courts was 48,000. It was reduced to 40,000 by 2019, but we recognise that it is a lot higher now. The change? A pandemic. She rightly referred to significant increases in the remand population. During the pandemic, supported by the then Opposition, we opted not to mass-release prisoners, as other countries did, and not to cancel jury trials. That of course led to increases in the remand population, compounded by the effect of the Bar strike.

The vast bulk of the backlog is in the Crown courts, as the Lord Chancellor will know, and it is right to recognise the interrelationship between magistrates courts and Crown courts. I believe that the concordat on sitting days had not been formally signed by the former Lord Chancellor at the time of the election, and I therefore saw with concern that, in stark contrast to previous Lord Chancellors who increased sitting days, it appears we will see a reduction of 2,700 sitting days compared with last year. I would be grateful for the Lord Chancellor's reflections on that. In 2019 there were 85,000 sitting days, and 107,700 last year. This year the cap appears to be at 105,000. That appears to be the Government's choice, but I would welcome clarity from the Lord Chancellor on that.

The changes that the Lord Chancellor has set out were characterised by the chair of the Criminal Bar Association, Mary Prior KC, in *The Guardian*:

"This is a knee-jerk reaction, done without consulting—once again—the criminal barristers or solicitors who deal every day with these cases".

There are therefore a number of questions about that and the broader criminal justice system, given the scope of the right hon. Lady's statement, which I hope she will be able to answer. Has she conducted a complete impact assessment for the changes, and will she publish that and all the modelling on it prior to the statutory instrument being laid? How many people are currently on remand, and will she share with the House the latest, most up-to-date figure? Reports suggest that this measure will in the short term potentially increase pressure on prison places, so will she say by what amount her modelling suggests that will be? What prior consultation did she or her Department undertake with the Criminal Bar Association, the Bar Council and the Law Society before making this decision? What assessment has she made of the impact of the decision announced today on the backlog and on the number of short custodial sentence passed by the courts?

Given that the right hon. Lady explicitly referred to her prisoner early release scheme, I hope she will be able to answer all those questions, but there is also one important question that I hope she will answer today by way of reassurance: are any of the 37 prisoners released in error last month still roaming free, or have they all been safely returned to prison? I would be grateful for clarification on that, because it is important.

We will find out in under two weeks whether, in pre-Budget spending discussions with the Chancellor, the right hon. Lady has successfully fought for investment and in the interests of justice and victims of crime, or whether she has sold out the victims and the systems, and conceded cuts to the Treasury. If she has succeeded in securing additional investment, she will have my gratitude and support. If she has not, we will rightly hold her to account.

Shabana Mahmood: It is almost as if the shadow Lord Chancellor was not, in fact, a Minister in the Ministry of Justice just a few short months ago. Let me remind him of a few salient facts. First, on Crown court sitting days, I will not accept any suggestion or allegation from him that this Government have cut sitting days or trials in the Crown court. That is entirely untrue. As he knows, or ought to know, perfectly well—I am sure he can check with the former Lord Chancellor—on 28 June, the last Government and the last Lord Chancellor determined how many days the judges could sit this year. Since then, this Government have increased the number of sitting days by 500. As there is clearly some confusion here, it is important that I set the record straight.

Every year, the Government and the judiciary agree a number of sitting days, and an overall budget to fund those sitting days, in what is known as the concordat process. In June, the judiciary reached an agreement with the former Lord Chancellor to sit 106,000 days in the Crown court, with a total budget of £275 million. It has become clear that there has been over-listing against that budget, with more trials scheduled than the funding allowed for. As a result, some cases have had to be delisted, although far fewer than some recent reporting has suggested—it was claimed that around 5,000 sitting days were being cancelled, and I know that the shadow Lord Chancellor had some other numbers in his remarks. In fact, as I understand it, the number is more like 1,600 sitting days. Although misleading reports have abounded, one thing is clear: the concordat process has not worked as it should. I can assure the House that the first concordat process on my watch will be very different, and such confusions will not occur again.

The shadow Lord Chancellor asked a number of questions relating to the impact assessment for the changes announced today. I will publish all the usual impact assessments when the statutory instrument is published. As I said in my opening remarks, we expect an initial impact on prison places, but over time we expect that to come down. We have a little more space in prisons because of the action we have taken to stabilise the pressure on prison places. It is a sensible measure to then take the opportunity to bear down on the Crown court backlog by providing the extra 2,000 sitting days that this change will allow, while also bearing down further on our remand population.

As the shadow Lord Chancellor will know, the exact numbers are difficult to model because listing is a matter for the judiciary. Some of those on remand will ultimately be found not guilty and some will be found guilty and sentenced, and the whole range of sentencing measures is available to the independent judiciary. But we expect to make some progress on the remand population and, crucially, to be able to move people from the reception estate into the rest of the prison estate, thereby helping us to make sure we have the prison places where

we need them. I can also confirm that all of the 37 people released in error because of being incorrectly sentenced are now back in custody.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): As someone who spent a decade shadowing and scrutinising the previous Government's justice policies, I sympathise with the Lord Chancellor over the chaos she has inherited, but the proposed changes to magistrates' sentencing powers may have mixed results. They should ease the backlog in the Crown court, but they may put additional pressure on our overcrowded prisons. My concern is that we do not have robust data on the Crown court backlog or on the effects of varying sentencing. The Government are about to embark on a quick but thorough review of sentencing. Will they use that opportunity to get the policy and the figures lined up?

Shabana Mahmood: I think this is my first chance in the House to welcome my hon. Friend to his new position as Chair of the Justice Committee. Let me deal with Crown court data first. In fairness to the previous Government, they discovered this error prior to the conclusion of their term in office. When I came in, I was made aware of the issue with Crown court data. I ordered further investigation and examination of the issues. It is clear that a number of problems with the data—a number of errors and other issues—need to be resolved. We will make sure that it is published when we can be sure that it is accurate and that all those errors have been finally resolved.

Clearly, the situation is unacceptable. I am in discussion with the Lady Chief Justice about the need for a full external audit of Crown court data, because I think we can all agree that that data must be accurate. We clearly must do more to restore confidence in the reporting process, and I will update the House further in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. So many of my constituents are appalled by the state in which the Conservatives have left our justice system: huge court backlogs, a woefully big remand population, overcrowded prisons and so many victims and survivors without justice. I therefore welcome her determination to arrest this problem and this decline, and especially the reports of her correspondence with the Prime Minister over a fully funded Ministry of Justice. However, I want to address some of the Liberal Democrats' key concerns about some of the proposals that she has set out.

First, the Secretary of State recognised that there may be additional issues with prison capacity in the short term. With the system bursting at the seams and with us, a matter of weeks ago, just 100 men away from the prisons being completely full, how will she prevent our prisons from collapsing as a result of these measures?

Secondly, on prison effectiveness, putting too many eggs in the prisons basket will ultimately fail to keep our communities safe. We know that 75% of ex-offenders

go on to reoffend within nine years of being released. From the work I did before I arrived in this place on getting kids out of crime and out of gangs, I know that rehabilitation, done holistically, is a critical way of reducing reoffending and victimhood. How will the Secretary of State double down on rehabilitation and through-the-gate mentoring programmes to reduce offending?

Thirdly, these measures will put more pressure on magistrates courts, at a time when many, such as my own in Eastbourne, have closed. That risks forcing victims of crimes currently heard in those courts to wait even longer for justice. How will the Secretary of State address that risk?

Finally, one of the worst Justice Secretaries in recent memory, Dominic Raab, tried a similar policy in 2022, with magistrates increasing the number of people being sent to prison on short sentences. The scheme was dropped after a year, and short-sentence reoffending rates are at 57%, which is a deplorable number. How will the Secretary of State avoid these measures backfiring in a similar way?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Just for reference, your questions should be two minutes, no longer.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the hon. Member for his questions. I am very aware of the number of places in our prison estate, and we had a particularly difficult moment before the last bank holiday, in August, when we came down to fewer than 100. However, as a result of the measures we have taken on SDS40, there is now some space and some capacity in our prison system. It is important that we use this opportunity also to bear down on the remand population and to deal with the Crown court backlog.

This is a delicate balancing exercise, and it is one that I will personally be keeping a close eye on and keeping under review. However, I think that the measure we have announced is ultimately the right one, because it helps us with our prison capacity challenges. As a result, we will have the prison places where we need them—in the reception prisons—and we can start moving people out to other parts of the estate, which is not possible until cases are heard. I am confident that we have the capacity in the magistrates courts to deal with the additional workload. Again, I will be keeping that under review.

The hon. Member is right: 80% of offenders are actually reoffenders. This country has a real problem with failing to rehabilitate offenders, and our record on reducing reoffending is not as strong as it should be. Prison has a place, and it is really important that people who break our laws are properly punished. That is necessary for the public to maintain confidence in our system and for law-abiding citizens to feel that there are consequences when our laws are broken. There is no doubt in my mind that punishment and prison are important, but they go hand in hand with rehabilitation. I do not think there is a choice to be made between punishment and rehabilitation—they are two sides of the same coin, and we have to have both. This Government are determined to have a better track record on both punishment and rehabilitation compared with anything that has gone on in the previous 14 years.

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

Let me gently say that it is not the case that magistrates courts send more people to prison. Following the previous change the courts were able to run through cases faster, and because the previous Government had not created capacity in the prison estate, the pressure on prison places became acute and the measure had to be dropped back to six months—the shadow Lord Chancellor might wish to offer further comments on that. That is what happened and what I expect to happen again.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is fascinating and powerful to hear the plans to deal with the backlog in the courts. I know that all our constituents will be grateful for the Lord Chancellor's work. I have a constituent who was the victim of an aggravated burglary that involved multiple men coming to her house with machetes in 2021. Finally, last week at Snaresbrook Crown court, a date for the trial of the gentlemen accused of this crime was set for October 2026. The Lord Chancellor will recognise and share the concern of my constituent. As she says, justice delayed is justice denied. What comfort can she give my constituent that such matters will be expedited as a result of her work?

Shabana Mahmood: I am very sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. I have many such instances of unacceptable delays for hearing cases in my own constituency caseload. I hope that the measures that I have announced today will begin to ease some of that pressure, because making this change will free up around 2,000 sitting days in the Crown court. This Government have funded an additional 500 beyond the concordat process agreement that was reached by the previous Government in June. I am determined to make more progress in dealing with the Crown court backlog so that constituents such as my hon. Friend's do not have to wait so many years for their cases to be heard and, ultimately, for justice to be done.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I reach out across the party divide to say that I warmly welcome what the Justice Secretary said about punishment and rehabilitation? By coincidence, I have just written to her—she will not have seen the letter yet—about the work of my constituent, the publisher Andrew Duncan, in co-ordination with a panel of experts that includes a psychology professor, a former governor of Pentonville, a Probation Service specialist in reducing reoffending and a central London magistrate, on a new concept of community detention. My request is that either she or the Minister she thinks most appropriate will agree to have a meeting with my constituent, a few members of his team and me. As a right-of-centre politician, I am sometimes sceptical of alternatives to prison. This one sounds really interesting, and I think it would not be a waste of her time.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Member for the spirit in which he made his remarks. I hope that where consensus is possible on a cross-party basis across this House, we are able to work together, because this is a national problem that will require us all to come together to solve it. I will track down his letter and ensure that he gets a full response and a meeting.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): In Shropshire, the justice system is broken. Under the watch of the last Conservative Government, the remand court in Shropshire magistrates court was closed and transferred to Kidderminster. I am delighted to say that, under this Government's watch, that remand court is about to reopen. Some 300 court sessions are running empty each and every year at Shropshire magistrates court. My local paper, the *Shropshire Star*, highlighted a criminal trial—it involved a retrial—that will take seven years from the original date of the offence to be disposed of, which is an absolute disgrace. Will the Lord Chancellor look at ways in which we can further empower district judges in the magistrates court, and at the use of technology in the justice system? Finally, it is important that the transparency around data is fixed. Unfortunately, the last Conservative Government did not release the data on time. We need to understand what is really going on now, and what has happened in the past.

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Cases are taking too long to reach conclusion in our courts. We are making some changes, and I am considering what further ones we will need to make. There is an important piece around efficiency and productivity in the court system, and there have also been reports by Lord Justice Auld, Lord Leveson and others on other ways to speed up trials being heard. All those options are on the table, and I will update the House in due course about this Government's approach.

I simply reiterate my remarks on the data: when it is finally published, it is important that we can be certain that it is accurate and properly captures what is going on in our Crown courts and that we can all have confidence in it. In fairness, the last Government did pick up on this problem. I am determined that it will be resolved and that the data will ultimately be published.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her very welcome statement. There is a clear commitment to the change that is necessary. She will note that I nearly always focus on victims, so will she outline what weight is given to victim impact statements, and whether there is a need to determine in law how much weight is given to the impact on devastated families? I always think of the devastated families—they are the ones who are really important.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me reassure the hon. Member that we place great importance in the victim's experience. This Government will strengthen that further and ensure that victims are not further traumatised by their experience of seeking justice. Victim impact statements have an important role to play. The victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), recently met Victim Support and other groups. This is a really important piece of work for the Government, and I know the hon. Member will hold us to account on our track record. I am very aware of the impact of delays in the system on victims, which is why we are making the changes today. We will make more progress to bring those delays down.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Lord Chancellor and her Department for their important work in tackling the backlog. Given that the previous Government agreed the funding allocation, who does

she feel is responsible for the number of Crown court sitting days being cut? Has she explored the further use of artificial intelligence in small judgments to speed up the backlog?

Shabana Mahmood: I reiterate my previous remarks on what has happened to Crown court sitting days, but I do not think it is helpful for me to speculate on who is ultimately responsible. It is clear that the concordat process has not worked as it should. As I said, the first process that I conduct as Lord Chancellor will not have those issues. An agreement was reached and it has to be stuck to. I am sure that all those in the system are worried about the impact on victims—they are the ones who will be waiting longer. As I said, although reports have suggested that up to 5,000 sitting days have been cancelled, the number is more like 1,600, and the changes we have announced today will free up capacity in the Crown courts.

I am very interested in the role that AI and other technology and digital solutions can play in increasing efficiency and productivity in the Crown court system and the court system more broadly. That is subject to discussions in relation to the Budget and the spending review. I hope to update the House in due course.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I am very concerned to hear of the missed publication of Crown court backlog data. How can we hope to drive down the backlog if we do not know how big it is?

Shabana Mahmood: One of the reasons why I am determined to get to the bottom of what has gone wrong, and to ensure that all errors and accuracy issues are dealt with, is so that we have comprehensive data that we can rely upon. We know that the Crown court backlog is at historic levels. Sadly, I do not think that any assurance work on the data will suddenly bring that down—I suspect it is more likely to go up—but it is important to establish the true scale of that backlog, because this House needs to know exactly what it looks like so that it can hold the Government to account on their efforts to bring it down. We cannot do that unless we know its exact size. Sadly, I suspect it will remain at the historic levels that we have inherited—I do not think it will come down by much.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Lord Chancellor very much for her statement. It is very clear, from everything we have seen over the past 14 years and since 4 July, that the previous Government completely failed to manage our prison estate. Does she agree with me and my constituents that it is really important that we maintain space in our prison system to lock up the most dangerous offenders? At the same time, we need to have a look at community sentences. Will she be doing that?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There must always be space in our prisons to lock up the most dangerous offenders. We must always place public protection above all other considerations when it comes to dangerous violent offenders. When we have a capacity crisis as acute as the one I inherited, we unfortunately have to also consider alternatives, simply because running out of space is no option at all. I reiterate the remarks I made earlier: punishment and

rehabilitation have to go together. It is not a choice between one or the other. They are two sides of the same coin and the Government are determined to make progress on both.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): My constituents will welcome the clarity that the Lord Chancellor has provided today. With reference to her point about the long-term plan for the justice system, a plan that we have to get right, may I ask her to keep in mind the need for a proper, robust and accessible legal aid system?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Legal aid underpins our system of justice and access to justice. Stabilising the situation in relation to legal aid is a key priority for the Government.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I have a number of prisons in my constituency, so I was particularly concerned to read about Serco's failures on tagging. What is the Secretary of State doing to hold it to account?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Serco's performance is unacceptable. We are having daily meetings with it to ensure it recovers the position. I have made it clear that improved performance is an absolutely priority. We are already imposing financial penalties, given its performance to date, and we will not hesitate to trigger relevant contractual penalties if it does not improve.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement, and commend her and her ministerial team for the work they are doing to fix the last 14 years of Tory mess in this Department. In her statement, she talked about the withdrawal of victims from the process. On that point, 60% of rape victims are dropping out of their cases, partly because they are waiting years for justice. Will the Secretary of State explain how independent legal advocates will support victims to see their cases through to trial?

Shabana Mahmood: The introduction of independent legal advocates for rape victims will, we believe, ensure that the rights that victims already have will be enforced, and in such a way as to give them the confidence to continue with their cases. This is a key priority policy for our party and for the Government, and I will be very pleased to be able to roll it out over the coming months and years. It is a significant change to our legal system. It will be the first time that independent legal advice is given to a type of victim. We think that is incredibly important, because rape victims lose confidence in the process and are often re-traumatised by the process of seeking justice. The independent legal advocates will try to ensure that the scales of justice are rebalanced and that victims have a fair shot at having their already existing legal rights enforced.

Ben Goldborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): Prisons have two vital functions: punishment and rehabilitation. Reoffending has gone up, because after 14 years under the Conservatives prisons have become colleges of crime. We need to get the basics right and we need to get the fundamentals right on prison education reform. Will my right hon. Friend look at how we can improve literacy and numeracy skills in our prison estate?

Shabana Mahmood: We will of course look at improved literacy and other skills within our prison estate. The problem with running a prison estate as hot as the previous Government did, and so full to the brim, is that when we are so badly overcrowded and prisoners are locked up for 23 hours every day, there is very little other work we can do to help prisoners rehabilitate. Dealing with the capacity crisis will enable us to have a better performance and better track record on rehabilitation, which is crucial if we are ultimately to reduce the number of victims in future and cut crime.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that failing to address the prisons capacity crisis and allowing the Crown court backlog to grow to unprecedented levels has meant that the entirety of our criminal justice system has been broken? I make particular reference to rape and serious sexual offences cases.

Shabana Mahmood: It is clear that the position I have inherited from my predecessors was shocking and completely unacceptable. We were, simply, one bad day away from total disaster in our criminal justice system. That is why, since we formed the Government, we have been making the difficult choices necessary to stabilise our criminal justice system and stabilise the situation in our prisons, so we can restore the system to one that the public can rightly have confidence in.

Government's Childcare Expansion

12.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): With permission, I will make a statement on the Government's plans to deliver additional places in school-based nurseries, and a clarification on Government action on so-called top-up fees for funded childcare hours. I will also update the House on the Government's response to the consultation on safeguarding requirements in the early years foundation stage framework.

The Secretary of State has promised a new era of child-centred government, working alongside the sector to deliver meaningful long-term reform of the early years system. The Government believe that all children deserve access to a brilliant early education, regardless of who they are, where they come from or their parents' income. Today marks a significant step for thousands of families, as we begin the first stage of the Government's plan to deliver 3,000 new or expanded school-based nurseries. From today, primary schools can apply for a grant of up to £150,000 from a £15 million capital funding pot to make the changes needed for their site to accommodate a nursery.

The new or expanded nurseries are set to open across England from the start of the next school year. We have chosen to expand school-based nurseries because schools are at the heart of our communities. School-based nurseries cater for a higher proportion of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and offer a higher share of nursery places in the most deprived areas. To support our most vulnerable children and build on the existing market, the funding will be available for projects that are either school-run or delivered on the school's site by private and voluntary providers or childminders. Schools will be asked to work with local authorities to demonstrate local parental demand for places. If there are primary schools that are interested in this programme but are not currently ready or eligible to host new nursery places, we encourage them to register an interest for the future. We expect funding to be allocated to successful schools in spring 2025 to support delivery of the first nursery places from September 2025.

As we expand the childcare system, it is crucial that early education and childcare remains fair and accessible to all parents. That is why we are taking action to address situations where parents are facing high and additional charges on top of the funded entitlement hours. Those charges, which may include mandatory fees for nappies, lunch, or additional hours, should not be a condition for accessing a funded place. The vast majority of providers are working hard to make sure that parents can access their entitlements, but any sort of mandatory additional charging or preferential treatment towards parents who purchase optional extras is not acceptable. Over the next few months, my Department will engage with local authorities, providers and parents to develop and clarify guidance on this issue, including on so-called "top-up fees". We will support local authorities to protect parents from overcharging.

I turn to new childcare entitlements. In September, working parents of children aged nine months and above were able to access 15 hours per week of Government-funded early education for the first time. I can confirm

that over 320,000 additional children are now accessing the new entitlement. Delivering the scheme has not been without difficulty and owes much to the collaboration between local authorities, providers and the work of my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, who has made ensuring the roll-out a priority. At the same time, we are helping the sector to deliver the necessary places for September 2025. This final, more challenging phase of the roll-out will increase the funded childcare entitlement of working parents to 30 hours per week.

Trust matters in politics, which is why I want to reiterate this Government's commitment to honouring the promise made by the last Government to deliver these entitlements, but the House should be in no doubt that this will be an extremely difficult task. There remains a significant shortage of staff and places. The Government's spending watchdog has said that, in order to deliver the roll-out, in some parts of the country we will need to double or even triple capacity in order to provide the additional hours. There are substantial gaps to fill, left behind knowingly by the Conservative party. We must be honest with families about the fact that in some parts of England, while parents may receive the hours they were promised, they may not get their first choice of nursery or childminder.

I assure the House that we will continue to work tirelessly to bridge the gaps in time for next September, and our plans to expand primary school-based nurseries will help us to deliver these entitlements. Our priority is to provide high-quality education and care for children while ensuring their safety, in order to give every child the best start in life.

Today the Department published its official response to the consultation on proposals to strengthen safeguarding requirements in the statutory early years foundation stage framework. These reforms are set to be implemented from September 2025. The changes to be made to the framework are based on lessons learned from tragic past events, responses to our consultation, and feedback from safeguarding experts and the sector. The consultation received 1,470 responses, with strong support for all the proposals. The Department will therefore implement all the proposals, including those on safer recruitment, child absences, safer eating, safeguarding training, and paediatric first aid training. There will also be new proposals on providing employment references and supporting whistleblowing. These changes will formalise existing best practices, and will ensure that all early years educators have the knowledge and support that they need to deliver safe, high-quality early education and childcare.

As many parents know, childminders are a key part of the early education and childcare market, providing choice and flexibility. We are already delivering childminder start-up grants to help new childminders with the costs of registering, and on 1 November we will introduce new flexibilities for childminders to help them join and stay in the profession. These changes will create a new category of childminder who can work entirely from non-domestic premises. The total number of people who can work together under a childminder's registration will increase from three to four. Childminders will also have more flexibility to operate for more time outside domestic premises, for instance from a community hall

or school. These new flexibilities will further support the Government's commitment to rolling out expanded childcare entitlements and giving children the best start in life.

Parents' need for childcare does not stop when their children reach primary school age. Since July, we have allocated more than £130 million to local authorities to begin delivering these new places to parents of primary school age children as part of the national wraparound childcare programme. Initial delivery plans indicate that this programme will deliver up to 200,000 new childcare places, at either end of the school day, available in over 50% of all primary schools. However, we want to go further to support hard-working families and tackle disadvantage, which is why we committed ourselves in our manifesto to introducing free breakfast clubs in every primary school.

Breakfast clubs can have a tremendously positive impact in helping children to arrive at school on time and ready to learn, while also helping working parents to have more choices in the workplace. From April 2025, free breakfast clubs will be available in up to 750 early adopter schools. That will be part of the test-and-learn phase, but new breakfast clubs, once rolled out nationally, will be available to every state-funded school with primary school age children, and will give parents more affordable childcare choices while also helping families with the cost of living. Children will be able to start the school day ready to learn, which will give them the best start in life and in their education.

This Government are determined to break down barriers to opportunity. That must start before school, with high-quality early education that is both available and affordable. We inherited a pledge without a plan, so this Labour Government must work to deliver the change that families need. We will deliver places in new nurseries, tackle unfair "top-up fees", and ensure that every child can have the best start in life. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I should explain to newer colleagues that interventions are not made during statements by Ministers or responses from shadow Ministers. I now call the shadow Minister to respond to the Minister's statement.

12.34 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement.

Labour Members may take this opportunity to create a fictitious narrative about the alleged failures of the former Government on early years and childcare, but it will not wash with us and it will not wash with the British public. That is simply because our record on childcare is strong, so let me take this opportunity to remind the Government and the House exactly what it is.

In 2010, we extended the three and four-year-old entitlement, commonly taken as 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year. In 2013, we introduced 15 hours of free early education a week for disadvantaged two-year-olds. In 2017, we doubled the three and four-year-old entitlement to 30 hours per week for working parents, as well as introducing tax-free childcare, which meant

[*Mr Gagan Mohindra*]

that for every £8 people paid in, the Government would automatically add £2 to support childcare costs—on top of the free-hours entitlement. In March 2023, we announced the biggest expansion of childcare by a UK Government in history. It was intended to give working parents access to 30 hours of free childcare a week, from when their children were nine months old until they started school, and to save families an average of £6,900 a year. Our reason for doing that was simple: childcare is one of the biggest costs facing working families today, as well as one of the biggest barriers to parents returning to work if and when they wish to do so. I want to take this opportunity to thank early years providers, local authorities, membership bodies, and other key partners who have made delivering this possible.

I welcome the fact that the Government have finally agreed that rolling out our childcare expansion will empower parents to make the choice that is best for them, and are committed to doing so. I am, however, disappointed that they did not do more to spread awareness among parents of the childcare entitlements that became available in September. Will the Minister tell us whether there was any unspent budget for this, and will he now commit himself to increasing the publicising of childcare roll-outs so that parents are rightly aware of their entitlements?

Of course the Opposition welcome the expansion of childcare and support the idea of utilising unused space in schools, which provides a single point of contact for parents with multiple children, but will the Minister tell us how many childcare places the first 300 new or expanded nurseries will provide? The Government previously pledged to deliver 3,000 nurseries to support 100,000 childcare places. What will be the timeline for the delivery of the rest of those nurseries, and are the Government still committed to the creation of 100,000 childcare places across the country in the long term?

The Education Secretary has confirmed that early years and childcare are her No. 1 priority, which I wholeheartedly support. However, the Government's education tax will mean that children in classes in which one child is five years old, or is due to turn five by the end of the year, will be subject to the Government's retrograde education tax regardless of their age. Will the Minister confirm that that is indeed a broken promise? How can the British public trust the Education Secretary's word that she will prioritise early years and childcare when she has already broken a promise within the first 100 days of a Labour Government?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the shadow Minister for his response, and welcome him to his place. I know that he will want to be a keen champion for the early years sector, and I was glad to hear him welcome the update that I have given to the House.

As I said in my statement, Labour is committed to the delivery of expanded entitlement across Government. The last Government left significant challenges, but we are not shirking that responsibility. With Labour, the early years sector can rest assured that we will be working tirelessly to deliver a wider sea change in early education, as well as high and rising standards throughout the education system.

Let me now deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's specific points. It is clear to me from my consultation and engagement with parents and providers so far that we have inherited a pledge without a plan, and the consequences of that are inherited delivery challenges relating to workforce and places. I appreciate the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the workforce; I believe by resetting the relationship with the workforce, we can have a much more positive relationship with the sector in the future.

Over 300,000 children have benefited from the entitlement offer since September this year, which demonstrates that we are actively engaging and working with parents to promote opportunities to take up the offer. We will continue to do so.

On school-based nurseries, the pilot during the testing phase is for 300 places from April. Our ambition is for 3,000 places over the course of this Parliament.¹ I look forward to working with the hon. Member constructively to bring about the change that early years education so desperately needs.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for all the work he is doing to right a much overdue wrong. It is extraordinary to hear the shadow Minister trying to claim credit for something this Government have finally done today, putting to rest the concerns that many of us tried to raise with the previous Government. I thank the Minister for being honest enough to finally publish the data about the numbers of people we need working with our children to make these plans happen. The previous Government always avoided the question and now we can see why, because the data shows that we will need an extra 35,000 people working in our childcare sector by autumn next year to fulfil all our pledges, and an extra 6,000 by the end of this year. Will the Minister tell us more about his workforce strategy? We take our hats off to the people who look after our children. I know this Government want to invest in them, but we need a lot more of them. What can we do to make that happen?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for her tireless work speaking up for children, young people and parents up and down the country. As she rightly says, we are working hard with the early years sector to recruit the staff we need, including through the extended recruitment campaign *Do Something Big*, so that we attract more people to work in the early education system and ensure there are good training pathways into careers in early education. We are resetting relationships with staff across the education sector to ensure they are respected and valued for the important work they do. School-based nurseries currently have lower turnover and have the option to use some staff flexibly between reception and early years in primary schools. I am looking forward to cracking on with delivering on those commitments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who has two minutes.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I am suffering because of the length of time that my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) took earlier. I will try to stick to two minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker.

1.[*Official Report*, 22 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 1WC.] (Correction)

I thank the Minister for sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats believe that flexible, affordable childcare and early years education is a critical part of our society. High-quality early years education is the best possible investment in the future and contributes to economic performance in the present as well. Most importantly, it is the most effective way to narrow the gap between rich and poor children.

Broadly, we welcome the Government's promise to expand access to affordable childcare and early years education. Under the previous Government, we saw what happens when big promises on childcare are not backed up by the funding and resources needed to deliver them. The Conservative Government's plans risked exacerbating the problems that parents already faced: a lack of childminder places and eye-watering fees.

The number of childminders in England fell by an estimated 26% between 2018 and 2023. Last year, a report found that 35% of nursery managers would limit the number of places they offered unless the Government helped with recruitment. I note from the Minister's statement that the Government are taking steps to improve recruitment and retention in the childcare and early years sector, but does the Minister agree that a career strategy is also needed for those working in early years, including a training programme, so that all those working with young children are properly trained and supported? Will he give assurances that the places announced today will be properly supported by committing to a full review of the rates paid to providers for free hours, to ensure they cover the actual costs of delivering that high-quality childcare?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for his statement and welcome him to his place. As he identified, there are some core challenges for the early years sector in delivering the Government's agenda to expand childcare entitlement. As I made clear in my statement, today's announcement sets out key steps we are looking to take to deliver for children and ensure that they have safe, supported systems to help them succeed in life. I know that he will support our ambition of ensuring that every child, no matter where they come from, can succeed in life.

The hon. Member was right to focus on disadvantage, which is a key priority for me as a Minister. If we are serious about breaking down barriers to opportunity, we need to think about the impact of the scheme on the most disadvantaged in our society. The number of childminders involved in the system has halved over the years; we want to reset that relationship. The new flexibilities announced today will make a big difference. Finally, he will appreciate that funding is a matter for the spending review.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I thank the Minister for finally bringing forward a realistic plan for expanding childcare. Residents, and certainly parents, in Southend West and Leigh will welcome the announcement. Will he provide assurances that childminders, who are a vital part of childcare arrangements, will still be a key focus? Will he give a further idea of how they will be supported?

Stephen Morgan: Childminders are a key part of the childcare market, providing more choice and flexibility for parents. From next month, the Government plan to implement new flexibilities to help childminders join

and stay in the profession. That will include enabling childminders to work from non-domestic premises, as I mentioned in my statement, and increasing the number of childminders who can work together; that will improve children's access to new experiences out of the home and encourage socialisation. As we seek to deliver a sea change in our approach to early years, we want partners, including childminders, to work closely with us to push for better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There are countless millions of free childminders available. The love between a grandparent and a grandchild is the purest love: love without responsibility. I declare a personal interest. Will the Minister assure me that he will incentivise grandparents to look after their grandchildren, and that nothing in the tax or benefits system will discriminate against mothers who want to look after their children full time? Will he build on the Conservatives' scheme of transferrable allowances?

Stephen Morgan: Families have an important role to play in supporting children in the first few years of their life. We are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity for every child, in every part of the country, and our childcare system has a key role to play in that.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): As a former school governor and a dad, I see the amazing work that preschools and nurseries do up and down the country. These measures will be a key way to break down barriers to opportunity and get the country growing, as the Minister says. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that children in care and the children of those in the armed forces are prioritised for the additional care places? Will he reassure childminders that we are on their side, because childminders in Telford have missed the memo from the Government on this set of improvements?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I remind hon. Members to ask short questions.

Stephen Morgan: Since joining the House, my hon. Friend has already become a champion for children and young people in his constituency. He raises a number of points—about childminders, support for children in care, and military families. As I represent the heart and home of the Royal Navy, I take those matters very seriously. I will certainly consider the points that he raises as we design a system fit for the future.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I am incredibly proud of the previous Government's massive expansion of the childcare offer, and I am genuinely pleased that the new Government are carrying on with it. When it comes to the expansion of in-school nurseries, what mechanism will be put in place to ensure that rural communities, like mine in Mid Buckinghamshire, get a locked in, fair share of those new facilities?

Stephen Morgan: Our party wants to govern the whole country. In the election in July, we won many rural seats, and we will take the views and ambitions of rural communities seriously. If the hon. Gentleman

[*Stephen Morgan*]

wants to raise particular points with me to ensure that the roll-out works well in his constituency, I am very happy to meet him to discuss those issues.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): With so many families struggling to find affordable childcare across my Hitchin constituency, I really welcome the Minister's announcement today, and I will encourage local schools to take part in the pilot scheme. I particularly welcome the focus on the exclusionary nature of top-up fees. Those fees run counter to the nature of the scheme, and all too often leave those most in need of affordable childcare unable to access it. Will the Minister assure us that as he takes the vital, robust action needed to clamp down on top-up fees, he will work with the sector more widely to ensure the viability of providers, who were all too often left on the brink by the previous Government's mismanagement of childcare?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I have heard that message loud and clear from parents in constituencies up and down the country. Where providers seek to put up fresh barriers to access, we will not tolerate them. We will make guidance in this area as clear and consistent as possible to support hard-pressed families as we deliver this sea change in early years provision.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for this welcome news. Within seven months, my party colleagues in Northern Ireland have designed a scheme to slash childcare bills by 15%, saving parents up to £660 per month. The Northern Ireland childcare subsidy scheme has saved parents about £1 million in the month of September alone. Some 13,000 children signed up in the first four weeks. That is DUP delivery. Does the Minister have any plans for implementing greater support on a UK-wide basis, so that better communication and better partnership can blossom and grow?

Stephen Morgan: I always enjoy responding to questions from the hon. Gentleman. On my visit in April to Belfast, I heard that childcare is a huge issue for the community. I assure him that there is more we can do to support our colleagues in Northern Ireland. We have already committed to a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss these issues.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome these measures, which will do an awful lot to help hard-pressed families in my constituency. Does he agree that the Conservatives suffer from something of a blind spot in looking back at their record, which contains years in which funding fell short of the delivery costs? They ignore the exodus of early years professionals and the fact that 1,400 Sure Start centres have been closed, yet they continue to believe that we have never had it so good. Will the Minister join me in thanking early years professionals in Southampton Itchen, who can finally count on a Government who are child-centred, and could he outline how these measures will be targeted at so-called childcare deserts?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and congratulate him on being selected for the Select Committee. I agree that we should be shocked by the Conservatives' response to today's statement. This Government are focused on the issues that make the biggest difference to working people across the country, so that we can deliver the change we need. Today's announcement is an example of how we will go about doing that. I am very keen to meet my hon. Friend to discuss these issues further, and I appreciate his thanks to those in the sector for the hard work that they do in his constituency.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I hugely welcome the news about funding for schools, children and parents, and for school-based nurseries in particular. I hope the Minister will look fondly on applications from Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield in due course. I wonder whether he thinks that the capital allocation in the statement is sufficient for his ambition. Does the Minister agree that this Government are delivering on their promises within their first 100 days?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am absolutely delighted to hear of his enthusiasm for the scheme, which will make a huge difference to communities up and down our country. We are starting a test-and-learn phase in April; the roll-out will be in September.¹ We want to learn from that approach, and I would be delighted to work with him on this matter.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I strongly welcome the proposed expansion of childcare, which I am sure will help many families in my Penrith and Solway constituency. Can the Minister outline how this measure will be targeted at the areas of the country with the greatest need, and at areas that are considered to be childcare deserts?

Stephen Morgan: We are absolutely committed to being a child-centred Government, and it is vital that we deliver the programme in the areas in most need. That means making sure that we understand where there are gaps in places and in the workforce, and we look forward to working closely with the sector to ensure that the scheme makes the biggest difference in communities that need it the most.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): This announcement is particularly fitting, as my son started preschool today. Many hard-working parents in York Outer welcome today's news, but many feel that some providers are taking the biscuit when it comes to funded hours, abnormalities, unfair top-up fees and even restrictions on the days of the week on which funded hours can be used. Will the Minister meet me so that I can pass on York Outer parents' concerns about the funded hours scheme?

Stephen Morgan: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I wish his son good luck as he starts nursery today.

Adam Jodge (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I have sore calves after this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker. A child-centred Government are exactly what people in Newcastle-under-Lyme want, but the disgraceful state

1.[*Official Report*, 22 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

of special educational needs and disability provision in our schools means that we have more to do. How does this announcement, which I welcome, sit alongside our commitment to overhauling the SEND system?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are reviewing the early years SEND funding arrangements to ensure that they are suitable for supporting the needs of children with SEND. For children with more complex needs and an education, health and care plan, funding is available via the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant. Local authorities should have SEND inclusion funding for children with low and emerging needs. Disability access funding is also designed to support disabled children's access to entitlements.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): We can probably all agree that every child should have the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their background and circumstances, who they know and where they come from. None of that should shape people's lives more than their talent, creativity or determination. I welcome the emphasis on the importance of early years provision. Particularly in these years after the pandemic, measures such as early speech and language interventions can make all the difference. Does the Minister agree that now is the time to take early years provision seriously?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he is absolutely right. The pandemic had a huge impact on children's lives, and our investment in early interventions around speech and language is absolutely key. I look forward to working with him to deliver that successfully in his constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The final zinger of a question is from Josh Simons.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): We'll see! I am intrigued to hear Conservative Members' attempts to defend their record. Moments ago, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) said that the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) is "preoccupied with her children" and cannot be the Leader of the Opposition while spending time with her family. This comes after she herself said that maternity leave has "gone too far". Does the Minister agree that whereas this Government are working hard to back the hope that children represent, Conservative Members are, in the end, the same old Tories?

Stephen Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Early years provision was cast off under the Tories, and we are bringing it back into the fold as a crucial part of our education system. We are committed to giving every young person the best start in life, and I look forward to working with him to make that happen.

International Investment Summit

12.57 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, His Majesty's Treasury (Emma Reynolds): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International Investment Summit.

I am delighted to open this debate on the Government's inaugural international investment summit, which we hosted at the Guildhall in London on Monday. Leaders of the world's biggest companies, from Alphabet and BlackRock to Goldman Sachs and Novo Nordisk, came from all corners of the globe to meet Government Ministers and to listen to what our new Government had to say. Our message at the summit was clear: the UK is open for business once again. We have turned the page on the stagnation and instability of the previous Government, and in just over 100 days, this Government have put growth front and centre of our agenda and reassured investors that we will create the very best conditions for them to invest and to grow their businesses, restoring the economic stability and confidence for which businesses have been crying out for too long.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor made it clear that the UK has an enormous amount to offer, as did all the high-profile investors who spoke at the summit, including esteemed business figures such as Larry Fink, Eric Schwartz, Ruth Porat and more. We have made clear our commitment to growth and restored economic stability, and we have given businesses the confidence that they need for the long term. Businesses are safe in the knowledge that the UK at last has a Government whose central mission is to grow the economy and stimulate private investment, thereby ending the chaos and churn of the last 14 years.

As both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have set out, increasing investment into the UK is the Government's No. 1 priority to drive growth. Our mission-driven approach allows us to think in terms of years, not weeks, and to commit to the hard yards required to break down the silos that have too often prevented effective government and got in the way of real growth-driving change.

This is about ambitious policymaking for the long term, not sticking-plaster politics. As the Chancellor said earlier this week:

"If the challenge is growth, investment is the solution."

I am delighted to say that, as a result of the stability dividend introduced by this Government, we announced a record-breaking £63 billion of shovel-ready investments across the country—more than at any previous summit, and more than double the total of last year's summit—from global companies such as Eli Lilly, ServiceNow, Holtec and many others.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the Government's success. Could the Minister tell us the proportion of that investment that came into play before the election?

Emma Reynolds: The agreements were reached in the lead-up to the summit and at the summit itself. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman joins us in congratulating the new Government on securing £63 billion of shovel-ready investment. I lost count of the number of Prime Ministers,

[Emma Reynolds]

Chancellors and Home Secretaries we had under his Government. I was working in the private sector at the time, and I often heard from businesses that said they did not have the stability, or even the predictability, of Government policymaking.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will not have a cross-Chamber discussion with the hon. Gentleman. I am sure he will make a contribution to the debate.

This Government are determined to increase the number of good, well-skilled jobs, to embrace the opportunities of technology and innovation, and to improve productivity across the country. At the international investment summit, we demonstrated that the UK has tremendous strengths. We have a dynamic, ambitious and globally connected economy that has long been at the forefront of global exploration, invention and innovation. We have a global language, a central time zone and a renowned legal system. We have a high-spending consumer market that benefits from an open economy. We have trade deals with over 70 countries, and we have world-class talent supported by our globally recognised higher education system, with four of the world's top 10 universities.

One of my favourite moments of the summit was a panel chaired by our fantastic Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the creative industries and sport. I was delighted to have a photograph with Gareth Southgate, which I showed to my boys when I got home. In all seriousness, Gareth Southgate talked about how the Premier League was once just an idea and how it has been built and marketed into a world leader, creating great investment into our economy. I am sure the whole House will support that sentiment—

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Hear, hear.

Emma Reynolds: The shadow Secretary of State is demonstrating that from a sedentary position—it is the first time I have said that in a debate for some time.

When we took over from the last Government, we recognised that there were issues we needed to address to improve the UK's competitiveness. That is why we have already announced a series of steps to improve our business environment, such as driving through planning reform to get Britain building, removing the ban on onshore wind farms and giving the green light to key solar and data centre projects. We are also undertaking a pensions investment review, which the Chancellor has asked me to lead, to harness the potential of our £2 trillion pension industry to unlock new capital for our innovative businesses, to drive growth and to improve outcomes for future pensioners.

We have launched Skills England to boost the nation's skills and fill job vacancies by bringing together businesses, trade unions, mayors, universities, colleges and training providers. We are also resetting our relationship with our closest partners in the European Union.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Government on an extraordinary achievement in securing £63 billion-worth

of investment, which is a tremendous vote of confidence not only in this Government but in this country. My hon. Friend is right to say that a big part of this is the stability dividend, but she is also right to say that resetting our relationship with our closest neighbours in Europe must also be a big source of appeal. Did she hear that feedback at the investment summit?

Emma Reynolds: Indeed, I did. Business wants the Government to take a pragmatic approach, not an ideological approach, to our relationships with our main trading partners, and that is exactly what our new Government are doing.

I am pleased to report that we are not resting on our laurels; far from it. On Sunday, the Business Secretary announced the launch of an industrial strategy advisory council, which will be chaired by Clare Barclay, the CEO of Microsoft UK. The Business Secretary also announced our modern industrial strategy Green Paper, setting out eight growth-driving sectors: advanced manufacturing; clean energy industries; creative industries; defence; digital and technology; financial services; life sciences; and professional and business services. This is not about picking winners; it is about building on the UK's unique strengths and untapped potential to enable our already world-leading services and manufacturing industries to adapt, grow and seize the opportunities to lead in new and emerging industries.

At the summit, the Prime Minister set out the Government's commitment to a pro-growth approach to competition and regulation, to create a dynamic business environment that will strengthen our foundations and help deliver our growth mission and industrial strategy. As investors made clear, they have a choice of where to invest. We must not rest on our laurels; we must make sure that we forge ahead with these policies, because we need investors to make a positive choice to invest in our country. As one private sector speaker said at the summit, we do not want investors just to invest; we want them to place a big bet on investing in the UK.

The Chancellor also confirmed two new innovative measures to ensure that our public finance institutions can better catalyse billions of pounds in private investment. We turbocharged the UK Infrastructure Bank to become the national wealth fund, which will have £27.8 billion to catalyse investment that would not have otherwise taken place. We have also launched the British Business Bank's new pathfinder British growth partnership, a vehicle to crowd pension fund investment and other institutional investment into venture capital funds and innovative businesses.

We have committed to bringing forward a tax road map, long demanded by businesses across the economy, at the Budget. This will give businesses the certainty and predictability to plan for the future. As the Chancellor has already made clear, we will cap the rate of corporation tax at 25% for the duration of this Parliament. Gone are the days when a Government—the previous Government—would announce a decrease in corporation tax, then announce an increase and then, months later, reverse the decision again at the next fiscal statement. We want to ensure that businesses have predictability. We have also said that we will maintain our capital allowances offer, with full expensing and a £1 million annual investment allowance.

We will also reform and turbocharge the Office for Investment, which will sit under our new joint Treasury-Department for Business and Trade Investment Minister, Poppy Gustafsson, the founder and former CEO of Darktrace. This is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to better serving the needs of investors and breaking down the silos between Departments, which have too often prevented transformative Government policy.

We are determined to drive the transformational investments that the country so desperately needs to fulfil its economic potential. Such measures, introduced within just 100 days, show that this Government are not just about warm words; we mean business, in every sense of the phrase.

This week's summit was a major vote of confidence in the UK's economic future and in this Government's commitment to realising it. The investments and partnerships forged at the summit will have lasting impacts, driving growth, innovation and sustainability for years to come. It was not just a one-off event; it was a first milestone in our ongoing work to build a deep and meaningful partnership with business, drive economic growth and create good jobs for working people up and down this country at all levels of society. As we move forward, let us work together across the House to ensure that the benefits of these investments are felt by all our citizens across every region of our great nation.

Before I finish, I want to say that the particular highlight of the summit for me was the evening reception at St Paul's, at which His Majesty the King was present and at which many of us were delighted to hear Elton John, who had some very warm words to say about our new Government. He said something like, "We've been in the doldrums for the last few years, but now we have a new Government under the leadership of a new Prime Minister and things are looking up."

As the Chancellor made clear in her closing speech at the summit, since taking power this Government have put unlocking private investment at the heart of everything we do. Our investment summit demonstrated our commitment to growth and that the UK is once again open for business.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.11 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I welcome the Minister back to this place and to her new position? I assure her that I am very happy to work with her to further the best interests of the United Kingdom.

I very much welcome what happened on Monday. Having 300 investors come to this country is very welcome; this country is clearly open for business. We are keen to help the Government to succeed, because it is in everybody's interests. I speak not only as a constituency MP, but as a former businessperson.

I was also pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk about cutting red tape and regulation. We would all welcome that, although I have some questions. We know that there is a bottleneck in our economy, particularly in planning and infrastructure, so we will welcome any changes that the Government can successfully make to accelerate the projects that have been held up by problems.

We also welcome the work—for which I understand the Minister is responsible in her other role as Minister for pensions—on the Mansion House compact and the Mansion House reforms, which could liberate £75 billion of capital into our productive economy. That is much needed: only 3% or 4% is invested today in equities, compared with 50% a couple of decades ago, so it is very important that we continue the reforms started by the last Government.

We were pleased to see all the positivity on Monday, despite the gloom and doom that we have heard from Government Members in recent weeks. It is good to hear investors saying that now is the right time to invest in the UK. We can see why. *[Laughter.]* No, it is not necessarily because there is a Labour Government. It is because inflation is running at below 2%, whereas it was running at 11% only two years ago. In this country we have only 4% unemployment, our economy is growing as fast as any other in the G7 and our deficit stands at 4.4%. That is what we handed over to the Minister's Government. The deficit was higher than we would have liked, but in 2010, by comparison, it stood at more than 10%.

We constantly hear from Labour Members the refrain that they inherited the worst economic situation in history, but that is simply not the case. I am happy to take an intervention from the Minister, or any other Government Member, on that point. If they can name a single metric that is worse today than in 2010, I will be happy to hear it.

Liam Byrne *rose—*

Kevin Hollinrake: The Chair of the Business and Trade Committee is going to give us one.

Liam Byrne: The hon. Gentleman gives way with characteristic generosity. The truth is that the International Monetary Fund forecast growth for this year at about 0.5%, that families were about £1,200 worse off on average at the last election than in 2019, and that since 2010 the national debt has more than doubled, to £2.3 trillion. I suggest that those three metrics represent not a good inheritance, but a bad one.

Kevin Hollinrake: There is no doubt that we have been through a difficult time, given the effect of covid and the cost of living crisis on a services economy, but the right hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that back in 2010 the deficit was more than 10%, whereas today it is only 4%. In real terms, adjusted for inflation, that is a difference of about £160 billion, the equivalent of the health budget. The inheritance left for the present Government is much better than the one we received in 2010.

Emma Reynolds: The shadow Secretary of State is being generous to a point. I suggest kindly that in 2010 the outgoing Labour Government did not leave a £22 billion in-year hole in the public finances, as the Conservative Government bequeathed to us.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister is a very sensible person with experience both in the private sector and in politics, so I am surprised that she mentions that figure. Of the £22 billion, £9 billion was a result of her Government's actions in lifting public sector pay without any commensurate productivity improvements and in

[Kevin Hollinrake]

scrapping the Rwanda scheme. It is fake news to say that there is a £22 billion black hole, I am afraid, and the Minister absolutely knows it.

There is no doubt that there are tough spending decisions and tough choices to be made, but it is very disappointing that one of the Government's tough choices has been to scrap the winter fuel allowance. Let us see what their other choices will be.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Does the shadow Secretary of State acknowledge that the cost of Government borrowing that this Government have inherited is roughly double what it was in 2010? That is, in part, a direct result of the disastrous Liz Truss mini-Budget.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is simply not true—just read what the Bank of England said about that time. All the numbers went back to normal within a month of that fiscal event. The hon. Gentleman can choose his opinions, but he cannot choose his facts.

Let us look at some facts. Of course we welcome the £63 billion that has been announced, but as the Minister and her Government stand on a platform of honesty and transparency, let us put some honesty and transparency around the numbers. The Amazon £8 billion was announced on 20 March this year. The Blackstone investment of £10 billion in a data centre was announced on 23 April this year. Of the £63 billion announced, £36 billion was announced prior to the investment summit or initiated via things like auctions by the previous Government. Only 20% of what was announced was not already in the pipeline before the investment summit. The reality is that much of it was already baked in. There is bound to be an overlap when a new Government come in, but let us have some transparency and honesty around the numbers.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): By spring this year, financial markets had already priced in the fact that they expected a large Labour victory, and that was what gave businesses and the markets so much confidence in the future stability of our economy. Will the shadow Secretary of State explain why?

Kevin Hollinrake: I will come on to confidence in a second, if I may.

The reality is that the UK has always been a good place for foreign investors. For the past three years, it has been No. 3 in the world for foreign direct investment; the only countries ahead of us have been the US and China.

The Minister referred to the wonderful event at the Guildhall. We have wonderful places to host international events, and we support what they do to show the best of Britain to our international investors. I was pleased, but perhaps surprised, to see Elton John entertaining the audience; I was expecting Taylor Swift. Was that ever on the agenda? There is obviously a very strong relationship there. But when I thought about it, and when I heard about the reversal of position on the DP World investment, I thought, "Well, it's obvious why they've done that: they've asked Elton and the Transport Secretary to join in a duet of 'Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word'."

Interestingly, a No.10 press release on this mentioned a rogue operator—I was not sure whether that meant the Secretary of State or the company—so I am not sure where that all landed in the end, or whether that was just a rogue comment by the Secretary of State.

None the less, we welcome the investment and we will absolutely support any successes that the Government can achieve, but, as the Opposition, it is right that we challenge where challenge is due. We have many concerns about some of the things to which the Minister refers. She is absolutely right to say that stability is the key. It breeds confidence in investors, which breeds investment. That is why we are particularly concerned about the changes to business taxation. Some were floated months ago and have been left hanging in the air. We know that this is now affecting investment, particularly around capital gains tax and around business relief—it used to be called business property relief—which is very close to my heart.

Business relief gives private businesses and businesses listed on AIM the ability to pass on their assets to the next generation without inheritance tax. There are a number of questions around whether that relief will be continued. It is hugely important that the Government do continue it, because it affects some of this country's fantastic family businesses, which generate around £200 billion of tax receipts every single year and employ nearly 14 million people. That business relief is there for a reason. It is not a tax loophole; it is an incentive for family and intergenerational businesses to pass on their assets from one generation to the next. Similarly, that happens with agricultural property relief.

We are also concerned about the Government's unwillingness to confirm that there will be no rise in national insurance for employers. Members on both sides of the House have described that as a jobs tax, and that is exactly what it is. All the uncertainty around business taxation will mean a suspension of investment and a reduction in the amount of hiring, particularly when it is seen in conjunction with the potential workplace changes that the Government are making, which we will debate in the House on Monday and about which we have great concerns. In particular, those relating to union powers could take this country back to the 1970s. I know that many Members in this place will not remember the 1970s, but I do and it was not a good place to be.

In the Prime Minister's statement, he talked about cutting red tape. If, as currently drafted, the 28 new regulations—particularly those for small and medium-sized enterprises—are added to the Employment Rights Bill, it would seriously damage growth, investment and SMEs. But the Minister does not need to take my word for that. Let me read out some of the comments about the changes that the Government are thinking of making that will damage investment. The Federation of Small Businesses said that its members are viewing the measures coming down the line with "trepidation". Tina McKenzie described them as

"clumsy, chaotic and poorly planned."

She said:

"There are already 65,000 fewer payroll jobs since Labour took power, and the new Government is sending out troubling signals to businesses and investors."

Those are her words, not mine.

The Institute of Directors said that confidence is fizzling out. Its index in relation to investor appetite has gone from plus 30% in June 2024 to minus 7% in October 2024. That is in just four months. The CBI said that 62% of employers say that the UK will be a less attractive place in which to invest. Ernst & Young said that

“60% of asset management (private equity) clients have asked them to start work on moving abroad.”

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that he is now guilty of talking down the entrepreneurial spirit and the ability of UK companies to cope with an exciting new Government?

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very keen not to do that. That is my point. It is gloom and doom from the Opposition—sorry, I mean the Government; I have to stop doing that—and it is brought on by these significant changes. These are not my comments, but the comments of sensible business representative organisations, which are representing their members. We should listen to the voices of business in this context. Even Richard Walker of Iceland Food, one of the Government’s supporters, says that the changes must happen slowly to avoid a “disastrous impact”.

I realise that we have a lot to get used to these days. I have to get used to calling those on the Labour Benches “the Government”, and I also have to get used to being a backseat driver. It is even more frustrating being a backseat driver when the learner driver in the driving seat does not know the difference between the brake and the accelerator.

Importantly, stability is one of the key levers that the Government have at their disposal. Winston Churchill once said that some people see “private enterprise as a predatory tiger to be shot. Some see it as a cow that they can milk. Few people see it for what it really is—the strong horse that pulls the whole cart”. It is hugely important that we get behind private enterprise in this country. It is hugely important that we get that stability in tax policy, workplace policy and the employment relationship. It is hugely important that we continue to level up this country. I note that levelling-up seems to have disappeared as a departmental aim, but that is still hugely important to all parts of this country, not least to the part of the country that I represent. It is also hugely important that we control energy costs. We know that that is a key concern to many businesses around the UK. Another key concern is that we cut the red tape for our larger companies.

The area that I focused most on as a business Minister was SMEs, which are the backbone of our economy. The No. 1 area that they struggle with is access to finance. I would really like to see some different measures in that area.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On that point about finance, I was pleased to see that JP Morgan, which has its headquarters in my constituency, joined other big banks in the world to back the push to invest in the UK ahead of the summit. Does the hon. Member agree with JP Morgan and those banks that we should be optimistic about the future of the British economy following the election?

Kevin Hollinrake: I would not necessarily say “following the election”, but, generally, we should be very positive about our economy. I set out earlier some of the economic conditions that would make it conducive to invest in the UK, and we should be proud of that situation. I welcome the Minister’s comments about the change of priorities of the British Business Bank, specifically in relation to the pathfinder initiative. That piece of work was started by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) when he was in the Treasury. Again, that will help to ease the flow of finance into our SMEs.

As I look, with a mixture of sadness and joy, at the now redundant Conservative party manifesto, I can see that there were some really positive ideas in there about easing finance for SMEs. In particular, I am referring to things such as regional mutual banks, which is a policy that the Labour Government should adopt, and the open finance and smart data revolution for our economy, which could transform the opportunities of SME finance, making it much easier for SMEs to shop around. However, the key thing that I would reiterate to the Minister and her team is that they need to make sure that we have stability in terms of not just work, but business taxation, capital gains tax, and business relief. I say no to a jobs tax, but, yes to stability and business taxes. I say no to taking us back to the 1970s, by giving unions more power, no to doom and gloom, and yes to a positive and optimistic view of the UK’s future in the world.

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

1.28 pm

Jade Botterill (Ossett and Denby Dale) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech in this important debate on international investment, the benefits of which will be felt right across all regions of our country.

I want to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Mark Eastwood. He was a dedicated servant to his previous constituency of Dewsbury. On behalf of myself and our community, I say thank you.

Being the Member for the area in which I grew up is truly the honour of my life. I will forever be grateful to the people across Ossett and Denby Dale who put their faith in me to represent the area that I proudly call home. I pay tribute to the Labour members across the constituency, especially stalwart member Robert Gosling, without whom I would not be standing here today.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank my parents for their support, as well as my brother, who has always been there for me during some of the most challenging times. I am delighted that they have travelled from Wakefield to be in the Public Gallery today. Their own commitment to our community in their long careers of public service—working hard and talking straight—are principles that I hope to emulate here. My mum is so committed to the north that this is her first ever trip to London—proof, were it ever needed, that us northerners only come south if somebody makes us.

I know many Members have already spoken about the beauty of their patches, but with respect, I must make the case for Ossett and Denby Dale. Driving from Ossett towards the Wakefield rural villages and into

[Jade Botterill]

Denby Dale, the sky widens and the moors roll out before you. On that drive, when I see the Emley Moor mast appear from the horizon, built taller than the Eiffel tower, I know I am home. It is beautiful, it is Yorkshire and it is the place that made me who I am today.

It is not just those moors and views that move me; it is also the people who call them home. We are people of talent, community and, as good Yorkshire folk say, hard graft. In fact, that beautiful landscape is the fruit of exactly that graft, of that talent. You see it in the pits dug across the countryside that served to fuel and heat our nation. You see it in the fields—ploughed, planted and grazed by countless generations to feed not just Yorkshire but the rest of the country. You see it in the town markets, which have bustled with small traders, craftsmen and local farmers for generations. That landscape is not just the cradle of talent, but a product of it.

Each town, each village has its own community, its own culture—all quietly, proudly distinct. As well as hard work, these towns and villages are famous for their culture, their creativity and their heritage—home to brass bands, Morris dancers, maypoles and even a Doctor Who, but most importantly of all, the world's greatest rugby league team, Wakefield Trinity. Labour may be a party of the Union, but in West Yorkshire, when it comes to rugby, we watch the proper stuff and as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that is league.

We are also home to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, with its Barbara Hepworths and Henry Moores, and the National Coal Mining Museum, which roots us in our proud history. I am enthusiastic—sometimes maybe a little too enthusiastic—that my constituency contains so many wonderful pubs and brewers. We have the ever expanding Ossett Brewery and our famous yearly festival, Ossett Beercart.

Just as we work hard and play hard, we also pie hard. Indeed, for over 200 years, the people of Denby Dale have marked special occasions in the only way I think appropriate: by baking enormous pies to feed thousands—some even as long as 40 feet, with nine tonnes of filling and 200 pints of bitter. That history and that culture must be championed. It is Yorkshire culture; it is our culture.

But I refuse to talk about my community only in the past tense—about opportunities we used to have and industries we used to lead. Indeed, I want my successors in this place to be celebrating the creativity and achievements of children being born in my constituency today. Sadly, however, the Social Mobility Commission recently reported that many young people in Ossett and Denby Dale, and other post-industrial communities across our nation, face an uphill battle. Growing up in a rural town, I know that feeling all too well: that the place you are from is overlooked—forgotten, even; that opportunities are few and far between; and that the only path to success in life is leaving your family, your friends, your home. After briefly living in London in my twenties for work, I remember feeling like the token northerner with the funny accent. I found myself having to speak eloquently so folk down here could actually understand me. The only problem with that was that when I got back home, my friends and family would ask me why I was speaking so posh. It actually made me feel quite lost.

Young people in Ossett and Denby Dale, and in towns and villages across our country, should not feel like they have to get out to get ahead—and yet so many of them do. To talk solely about what was once possible in our community is to betray those young people. Instead, our politics must be built on their dreams and on their potential: decent, secure jobs with reliable public transport to get them there; good affordable housing where they can build their families and their future; high-quality education and skills training; access to creativity and culture; aspiration, hope. When they see the sky widen and the moors roll out before them, with Emley Moor mast standing tall on the horizon, young people should see somewhere that is ready to be remade once more by their talent, by their graft, by them.

England is a nation of towns and villages like mine—of community, of culture, of graft. For England to succeed, towns and villages must succeed, and it will be my mission in this place to see that happen.

1.34 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I welcome the Minister to her place. I also thank her for her support when she was not in this place and I was further back on these Benches, and we worked together on some of the issues under focus today.

We Liberal Democrats want Britain to be one of the most attractive places in the world for business to invest. We want to see responsible, sustainable businesses investing in tackling the climate emergency and creating jobs, growth and wealth, some of which should be invested into our health, education and public services. I welcome the Government deciding to hold an international investment summit within their first 100 days. It sends an excellent signal to the world that UK plc is open for business, and we Liberal Democrats welcome and support that move.

We welcome, too, the announcements about the revival of the industrial strategy and a new strategy for the British Business Bank. We look forward to scrutinising those plans as a constructive Opposition. However, we also know that this Government have to rebuild not only the economy, but our country's reputation.

It is an enormous relief that some of the dark days of the last Government are—I hope—behind us. We had the tweeting diplomacy of two former Prime Ministers, which made us look like a small country on the international stage. We had the half-baked Brexit deal, which has wrapped up small businesses in red tape and reams of paperwork. We had the rolling back on net zero and the flip-flopping fiasco on HS2, which created uncertainty, scared off investors and put the jobs of the future at risk. We also had the sheer incompetence of a Government who had forgotten how to negotiate. In my former role as my party's health spokesperson, talking to some of the pharmaceutical companies involved in the voluntary scheme for branded medicines, pricing and access negotiations, it became patently clear that many were putting their investment abroad and not in this country. That investment was lost on the Conservatives' watch.

Even though I welcome many of the things that the Labour Government have proposed and are bringing forward, there are some notable gaps, and it is on those gaps that I wish to focus. We know today's debate is about international investment, but I urge the Government to think about local investment in this country too.

Small businesses are the engine of growth and the backbone of our economy. They are the heartbeat of our communities, but they are really struggling to invest. There is one major reason for that: the broken business rates system. It is absolutely absurd that small bricks and mortar businesses on our high streets up and down the country see their business rates going up while Amazon warehouses see their business rates going down. It is a disgrace. I urge the Labour Government, in the strongest possible terms, to make the Budget this autumn the final one in which business rates are a permanent feature. They should be scrapped and replaced with a commercial landowner levy. I urge the Labour Government to act on that as soon as possible.

To make it even worse, we know that in many parts of the country, where high streets are not in a good state, there are small businesses that want to invest in good environmental things. They want to invest in solar panels, insulation, ventilation and bike sheds—things that would be good for business and create a sense of community, tackle the climate emergency and improve the public realm. Yet if they invest in those things, their business rates can go up. That is absolutely nuts, and I urge all colleagues to get behind my call to make the upcoming Budget the final one in which business rates are a permanent feature.

The other point I will talk about is skills. The Government have talked a lot about investing in infrastructure, housing and big things that we can build, but skills are so important. In my constituency, we have a phenomenal organisation called GEM Cable Solutions, a leading defence and aerospace company that makes bespoke cables and fibre optics using precision manufacturing. That means individual people making handmade cables that are flying things into space—it is extraordinary. But can the company get the highly qualified engineers that it needs in this country? No, it often cannot, because we are competing on the international stage for some of the finest engineering talent. At the same time, under the last Government, the company could not get that talent from abroad either, so I urge the new Government to bring forward a skills strategy as soon as possible, consult with other parties, and ensure that our small businesses can get those skills.

My third point is about the climate jobs of the future. I know the UK Infrastructure Bank has been rebranded the National Wealth Fund, and has attracted £7.3 billion in funds already. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether the new wealth fund will have an explicit remit to support the UK's transition to net zero carbon emissions. Finally, it is no secret that Brexit has wrapped up our small businesses in red tape, and that they are dealing with reams of paperwork. We have to remove as many trade barriers to our small businesses as possible. I urge the Government to bring something forward on that front as soon as possible.

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

1.40 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. When I drive around my Congleton constituency, I thank my lucky stars that I have the privilege of both living in and representing somewhere

so very beautiful. It is made up of gorgeous rolling countryside, farmland, hedgerows and oak trees. The farmers work all hours to produce the food that we need. It has views of the giant radio telescope at Jodrell Bank and the natural beauty spot Bosley Cloud. It is Arcadia within commuting distance of Manchester, Crewe and Stoke, and I cannot tell the House how much I truly love it.

The constituency is a growing place, with around 5,000 extra houses in the last few years. The population is divided between the Cheshire market towns of Alsager, Sandbach and Congleton, alongside the larger village of Holmes Chapel, and many beautiful smaller villages, such as Rode Heath, Church Lawton and Goostrey. There can be few more idyllic spots in the country than sitting outside the Swettenham Arms next to the Lovell arboretum, overlooking St Peter's, the archetypal village church.

Though each town and village has its own unique character and history, the joys and challenges experienced by the families who live there are often remarkably similar. They include families whose children have special educational needs and disabilities, who often face extensive challenges getting the diagnoses and support that they need. Those families need our help, and I will do everything that I can to assist them. I have been pleased to hear the Prime Minister referring repeatedly in this Chamber to those difficulties, and I am confident that he will help us too.

Families will also benefit from Labour's review of shared parental leave. Some 54,000 women a year lose their job when they are pregnant or on maternity leave. Women actually out-earn men in their 20s. The gender pay gap is in many respects actually a motherhood penalty. Men taking longer periods of paternity leave is a way that we could normalise parental leave and potentially reduce those problems. I thank the Government for starting the consultation on this matter imminently. I pay tribute to campaign groups such as Pregnant Then Screwed, Rights of Women, the Dad Shift, Parenting Out Loud, and the TUC and trade unions, which are all doing incredible things in this field.

Many homeowners in my constituency have been affected by leasehold and freehold problems, and will welcome our planned reforms on these issues, to which I intend to contribute. They include older people, often the backbone of our communities, who provide childcare for grandchildren, and often volunteer as well. Sometimes, however, they do so in avoidable pain while on NHS waiting lists that are too long. Those are just a few of the issues that I intend to apply myself to as MP for Congleton.

Let me take the House back to Congleton's history. Congleton is known as Beartown, owing to a local story that in the 1600s the town saved up to buy a new Bible. Shortly before the summer fête, the village bear died, so the townsfolk agreed that rather than buy their Bible they would postpone the purchase and get a new bear with the money instead. Congleton is very entrepreneurial across the whole constituency, and many of our small businesses feature references to the bear. It is also in our local iconography everywhere. We have the Beartown Tap and Beartown beer. The bear features pretty much everywhere, as does our fantastic statue of Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, which was lobbied and fundraised for by local feminists. Elizabeth, who based herself in Congleton from 1874 until her death in 1918, played a

[Mrs Sarah Russell]

significant role in the women's suffrage movement, founding the Women's Social and Political Union and campaigning for women's education and voting rights. I hope that I shall think of her often in this place.

Another of our most famous local figures, although quite different, is Harry Styles, whose hometown of Holmes Chapel is now a point of pilgrimage for his fans. I am sure that everyone is sorry to hear today of the death of his former bandmate Liam Payne—we all extend our condolences to his friends and family. Local people have set up a walking trail associated with Harry Styles. If anyone fancies it, I would strongly recommend following it, with a stop in any of our local independent businesses on Holmes Chapel high street. I would probably include a drink at the George and Dragon or the Bottle Bank, or both. I know that both publicans do a lot of voluntary work within our community.

People volunteering is common in my constituency, as I know it is in the constituencies of many other Members. Whether they are coaching football at Vale Juniors or any of the other community sports clubs—there are too many for me to list—planting trees and conserving and maintaining our woodland and footpaths, as the Sandbach Woodland and Wildlife Group does, and as a similar group does in Congleton; helping young people through uniformed groups such as scouts, guides and the various air cadets, some of which I have visited; running schemes to support men's mental health, such as the Goostrey Community Shed, Holmes Chapel Men in Sheds, or the new Sandbach men walking and talking group; or even running a community energy power plant in Congleton Hydro, we have the most amazing set of citizens. I am so grateful for the fantastic contribution that they make to help others, support those who need it, and truly make my constituency the fantastic place that it is.

On the topic of contribution, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Fiona Bruce. Congleton has had three MPs in its history, all of them women: Ann Winterton, Fiona Bruce and now me. I know that many Christians in the constituency and beyond appreciated Fiona Bruce's advocacy on behalf of the religious community, both in the UK and internationally, in her role as envoy for religious freedom. We have many active local church groups in our community, and they contribute a great deal of very varied support. Churches and secular volunteers and organisations, including food banks, food pantries and the Old Saw Mill, are all quietly providing much-needed food support within the community. They do this for a far larger number of adults and children than the apparent affluence of the area would superficially lead one to expect.

As a discrimination lawyer, and someone who went into politics because of the value that I place on equality and inclusion, I will continue to advocate for the rights and freedoms of all my constituents, and celebrate the diversity within our community. I recently attended the One World festival in Alsager, which was first established by Margaret Keeling 30 years ago. It celebrates the diversity of nationalities living within the Alsager community, with food, activities and lots of performances from local schoolchildren. It really is a delight—thank you, Margaret.

Another of the many achievements of the fantastic volunteers in my constituency is that we have regular Pride events. Congleton held its first Pride about five years ago. I pay tribute to Richard Walton, Ronan Clayton and all those who were involved in setting it up. It is now ably chaired by Malcolm Pope, who is taking it from strength to strength. The excellent curator Anna Maluk put on a Pride exhibition in Congleton Museum, hosting photos from those early events and featuring art from the local LGBTQIA+ community. Since then, more Pride events have grown in Sandbach, Alsager and, for the first time this summer, Holmes Chapel. At one of these events, it was suggested to me that these are really just a family fun day—a village fête, if you will. It is true that the events are fun, fabulous and family-friendly, but beyond the live music and bright clothing there remains a serious message. The hard-working volunteers who make these Pride events happen do so in the face of repeated homophobic hate crimes.

Similarly, there is still a backdrop of fear attendant in many women's daily lives. Women in my constituency have written or spoken to me about their experiences of sexual violence. I say to the young women who have talked to me—you know who you are—that I will fight for you, and all young people, in this place every day. That will include ensuring that, when embracing new technology and innovation, as we have done this week at the international investment summit, we find ways of protecting people from new threats—whether that be people looking at tractors on their smartphones in this workplace, or artificial intelligence baking in discriminatory decision making. Unfortunately, new technologies also bring the potential for harassment, discrimination and abuse, and we must not be caught off guard—we must get on the front foot on that.

My constituency has a long history of developing new technologies. The constituency boundary bisects the site of Jodrell Bank, the amazing radio telescope. Sandbach was the proud home of ERF and Foden trucks. The first Foden traction engine was built in Sandbach in 1881, and that was followed by the production of heavy goods vehicles for 150 years. The history and heritage of Foden still runs through the blood of the town, with the annual transport festival and its incredible parade of vintage trucks, wagons, classic cars and even the odd plane on the common. My constituency is also home to one of the world's leading brass bands, Foden's Band, which was born out of the works in 1902 and has twice won, and twice been runner-up, in the national brass band championships of Great Britain. I will work across this House to stand up for the incredible, entrepreneurial and community-minded people and businesses of the beautiful place that is the Congleton constituency.

Lastly, I want to say some thank yous. I thank the volunteers who helped me to get here and continue to support me, to whom I am very grateful. That includes those from the Labour party, and I make special mention of the Fabian Women's Network mentoring scheme. I thank my adored family, who are in the Public Gallery today. When I am in Westminster, I miss you so much. I hope I do all of you proud.

1.51 pm

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I pay tribute to those who have made their maiden speeches today. I think we all felt the passion and emotion in the

beautiful speech by the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell). She has given me an idea: when I am out in Keston this weekend, I might recommend to the residents that we get ourselves a village bear—although I can hear my daughter recommending that we get ourselves a village Harry Styles; that would probably be preferred. The hon. Member for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill) spoke passionately about representing the place that she called home. The idea of “Pie Hard” is what I am looking forward to—a Bruce Willis remake in the rolling hills of Yorkshire would be most enjoyable. I congratulate both Members on their maiden speeches.

I will continue being nice to the Opposition—

Kevin Hollinrake: The Government!

Peter Fortune: Yes, the Government—I have picked up that habit from my hon. Friend and I do apologise.

I am impressed by what has been achieved at the international investment summit. Within weeks of allegedly receiving the worst economic inheritance of any incoming Government since the second world war, Labour has supposedly secured billions of pounds of investment. That is frankly unbelievable, and not because I doubt our country’s ability to attract investment. Britain is a tremendous place to invest, as a wealthy, free, fair and talented nation where people can do business and thrive. That is why Britain’s foreign direct investment stock grew to more than £2 trillion throughout successive Conservative Governments—more than France, Germany and Italy combined. My scepticism is about the idea that the Government, who appointed a Minister for Investment only four days before the summit, secured every penny of the investment. As anyone in business will tell us, the devil is in the details, and a quick inspection will confirm that most of the investment was in progress thanks to the last Conservative Government.

Let us look at clean energy, for example. Britain secured much of the investment that the Government claim credit for thanks to a Conservative policy: contracts for difference. Without that market mechanism, under which investors bid for a guaranteed price, we would not have secured as much investment as cheaply for bill payers. It is why we have the world’s four largest offshore wind farms off our coast, why renewables generate 44% of our electricity today compared with 7% in 2010, and why the UK was able to close its last coal-fired power plant this year. That is a Conservative record, as much as Labour might envy it.

The Government have done the easy bit in tallying the figures and taking credit for someone else’s work. Admittedly, that is a harder task when No. 10 is in such disarray and the Minister had only two days to prepare for the summit. In fairness, only time will tell if the summit was a success and the relationships built there lead to more investment beyond what was already on its way. But that is the hard bit, because to secure more investment and compete globally, Britain needs to be light on regulation and low in taxes. Although the Prime Minister talked about removing “needless regulation” and being “open for business,” his Government’s actions say otherwise. Despite Labour’s explicit manifesto pledge not to increase national insurance, the Chancellor is drawing up plans to hike the tax for employers. Make no mistake: that would be a tax on jobs, and would make it more expensive for firms to hire, which would

impact on businesses big and small, including in my constituency—from Bombardier in Biggin Hill to pubs and cafés in Hayes and the Churchill theatre in Bromley.

The tax hike may fall on employers, but working people will pay the price as job opportunities shrink and pay rises are limited. The hands of businesses will be tied further by what the Government themselves brand the biggest increase in employment regulation in a generation. While the Government plan to tax jobs and pass French-style union laws, a Cabinet Minister took a more explicit anti-business approach. The Transport Secretary admitted that she has been boycotting a ferry company for two and a half years, and encouraged others to do the same. While the Prime Minister glad-handed investors—promising less red tape and openness to business, and was careful to mention tax only once—his Government are delivering exactly the opposite.

Britain faces a more significant problem: keeping up as technology advances. Leading on artificial intelligence, quantum, engineering biology or semiconductors is vital to our future prosperity and security, but we face considerable challenges in doing so. For example, Britain is home to the largest number of foundational models and generative AI start-ups in Europe, but we lack the compute power that we need to build and run AI models. The previous Conservative Government recognised that problem and planned to build a new supercomputer in Edinburgh 50 times more powerful than our current top-end system, but Labour has now cancelled that £800 million investment. That is yet another example of Labour’s actions not matching its rhetoric.

The Government cannot be in favour of growth while cancelling investment. They cannot cut regulations while planning huge increases in red tape for employment. They cannot support jobs while preparing to tax their creation. And they cannot claim to have the worst economic inheritance while copying and championing the work of their Conservative predecessors. If the Government do not get their story straight, investors will almost certainly stay away.

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

1.57 pm

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): It is with deep humility that I rise for the first time in this House as the Member of Parliament for the new Buckingham and Bletchley constituency, and I am pleased to contribute to this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill) and for Congleton (Mrs Russell) on their excellent speeches. Their constituents are fortunate to have such formidable representatives.

I should of course begin my remarks by paying tribute to my two direct predecessors. In Iain Stewart, this Chamber had a calm, measured advocate for the former Milton Keynes South constituency who, among other things, consistently championed better transport connections for the city and the United Kingdom more broadly. I also thank the now hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), whose kindness and generosity I have valued as I have navigated these early months in Westminster. They followed in the footsteps of John Bercow, who served as the Member for Buckingham for 22 years, and Dr Phyllis Starkey, who served as the

[Callum Anderson]

last Labour Member of Parliament for Bletchley, as part of Milton Keynes South, for 13 years. They all exemplify what it means to be a dedicated public servant, and I will do my utmost to meet their standard.

Although Buckingham and Bletchley is a new constituency for this Parliament, it is in fact a reunion of old friends. For nearly a century, those communities were connected as one, but in 1983, Milton Keynes, along with Bletchley, had the temerity to split away and flourish into the formidable modern city that it is today.

Although the towns of Buckingham, Bletchley and Winslow are different in character, all have deep-rooted, rich histories. And between those towns lie many villages, breathing life into the heart of our constituency. Be it Westbury, Quainton, Stewkley or Nash—I could go on—all contribute to the fabric of our collective identity, and I must never forget Tattenhoe in Milton Keynes. Although each community is unique, they share common values: a deep sense of civic pride, patriotism and a belief that opportunity should be available to everyone if they work hard. I pledge to serve each of them with the same level of diligence, be they urban or rural and regardless of their size or affluence.

One of the great privileges of representing Bletchley is that I carry the legacy of Bletchley Park and the remarkable codebreakers who worked there in the 1940s. The ingenuity and tireless efforts of those brave women and men—including Alan Turing, a very British hero—who together uncovered key strategic military plans of the Nazis, not only shortened the second world war and saved countless lives, but laid the foundation of today's technological age. That is why Bletchley Park remains an iconic institution of national and global significance, and why it was such a fitting host for the AI summit last year.

That legacy of technology and creative thinking remains at Bletchley's core today. As we speak, the South Central Institute of Technology is inspiring the next generation, providing young people with the skills to thrive in the digital age. The expertise does not end there: the University of Buckingham is innovating in higher education, enabling students to pursue accelerated degrees and equipping them with the agility and knowledge to navigate an ever-changing world.

Just as Bletchley and Buckingham lead in education, Silverstone—of which the southern half of the track is located in my constituency—leads on the world stage for motorsport. It convenes the best drivers, including our very own Sir Lewis Hamilton and Lando Norris, alongside cutting-edge engineers, technologists and designers. Silverstone is where the pinnacle of innovation meets the thrill of competition, and inward international investment has been pivotal to achieving that status. From Formula 1 teams to global technology giants, international investors are choosing Britain because they see a country where creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship can flourish.

But the value of international investment is not just financial; it is also a vote of confidence in us—in our workforce, our infrastructure and our unique creative spirit. It strengthens our relationships with key global players, ensuring that we continue to be the country that others seek out for collaboration, whether in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence or established ones

such as financial services and advanced manufacturing. That is why this Government's achievement in securing the commitment of £63 billion of private investment, 10% of which will help turbocharge Britain's AI capacity, is so important. I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends across Government on their hard work to secure that historic investment.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Buckingham and Bletchley constituency offers so much more. Farmers and rural businesses across north Buckinghamshire work tirelessly to feed our nation, using the latest methods to produce high-quality food while safeguarding our local environment, as I saw at first hand when I met the Edcott and Winslow Young Farmers earlier this summer. I am committed to being their advocate in the House, ensuring that they receive the support and recognition that they deserve.

If the House will indulge me for a few more moments, I want to close my maiden speech by thanking the people who believed in me and supported me on my journey to this place. First and foremost, I owe an unpayable debt to my mother, who brought me up alone in a council flat and sacrificed everything to help her son reach heights that neither of us could have dreamed of 33 years ago—be that the City of London or the home of our democracy—and whose simple values of hard work and quiet perseverance taught me that everyone has value and deserves respect. Her example has been a guiding light to me, and for that I will be forever grateful. There are so many others to whom I also owe so much, be they family members, my partner of 10 years, or my friends of 15, 20 and 30 years—all of which I mention to warn my constituents that I generally invest only in the most long-term of relationships.

It is on that note that I wish to address the young people in the towns, villages and city that comprise the Buckingham and Bletchley constituency: regardless of who your parents are, where you come from or what you look like, never stop believing that if you work hard, anything in Britain is possible. Every moment I am granted in this place will be spent working towards ensuring that you have the power to write your own life story and live the life that you have imagined for yourself on these islands of ours. That is the Britain I believe in, and the one I will be fighting for.

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

2.4 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on his powerful maiden speech. I am not sure that when he and I attended a Birmingham University Labour Students meeting back in 2009, either of us anticipated that we would be making our maiden speeches in the same debate.

I want to start by saying what an honour it is to stand here as the Member of Parliament for Banbury. As a Banbury lad who has never sought to represent anywhere else, I want to repeat what I told residents on the doorstep during the campaign: this is the job I have always wanted. To everyone who helped make that happen, I can only say thank you. I also want those

residents to know that now I have this job, I promise that I will work hard every day to deliver for them, whether they voted for me or not.

What makes this an even prouder moment for me is that I stand here as the first Labour Member of Parliament for the Banbury constituency. Until 5 July, the constituency had remained in the hands of one party for 102 years. But change is something that Banbury—the largest town in Oxfordshire—has got used to over recent years. For those who do not know, the Banbury constituency is at the furthest point north in the south-east region, encompassing not just the town of Banbury but the towns of Chipping Norton and Charlbury, as well as countless villages and rolling countryside.

Banbury is a beautiful part of the world to live in and represent. It is most famous for our nursery rhyme, known across the English-speaking world:

“Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
To see a fine lady upon a white horse;
With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes.”

Banbury’s history is more than that, though; indeed, it is more than just the town itself. The constituency reflects our country’s history, including in its foundations and its landscape. We have the neolithic and bronze age Rollright stones; the settlement on the edge of Chipping Norton left to us by the Romans; the Norman castle mound at Deddington; and Broughton castle which, as well being a stunning late-medieval stately home, is likely to be recognisable to many Members as the setting for TV’s “Wolf Hall”, and the films “Shakespeare in Love” and “Three Men and a Little Lady”. I was once told that one of the only requests to film there that the owners declined was when the studio wanted to paint it pink, which was probably wise.

In the village of Wroxton, where I went to school, we have the former home of Lord North. He is also buried in Wroxton, giving us something that not all constituencies have: the resting place of a former Prime Minister. Bliss Mill, Tooley’s boatyard and the Oxford canal are all remnants of the area’s growth during the industrial revolution.

But the most colourful time in our history is undoubtedly the civil war, when Banbury itself was on the side of the roundheads, despite its castle—right in the middle of the town—being on the side of the cavaliers. The people of Banbury were so unmistakably puritan that a poem was written about it:

“To Banbury came I, O profane one!
Where I saw a Puritane-one,
Hanging of his cat on Monday,
For killing of a mouse on Sunday.”

More happily, “the Puritans” is the nickname for the only supporter-owned football club in Oxfordshire, Banbury United.

I mention all this not just because I am really proud of where I call home and its role in our past, but because I want the House to understand what the Banbury constituency is all about. Although it did not change hands politically between 1922 and 2024, change did come to Banbury in a big way. Old industries such as making cloth in Chipping Norton or aluminium in Banbury went, while new ones such as logistics with companies such as DHL and TWE Haulage, food processing with Fine Lady Bakeries and Go Fresh, and

high-end mechanical engineering with the Haas Formula 1 team and Prodrive came in instead. Other industries, such as brewing, moved within the constituency. We can no longer get a pint in a Hunt Edmunds pub, but Hooky beer from Hook Norton is on sale across the United Kingdom.

The building of the M40 in many ways permanently changed Banbury from a small, semi-industrial market town into something completely different. Thousands of new homes have gone up as our area has become increasingly attractive for commuters to Oxford and London, but we still have a council waiting list that has quadrupled in a decade and a private sector that cannot meet the need. Meanwhile, vital infrastructure such as schools, roads and health services have failed to meet demand, posing fair questions from the community for those, like me, who support the Government’s ambitious house building agenda.

While they have changed, Banbury, Chipping Norton, Charlbury and the villages of north and west Oxfordshire have not lost their sense of community. The community united across political divides, and none, in defence of our local Horton General hospital when it was faced with downgrading, successfully fighting it off in 2008 and less successfully in 2016.

As the use of food banks grew in the years after 2010, people across the area came together to help support those in need. For example, the Chippy Larder in Chipping Norton has become a much-loved community resource. Food security in Banbury cannot be considered without mentioning our rural farming communities and perhaps the most famous farm in the country: Clarkson’s farm. For all the entertainment that the series has provided, for me the most important aspect of it is the light that it shines on the huge challenges faced by our farmers, and not just in the Banbury constituency but throughout the UK. I hope that the Government’s programme to support them will relieve many of the burdens that have made farming so challenging for so long.

Southill Solar farm on the edge of the Wychwood forest near Charlbury provides community-owned power to 1,200 homes. That is another reason I am so passionate about this Government’s exciting agenda on renewable energy.

Then there is the volunteer driver service in Banbury, taking the elderly or those less able to hospital and GP appointments at nominal rates. Throughout the pandemic, as in other places, people across Banbury worked hard to help those less fortunate during that most testing of times. Banbury’s community, led by some of its many thousands of Polish citizens, got together again to gather supplies to support the Ukrainian civilians fleeing that conflict, while welcoming others into their homes and communities.

On that note, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Victoria Prentis. Although there was much in the campaign that we disagreed on, this side of the House was united with the Conservative party in support for Ukraine. I pay tribute to Victoria’s decency and her clear compassion for humanity, exemplified as much by her taking a Ukrainian refugee into her home as by her nine years of service to the community.

As for myself, I stand here in support of this Government and their mandate for change—something that Banbury has a history of embracing. Before I finish, I want to thank my family for their support, in particular my wife

[Sean Woodcock]

who, despite having multiple sclerosis, remains the strongest, most steady and most stable woman I have ever met. I stand here as someone Banbury born and bred, ready to build a better Britain and a better Banbury, and I am determined to do it.

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

2.13 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill), for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) and for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) on their excellent contributions today—my thanks to them all.

It is the honour of my life to have been elected as the Member of Parliament for Bangor Aberconwy, and I offer my heartfelt thanks to everyone who supported me on my journey to this place: to my partner and my two kids, who I will not name—because my entry into the world of politics has already caused them enough embarrassment as it is—to my brother Mike, my sister Pam, my nieces and nephews, and all my friends back home; and to my dad, who is watching from the Gallery today, something that would never have been possible were it not for the incredible staff of Ysbyty Gwynedd, who have saved his life on more than one occasion.

I want to thank my incredible campaign team, my agent Jim Hoey and Ken Stevens. I also pay tribute to the late Councillor Bill Chapman, who is very sorely missed. Without his encouragement much earlier in my career, I would not be here today.

Bangor Aberconwy encompasses the former constituency of Aberconwy, as well as parts of what were Arfon and Clwyd West. I thank all three of my predecessors, and their staff, for all their work in the support of local residents. Robin Millar served as the Member for Aberconwy from 2019. I know that his work supporting hoteliers during the pandemic was very much appreciated. David Jones served as the Member of Parliament for Clwyd West and served in the role as Secretary of State for Wales during his time here. Hywel Williams served as the Member of Parliament for Arfon and the previous Caernarfon constituency for over 23 years—a Member who was and still is very well respected by the communities that he served.

I also pay special tribute to Betty Williams, who served as the Labour MP for Conwy from 1997 to 2010. She is a real Labour legend who is still remembered with huge fondness locally. If I can be half as good an MP as Betty was, I will be doing okay.

I have listened to many maiden speeches and noted that there is hot competition for whose constituency is the most beautiful in all the land—I am sorry, but game on! Bangor Aberconwy includes the seaside resort of Llandudno, the historic town of Conwy, Betws-y-Coed, Bangor pier, the Carneddau mountains, the Dyffryn Ogwen valley—too many beautiful places to name. I must, of course, mention my hometown of Penmaenmawr, which was the favoured holiday destination of Prime Minister William Gladstone, and my adopted home of Llanfairfechan.

I have noticed, too, that it is customary to elaborate on one's political roots—childhood memories of being dragged along to party meetings or folding leaflets at the kitchen table—but I am afraid that was not me. Politics was not really discussed in our house. For our family, direct action meant going out with a bucket and torch to rescue frogs. Largely thanks to my mother, my formative years were spent bird watching, pond dipping, bat counting and on long mountain walks. My mum knew the value of our natural world and how vital it is that we protect it. I will make it my mission in this place to do so in her memory.

When I was 11, my mum's life changed. She enrolled on an access course, did A-levels, then graduated with a degree in botany—no mean feat with three young kids. The fact that she was able to access higher education is testament not only to the last Labour Government, but to the grit and determination of working people in our community.

To understand why is to learn the founding story of Bangor University: 140 years ago tomorrow, on 18 October 1884, Bangor University opened its doors to its first ever cohort of students. Bangor University, the first in north Wales, was not founded by rich benefactors or philanthropists, but quarrymen and farmers who believed in the transformative power of education. They set aside money from their wages every week because they knew then, as we know now, that education is the way to get on in life. Our story is one of resilience and of people who believe in supporting each other.

All across Bangor Aberconwy, you will find incredible people who work hard day in, day out to support others in our community—people like Jaynie Black and the volunteers at Ty Hapus; Gini Rivers and the Friends of Mostyn Street; Brenda at Hope Restored; the wonderful women I met last week at Dyma Ni Befriending; Pobl i Bobl; Maes Ni; Hwb Ogwen; our food banks, our churches and our mosques; and our town, city and community councillors. There are too many to mention, but we owe them all a huge debt of thanks. Diolch o galon i chi gyd. [*Translation: Heartfelt thanks to you all.*]

I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are firmly on the side of working people. I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are committed to breaking down the barriers to opportunity for young people growing up in communities like ours. And I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who understand that tackling the climate and nature crisis is not only the biggest challenge we face, but an opportunity for economic growth.

The subject of today's debate is this week's record-breaking international investment summit. Before coming to this place, I spent my career working with start-ups and SMEs, so I know how important economic and political stability is for business. Under this new Government, Britain is truly the best place to do business, and there is huge potential in our corner of Wales ready to be unleashed. We have a proud industrial history; a wealth of talent in science and technology; and wind, waves and mountain ranges. Everywhere you look, you will find ingenuity and innovation, and communities full of pride, purpose and potential.

To finish, I am proud of our past and I am excited for our future. Whether you live in Penmaenmawr or Pwllglas, Bangor or Bontuchel, Conwy or Cerrigydrudion, I will fight tooth and nail to bring investment to our area,

while promoting our Welsh language and culture, to make sure that our young people know that these opportunities exist and are for them. There is much to do, and it will not happen overnight, but I hope to do every single one of my constituents proud. Diolch.

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

2.19 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to give my first speech in the House as the new Member of Parliament for Bournemouth West.

Over the last few weeks, it has been an absolute pleasure to hear the excellent maiden speeches of hon. Members from across the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill), for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson), for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) and for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes). I have to say that I have been absolutely blown away by the talent and dedication that all of these Members have shown. It gives me lots of hope for the future, and I am honoured, truly, to be serving alongside them all.

It is no coincidence that I have chosen to speak in the debate on the international investment summit today. Although I was born in the UK, I grew up overseas and was always extremely proud to be British. Wherever I went in the world, people knew what we stood for, and they were impressed with British leadership, excellence and expertise. Wherever I went, people knew about Britain's cultural contribution—from Harry Potter and Shakespeare to the Beatles and the premier league. This foundation, and my parents' and grandparents' encouragement to be curious about the world and to lend a helping hand wherever I could, took me into a career in overseas development, living, travelling and working in almost 100 countries. Not only do I have members of my family in the Gallery today, but I also have family friends from the United States, where we lived for eight years.

This foundation meant that Bournemouth was always at the heart of my life. My family live there now, and I have a very strong connection to the area from spending my summers there and getting that much-needed teenage freedom of being able to go to the beach with my friends, explore the town and explore the gardens. Sadly, it is not something that parents feel they can do any more. Over the years, not only has the reputation of this country that I love so much suffered, but the pride that the people in Bournemouth feel in their town has faded, and this is a real travesty. Do not get me wrong: I am still very resolutely proud to be British—for the record, I drive a Mini and I have two English bulldogs—but this is what has catalysed me into this place to stand up for the people of Bournemouth West, with a real desire to rebuild the bonds of community and to reignite the pride that we all have in our towns and our country.

I want to congratulate the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Business Secretary and all their teams on the investment summit. This was Britain at its best: outward-looking, active and engaged on the world stage, and led by our values and by our mission. And I know that all the billions of investment that have come in will benefit all areas of the country—

Emma Reynolds: Perhaps my hon. Friend would like me to intervene?

Jessica Toale: Yes, of course.

Emma Reynolds: I wonder whether she would be tempted to tell us about her favourite pub in Bournemouth—or whether there are any bears around.

Jessica Toale: There are no bears, I am afraid, but I will get to that.

Bournemouth will benefit massively from the innovation and investments that the investment summit has brought in. I know that my constituents will be keen to hear how our local businesses and our high street, and even their bills, will benefit from the summit.

I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Conor Burns. He served the constituency for 14 years, making it his home following his election in 2010. As well as serving as a Minister, Sir Conor was passionately dedicated to our local schools, bringing in investment for their improvement and improving opportunities for local young people—a tradition I am keen to continue. Many hon. Members will also know that Sir Conor was proudly devoted to the late Mrs Thatcher. In his own maiden speech, he stood in the same place that Mrs Thatcher stood to give hers, so perhaps the greatest tribute I can pay to him would be to continue that tradition in the same place here. I wish him all the best of luck in his onward endeavours. While he and I may have differed drastically in many of our views, we are here to provide a voice for the people of Bournemouth West in Parliament, and that is a role I will continue. I want to put on record my thanks to the great people of Bournemouth West for giving me that opportunity to do so under a Labour Government.

Bournemouth is not natural Labour territory, and I am really honoured to have won the trust of the people of Bournemouth in becoming not just its first Labour MP, but its first female MP. That is a monumental sign of the real changes we have seen in the constituency that are affecting it now and shaping its future. Yes, we are a beautiful seaside town, with white sand beaches and picturesque parks—and our hotels, hospitality and cultural venues, and English language schools have attracted people for generations to visit, but also to seek a better quality of life—but there is so much more.

Bournemouth is a relatively new town, but parts of my constituency such as Kinson were mentioned in the Domesday book. Scratch the surface just a little bit, and you will find a growing and vibrant community of innovators and creatives. We have world-leading graphic effects and post-production companies. We have a vibrant community of small businesses and vibrant high streets in Winton and Westbourne, with businesses that are integrating sustainability and also community into their business models. We have a burgeoning tech sector, with leadership in fintech, gaming and active travel. We have two world-leading universities and an excellent further education college, feeding that ecosystem and making sure our young people are equipped with the digital and creative skills they need to succeed in the 21st century—and I could go on.

Of course, there are challenges. Like all seaside towns, we have seen our town centre decline. More than a decade of cuts to public services has meant that people now struggle to get an NHS dentist. Crime and antisocial

[Jessica Toale]

behaviour are at the forefront of people's minds as, for me, are parents who will not let their daughters go into the town centre at night. Knife crime has destroyed lives, the housing market too often locks out young people and young families, and do not even get me started on sewage.

But I feel hopeful about the future, and I feel hopeful because of the collective spirit that I see every day in my constituency, with people such as Fran and Jesse at the Henry Brown centre and Kerry and her team at the Bourne community hub working against the odds to build their communities and transform lives in neighbourhoods such as West Howe and Alderney; all the community groups and resident groups fighting hard to improve their local areas and campaigning to protect our ancient heathland and our precious coastline; and, of course, all of the businesses giving it a go, getting into our high streets and the town centre, breathing life back into empty shops and revitalising our heritage buildings.

This is all really exciting stuff and I know that, with a new mission-led Government, our town can and will be the safe and thriving hub it once was. I know that kids in West Howe can and will have the same opportunities that our young people in Talbot Woods do to get a world-class education in their schools, colleges and universities. I want graduates who fall in love with Bournemouth to find great jobs and affordable housing so that they stay and build their lives there. I want all of our businesses to thrive in the vibrant ecosystems that we are now developing, and families in Wallisdown to get the support they need in their schools and not to worry about getting a dentist or a doctor. All of our residents, regardless of age or income, should feel proud of their town and their local neighbourhoods.

Three out of four people in my constituency at this general election voted for change. They did not all vote for me, but delivering that change is a responsibility I now embrace. I want to use it to build a better politics and a fairer future where everyone feels like they have a stake. So I am very excited and looking forward to working with the brilliant people of Bournemouth West and our mission-led Government to build the shared future and reignite this sense of hope not only in our special seaside town, but across the whole country.

2.28 pm

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) on her wonderful maiden speech. I know that her international background and deep expertise in international development will add much richness to our new parliamentary Labour party, and I also believe that an international background is essential to enriching the perspectives on our side of the House.

In my previous life, before coming into this place, I spent eight years interviewing the leaders of international businesses, many of whom had long-standing commitments to investment in the UK, but who repeatedly told me and my former colleagues at the *Financial Times* that political instability was putting them off making future investments. That is why I very much welcome the

remarks of our Minister on the international investment summit and the importance of the private sector's partnership with our Government.

The 10-year project that we have for national renewal, along with our 10-year industrial strategy, shows our commitment to long-term economic ambition and planning. I congratulate the organisers of the summit, which brought together more than 300 industry leaders and secured more than £60 billion of investment. That is 60% more than was raised last year, and it will create nearly 38,000 jobs, one of which is bringing Elton John out of retirement. Unfortunately, private investment in the UK since the global financial crisis has been much less "Rocket Man", and more "Tiny Dancer".

Over the last decade and a half, Britain has experienced a much larger slowdown in the growth of capital intensity than comparative countries such as the US, France and Germany, and it is that, alongside our skills growth, which accounts for our productivity puzzle. I very much welcome the appointment of John Van Reenen, the wonderful LSE economist, to our Council of Economic Advisors. He has done important work on productivity in the UK, and he suggests that our post-financial crisis fall in productivity growth is primarily due to a large fall in capital accumulation. In other words, British workers are being held back by low levels of public and private investment, and that is what our Government need to unlock to succeed in our growth mission.

We will provide stability, but stability alone is not enough. In the 21st century we must do more to provide industry and business leaders with the leadership that they require to navigate our increasingly complex geopolitical world, in which there is fragmentation of supply chains across the world, as well as the green transition. That means an industrial strategy. I welcome the publication of our Government's industrial strategy earlier this month, and particularly the focus on life sciences as one of the key eight sectors for investment.

My constituency of Earley and Woodley in the Thames valley is a prime location for foreign direct investment, particularly in life sciences, and I am proud that the Thames valley is the fastest growing region in the UK outside London. I congratulate the Thames valley chamber of commerce, with which I have already worked in my first 100 days, on securing over the last decade more than 1,000 instances of foreign direct investment. We can measure the excitement of business and the private sector for our Labour Government by the amount of engagement I have already had from businesses in my constituency and through Thames valley chamber of commerce.

The biopharmaceutical group Lonza, which is Swiss in origin, received a grant of £30 million over the summer to expand and relocate to my constituency in the Thames valley park, which is one of three business parks in the area alongside Thames Valley science park and Green park. I recently met Bayer, originally a German company, which employs hundreds of people at its headquarters in my constituency, and contributes to crucial health and life science research in the UK.

Advancements in life sciences have fundamentally improved not just the economy and innovation of the UK, but the length and quality of life here and around the world. That is why I welcome the Health Secretary's

mission to ensure that the NHS receives the cutting-edge treatments being pioneered by companies in my constituency and beyond. Life science investment, if done correctly, can be a significant driver of growth and productivity—our central mission. I look forward very much to meeting the Minister for Industry next week to discuss how we can give full range to life sciences companies in our constituencies, and to the clinical research taking place in the Royal Berkshire hospital, which is at the forefront of much research in medical trials. That hospital will benefit greatly from private and public investment.

Businesses do not exist in isolation, and what makes some countries prosper is the strength of their institutions. Responsible and highly productive businesses wish to retain their skilled workforces, who require countries with well-functioning public service provision, infrastructure and accessible housing. Those companies want political stability and a regulatory framework that works for business, workers, and the consumer. That is why Labour's pitch to business does not end with the international investment summit, but continues with legislation that the Government are passing, such as the Employment Rights Bill. Providing the foundations for businesses to thrive means fixing the foundations of our economy and society, and that is what I am proud to say our Labour Government will do.

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

2.33 pm

Kanishka Narayan (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr — thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the privilege of making my maiden speech in this House. I follow a long list of maiden speeches and so I perhaps offer no novelty, but I will take the opportunity of offering familiarity.

I come to this debate on the international investment summit having spent the last decade on the frontline of investment, backing the inventors of artificial intelligence data and wider software businesses across this country and the United States. I therefore know the cause with depth and personal experience, and in particular I know that no working-age person in this country has seen a start-up go to the FTSE top 10. In the United States, eight out of 10 have experienced that. In the last decade of innovation, Britons in this country and in the Vale of Glamorgan have been denied the opportunity of shaping their destiny. Decline no more, because I know from speaking to investors, including those at the summit, that they believe what I know with this Labour Government: change is on the way and has begun.

My role has been to put the Vale of Glamorgan front and centre in that wave of change, but I start by also recognising the dual impact that change in this House always has. For every maiden contribution, there is a contribution that has been, and in my case I wish to recognise that of my predecessor, the right hon. Alun Cairns, Conservative MP for the Vale of Glamorgan for 14 years. In those 14 years Alun served our constituency with sincerity. In fact, he was so sincere that I remember knocking on doors in Cadoxton in Barry with the best constituency Labour party in the country, only to have my hopes dashed by a lovely elderly lady who said, "I am going to be voting for Alun, the best Labour MP

this town has ever had." We all carry an inflated sense of our personal vote in this House, beyond our political allegiances, but in that moment I have to say that I felt and saw one. I congratulate Alun on his service and wish him the best with the inevitable duality of change that we share, but I also commit to him some continuity in the service that he and his predecessor, the Labour MP John Smith, offered the constituents of the Vale of Glamorgan—and continuity also because the cause of Barry's development, which I know Alun initiated, will echo for years to come as my top priority too.

I offer continuity because in fact the Vale of Glamorgan stands out for its continuity. There is continuity as the world centre of education. It was in Llantwit Major and St Illtud's church that the UK's first college was sited, not only home to St Illtud, but also host to St David in the early sixth century. In was in Cowbridge in 1795 that one of the first Gorsedd of the Bards was hosted by Iolo Morganwg, since then a font of appreciation for the Welsh language, Welsh literature and Welsh poetry.

There is continuity not just in education but in energy, with Barry being the world's powerhouse and the largest coal exporting port in this country, and indeed the largest in the world in 1913, and with Aberthaw not just one of the most advanced power plants of its time, but now the host of my and my constituents' future dreams of a centre of excellence in green energy.

Alongside energy and education, there is continuity in the world's pinnacle of natural beauty—a title I will only share, perhaps, with my hon. Friend the Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes), with our shared Welsh background. My hon. Friends from Dorset and Devon might have the Jurassic coast, but I confess that in the heritage coast of the Vale of Glamorgan we have every bit of the beauty and the history, and perhaps, for being a better kept secret, a brighter future too.

Finally, there is continuity not just across education, energy and the beauty that we have, but in the heart and humour of the people of the Vale of Glamorgan. Barry is the town that hosts "Gavin and Stacey", and in particular the heart and humour of Uncle Bryn, my favourite character, who when driving down the M4 blasting out James Blunt songs has been a personal inspiration to me each time I leave this esteemed Chamber for the even more esteemed comfort of Barrybados.

I have seen the heart of the community spirit across the Vale of Glamorgan in Big Bocs Bwyd, which is an initiative across schools that started in Barry and now goes beyond it, ensuring that no child goes hungry when they are learning. There is the real struggle and the fight that I see each week in the Vale Domestic Abuse Services in my constituency, fighting the onslaught of violence against women that we have seen not just in the vale but across this country, and there is the powerful heart of the voice choirs of Barry, Llantwit Major and Cowbridge, which were able to combine the pure heart of "Calon Lân" with the deep optimism of "The Greatest Showman" in one night.

I come here with news of the heart and humour of the Vale of Glamorgan, but also to report its honest challenges. We have the honest challenge of Barry, where, when delivering medicines as a volunteer, I learned that the pharmacist was issuing multiples of painkillers per patient, compared with the same pharmacist in Cardiff. We have the honest challenge of our beautiful farmlands, where third and fourth-generation farming

[*Kanishka Narayan*]

families are fighting a great but difficult fight against the combined challenges of weather, disease and uncertainty. We have the honest challenge of the veterans of the Vale of Glamorgan, who are not seeking the world, but simply seeking a bit of public service for the exceptional national service they gave us.

Money does not buy most things in life. It does not solve most of our problems, but its absence and the deprivation entrenched over the last decade are at the root of many of them. In particular, that has chipped away at the dignity of my community. That is why I come here with the twin ambitions of greater prosperity and a deeper bond of dignity in the Vale of Glamorgan and across the UK. I do so not as a political slogan or out of political theory, but out of a history of personal gratitude, because it was 22 years ago that the Vale of Glamorgan and south Wales, including Cardiff, offered a newly arrived set of parents the opportunity of a minimum wage and a night shift to subsidise the sleep of their young boys. In the absence of any holidays, it was Barry island that first gave those two young boys the opportunity of relief, and perhaps even some delight, over the weekend.

It was south Wales, where I grew up with my brother in a situation of particular economic stress, where I felt, through the deepest privileges of education, that I could go on to advise the Prime Minister and the civil service, to advise FTSE boards across the City, to invest in tomorrow's inventors and ultimately to stand before the House as Wales's first Member of Parliament from an ethnic minority background. When I stand for my twin ambitions of prosperity and dignity for the vale, I will do so out of that personal history of gratitude. For as long as I serve as the vale's voice here in Westminster, I will fight each day for the people in my community.

2.41 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I congratulate all my hon. Friends on their deeply eloquent and moving maiden speeches this afternoon. It is a real pleasure to be in the Chamber to hear them.

I take this opportunity to commend those on the Government Front Bench for a successful, record-breaking investment summit earlier this week. The investment of £63 billion represents a real vote of confidence in this Government's mission to grow our economy. I welcome in particular the announcement this week of a five-year programme of investment at Stansted airport, which is a major employer in our constituency of Hertford and Stortford. That programme totals £1.1 billion, including a £600 million investment in an extension to the airport's existing terminal. That investment in the east of England's largest single-site employer will not only provide an even better passenger experience, but help to connect our region's innovative sectors and creative industries with their international partners.

In Bishop's Stortford, Stansted airport is right on our doorstep, providing employment for around 1,500 residents in our town and surrounding areas. That contributes roughly £140 million in gross value added to our constituency. The terminal extension alone represents up to 5,000 additional on-site jobs, offering further employment opportunities for our residents and strong

rail and bus links to our constituency, meaning that even more commuters will be able to take public transport to work. On that point, I welcome the recent Department for Transport announcement that contactless payments will be rolled out on the Stansted airport line in 2025. That will allow residents at Bishop's Stortford and Sawbridgeworth stations to make use of tap in, tap out payments for the first time. That is an important step in improving rail travel for the many who rely on it in our constituency.

The House may already know that Stansted airport is the only major airport in this country with a purpose-built, on-site technical skills college, but I will tell the House more. Stansted airport college offers vocational training opportunities to young people in our community, and it is delivering record numbers of apprentice students into employment in aviation, helping to fill urgent skills gaps in the sector with our local talent.

Under this Government, I want Hertford and Stortford to be an even better place to live, work and learn. The investment promises to open new doors for our residents to new opportunities to gain skills for life and find meaningful work. It is also a clear signal that under this Government, Britain is once again open for business, and I hugely welcome it.

2.44 pm

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I join in the congratulations of colleagues who have made excellent maiden speeches, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale). I was only sad not to hear the names of her bulldogs and perhaps even her Mini. My hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) and for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) gave such important mentions of their mums in their lives.

I congratulate the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds) on this record-breaking £63 billion of investment. It is a sign of the confidence in the British economy and this Labour Government. It is more than double the amount committed at the last Government summit and is set to create nearly 38,000 jobs across the UK, including in Scotland, with £2.5 billion committed for Green Volt, Europe's largest floating wind project, to develop its north-east Scotland site. Iberdrola announced it was doubling its investment in the UK through Scottish Power from £12 billion to £24 billion over the next four years.

As a former trade commissioner, I thank my former colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade and in markets such as India for the incredible work they will have been doing to achieve that investment. I will remember the beavering away and constant phone calls to major investors at such moments. Having been at the last summit, I am sure my invite to this one was lost in the post.

I know from my time in India that international investors were already beginning to price in the benefits of a change in government. They see a Labour Government as a source of stability and predictability and the UK becoming a place for long-term, safe investment. That is the stability dividend that my hon. Friend the Minister has already spoken about. I just say that the £63 billion, while a record sum, is not enough for Scotland. We have seen significant investment in the first 100 days, but we

would like to see even more come north of the border, and in particular to communities such as mine in Ayrshire. My hon. Friends the Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Elaine Stewart), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) are keen that increasing investment in Ayrshire is at the forefront of Ministers' minds.

For the first time in 10 years, we have four Ayrshire Labour MPs committed to growth and investment and a Labour Government who can deliver it. My hon. Friends and I are working with the three local authority chief executives and the excellent principal of Ayrshire college to develop that "Invest in Ayrshire" proposition, and we are looking at the opportunities for our region and our skills gaps, because 14 years of the Tories and 17 of the SNP have let communities in Ayrshire down. Our towns were promised funding by the last Conservative Government and we, like other communities promised that towns funding, are lobbying the Minister for Democracy and Local Growth, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris). We want the towns of Irvine and Kilmarnock prioritised, but we know that other hon. Friends will be making similar cases. We need to see a mix of public and private investment in our towns to deliver the change that our communities need.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is also working closely with us so that we can ensure that the Ayrshire growth deal meets the real current and future needs of the Ayrshire economy. In the thousands of conversations I had during the election campaign, it was clear to me that jobs, investment and growth will be the most significant change this Labour Government can bring to communities across Ayrshire. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade visited Prestwick airport during the election campaign, for which I am grateful, and he will remember that Prestwick is Scotland's aerospace hub, with 55% of Scotland's aerospace sector jobs. That sector already attracts international investment, but we want to do much, much more.

Similarly, we are looking at GB Energy and this Government to drive further green investment in Ayrshire. We want to see parts of that green energy supply chain come to Ayrshire. We have a positive story to tell about transforming our coalfields into clean power fields, and we are proud to host our fair share of wind farms, which play a significant role in ensuring the Government meet their commitments to doubling onshore wind energy by 2030. We have also seen investment in companies such as XLCC, a subsea cable manufacturer, which has secured £87 million from the UK Infrastructure Bank to invest in the development of new subsea cable factories in the Scottish town of Hunterston, which was once home to nuclear power in Ayrshire. That industry is now on the way out, because of the failed policies of the SNP, which include a nuclear-free Scotland relying on English nuclear. I note that, once again, SNP Members are not in the Chamber in an important debate for Scotland's economy. When Torness in Scotland stops generating, and if no replacement capacity is built, the power generated in England when there is low wind output—as on Monday this week, for example—will be needed to maintain supply in Scotland, and it will be significantly based on nuclear energy.

I was pleased that the last Labour leadership of North Ayrshire council welcomed the opportunity to restart the conversation with the nuclear industry in Ayrshire, because the jobs and investment that the industry could bring would be significant. With Ardagh Glass, Irvine continues to be a major centre for glass manufacturing—another industry that benefits from stability and predictability in policymaking and that is looking to make a significant investment in the green transition.

To conclude, I hope my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State sees that there are significant opportunities for greater investment in Ayrshire and will ask her brilliant colleagues in the Office for Investment to prioritise working with my colleagues and me to make that investment happen.

2.50 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I start by noting that we have on the Government Front Bench two Ministers who split their time between Departments. One is at the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions, and the other is at the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Business and Trade. That just goes to show that we have a joined-up, mission-led Government who are trying to move away from working in silos and to have a shared ambition, and that is to be commended.

We are here today to talk about investment, which is obviously about money, but it is also—I would not want to lose this—about people. It is about skills, expertise, experience, opportunities for learning, better jobs, dignity at work, feeding families and enabling the maximum amount of prosperity. We should hold on to those things, because they are what our constituents want and what they send us to this place to deliver.

That said, investment is also about the money. The £63 billion truly is a record-breaking amount, and I commend our mission-led Government for securing it. It is the clearest sign that global businesses are backing the British economy and working people under this new Labour Government. That money could have gone elsewhere, but it is coming to our country, for all the reasons I just described. It is coming here because the country voted for change to achieve stability. In the last 14 years, we have had little to no growth, with billions of pounds of taxpayers' money wasted and a huge black hole in our finances. The country was left vulnerable to the worst cost of living crisis in a generation, and our Government was forced to spend £94 billion on household support because we were so exposed to fossil fuels.

That is why I am particularly pleased that so much of this investment is going towards clean energy. For example, some of the £2 billion from Octopus Energy will be used to build four new solar farms across Bristol, Wiltshire, Essex and the East Riding of Yorkshire, powering up to 80,000 homes. Those investments will improve our local economies and communities.

I feel sad and wrong saying this, but we have been talking about Elton John, and nobody else has made the inevitable point: sorry seems to be the hardest word, but we are not hearing it said, either in jest or in sincerity. As I look at the Opposition Benches, which are deserted, I wish that Conservatives could speak up on behalf of British business—[*Interruption.*] I do apologise to the hon.

[Tom Hayes]

Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies). Perhaps he will find the hymn sheet to sing from—the one about being in favour of British business and investment. Perhaps he will also say sorry, much as it is the hardest word—I have said that twice now.

As I said, neither this debate nor these investments are just about the money. Hopefully, nearly 38,000 people across the UK, including in my home of Bournemouth East, will begin new jobs as part of the green transition that our country so desperately needs and that our industrial sector has been crying out for. To that end, I very much welcome the publishing of the Government's Green Paper on their 10-year industrial strategy, which we have already heard about.

In the short time I have been a Member of Parliament, the Government have committed to strengthening Britain's industrial base—in both the service and manufacturing industries—to create good, well-paid jobs in not only the green sectors we have today but those of the future. With the right policies, the Government can supercharge investment in clean energy industries across the UK, from the industrial heartlands of the north to the thriving finance sector in Bournemouth. This is about more than just creating green jobs; it is about the revitalisation of entire regions and ensuring that every corner of our country benefits.

I have been fortunate this week to spend time with investors, businesses and working people at three events in London, and the relief is palpable. I have listened to investors talk about how they have been holding on to money because they have been craving regulatory certainty; planning reform; the building of homes for their workers; an NHS that can fix those workers, who they need at their workplaces but who are at home unwell, because of mental ill health, musculoskeletal problems or worse; and the certainty from Government that would remove the barriers to growth, so that the investments they make extract a dividend for not just their companies but our wider economy. When Members hear that the investment we are talking about was lined up before the general election, they should not believe it. It came forward after the general election, because businesses now have a Government who are committed to putting in place the infrastructure and changes needed for our economy to grow now and into the future.

We know the benefits of action, and we know the costs of inaction, because we are bearing those costs now. Working together, Government, investors, working people, our trade unions, and businesses will achieve energy independence and security. We will achieve falling and lower bills. We will achieve good jobs and pride in our communities. Together with our mission-led Government, we will achieve a growing and improving economy and way of life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I now call the shadow Minister, Gareth Davies.

2.56 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): I thank all those who have spoken in today's debate. It is right that I recognise the contributions that have been made from both sides of the House, but especially those made

by Members making their maiden speeches. We all remember the moments leading up to and during our maiden speech, and it still gives me chills to this day.

Let me say to the hon. Member for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill) that I hope her mother is enjoying seeing the bright lights of London for the first time. I know she will be very proud of her daughter. I wish the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) well with her campaigning on parental leave. We all regret the time we spend away from our families, but it is for a life of purpose and a worthwhile cause, as hard as it is.

I had the pleasure of meeting the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) before he was a Member of Parliament. I hope that, as the Member of Parliament representing Bletchley, he can crack the code to the success of this place. The hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) gave an excellent speech, and he will be a great local champion for Banbury. I appreciated the comments he made about my former colleague and his predecessor. The hon. Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) will no doubt be busy in this job, but I hope she will still find time for frog searching.

Finally, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan) gave an incredibly impressive and excellent speech. He went to one of our finest schools, studied philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford and later attended Stanford University in California, which, by the way, has some quite impressive alumni. I am sure he has a bright future in this place, although he should be prepared for many of his Labour colleagues to constantly suggest that he is desperate to return to California at the earliest opportunity.

All jest aside, let me say genuinely from the outset that it is right that we welcome this Government's building on the strong foundations for international investment in our country. As of July—a randomly picked month—the UK was Europe's leader for new foreign direct investment projects for a third successive year, with the highest total number of projects in the past five years.

The most recent official figures show that the UK ranked second only to the United States for greenfield FDI overall, while leading the world in investment into our renewables sector. That is one of the reasons why we have achieved the fastest decarbonisation of any developed country in the world, and we should be proud of that. That is down not just to those who are elected but to officials who work day in, day out to support Governments: those in the Office for Investment, the Treasury, the Department for Business and Trade, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and our many trade commissioners, who help drive our efforts to attract significant pools of investment capital from across the world.

This has been a good week for investment into our country—[*Interruption.*] It really has. It is important that we recognise the cross-party heritage of this week's summit, which I am sure the Minister will acknowledge when she stands up. Labour has carried forward good ideas that we Conservatives either implemented or started in government. The Government deserve credit and I am very happy to give it, because this was, in the end, a fine follow-up to the global investment summit pioneered this time last year.

Our cross-party collaboration does not end there. In many cases, this Labour Government have announced or re-announced investments that were negotiated or even agreed by their Conservative predecessors. I guess some things sound so good that they are worth repeating. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—who has made a timely entrance to this Chamber to rapturous applause—highlighted, more than half the investment that the Government announced was actually announced before the general election. That includes the £10 billion committed by Blackstone, which was announced in April, and the £8 billion committed by Amazon, which was negotiated by my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor. I could mention BW Group, which was announced in 2021, or CyrusOne, which was announced in 2022.

Whatever the origin, more private investment clearly benefits the British people, contributing to more jobs, better productivity and stronger growth. We can all agree on that point, and it should not be taken for granted. I commend the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), a relatively new Member, who highlighted the importance of not being complacent about that, and in particular ensuring that regulation remains low. As I said at the beginning, I commend Members for all the contributions to this debate, maiden or otherwise, that rightly recognised the importance of private investment in our economy.

However, we need to face the fact that this summit has been overshadowed by a rather large elephant in the room. As the Transport Secretary knows all too well, many investment decisions are provisional and dependent on an economic environment that welcomes and supports investment. Since Labour has taken office, thanks to all the doom and gloom, made-up black holes and submission to the unions, business and consumer confidence has fallen and the cost of borrowing for the British Government has risen.

We have had 100 days of self-contradiction and uncertainty. Even in just a few months, this Labour Government have promised public investment while cutting capital expenditure, fretted over a supposed black hole while frittering away billions on pet projects and union paymasters, disavowed red tape while smothering small businesses in new regulations, and paid lip service to fiscal responsibility while laying the ground to fiddle the financial rules. Meanwhile, almost every single revenue-raising policy in the Labour manifesto has proven pretty much worthless, just like its promise not to raise national insurance.

The rest of us were left wondering, and continue to wonder: if I make a successful investment, how much of the return will I be able to keep? If I take on a new employee, how much tax will I need to pay for the privilege? If I increase my workers' pay, what will the total cost be? If I save for the future, will the Government help themselves? If I pass on the business I built all my life to the next generation, will they be penalised?

If £1 billion is jeopardised by bad Labour commentary, £63 billion can be jeopardised by bad Labour policy. Investment and economic growth are not simply convened; they take concerted effort, not contorted fiscal signals. Some have questioned whether having the summit before the Budget was putting the cart before the horse, but my worry is that, come Budget day, the horse will already

have bolted. I wonder, in the event that the Budget backfires, will the Prime Minister be forced to disown or defenestrate yet another member of his top team, to avoid taking responsibility himself—sacrificing someone else on the altar of self-service?

As has been said before, Labour's chaos might be in my party's interest, but it is not in the national interest. I want to see the promise of these investments fulfilled. Labour must not put them at risk. Let us build on the success of our country's economy and push up businesses that want to succeed, not pull them down when they do succeed. I am afraid that as long as this chaos, scandal and uncertainty continues, I will not hold my breath.

3.4 pm

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): The hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) was doing so well. [*Laughter.*] He was doing so well in the first half of his comments and then he returned to the same old tired lines that got the Conservatives defeated in the general election.

I am so pleased to be closing this debate today, which in a parliamentary context draws to a close a hugely positive and successful week for the United Kingdom. I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. I am disappointed that only one Conservative MP managed to make it here to speak in the Chamber and that nobody from the SNP managed to come. I am surprised that they are not here to welcome the week we have had so far.

The Prime Minister made this Government's guiding mission clear from day one: we will go for growth at every opportunity, and we are doing that in spades. A week ago today, we launched our landmark Employment Rights Bill to create more secure employment and a happier and more productive workforce. On Monday, we launched our industrial strategy Green Paper, something business has been crying out for, which lays strong foundations for 10 years of growth and investment in our most important sectors. Also on Monday, the Prime Minister hosted some of the world's biggest investors to show them why, under this growth-driven Government, UK plc will be a blue-chip company that they should invest in. As was mentioned, Elton John was there to speak. I should tell the House that he took no fee—he took no fee. He wanted to come and celebrate with us the commitment of companies from across the world coming to the UK.

Before I talk a bit more about the investment summit, I want to pay tribute to the Members who spoke today, in particular those who made their maiden speeches. As someone who wells up quite often and quite easily, this was a difficult debate for me. There were many moments when we looked up at the Gallery and saw parents and other family members wiping tears from their eyes. It was lovely to see.

I loved the motto of my hon. Friend the Member for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill). Working hard and talking straight is a great motto for this new Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) gave us a wonderful tale of her constituency and its people, including a slightly odd story, I have a say, about Beartown. [*Laughter.*] But there we go; that's Congleton!

[Sarah Jones]

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) gave a great speech, telling us about the importance of Bletchley Park and its influence not just in world war two but on the technical age we are in today, and talking about the advanced manufacturing in his constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) was a Labour Student. I do not know how many members of the Cabinet were Labour Students—I was not—but it is quite a good stomping ground for future Cabinet members. He paid wonderful homage to the people and the place of Banbury.

Diolch to my hon. Friend the Member for Bangor Aberconwy (Claire Hughes) for an incredibly beautiful speech about her constituency, its proud industrial history, and the ingenuity and innovation that it still shows.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) spoke without notes and made a really impressive speech. The passion with which she wants to reignite pride in her town and in our country was very well understood.

My hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), who has incredible experience, not least working at the *Financial Times*, talked about the life sciences in her constituency and how important they are. I look forward to meeting her next week to talk about that more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan) also spoke without notes. He spoke lovely words about his predecessor, told a lovely story about the history and beauty of his constituency, and paid tribute to his constituents. Many of us have spent many happy days in Barry island—I certainly have.

At the investment summit, £63 billion of investment was announced, more than double what was raised at the Opposition's summit last year. Iberdrola doubled its wind energy investment in the UK from £12 billion to £24 billion; there was £10.5 billion from Orsted and Greenvolt, and more than £200 million from SeAH Wind. There was £8 billion for carbon capture, which will create 4,000 jobs and support 50,000; £2 billion from Octopus Energy and £1.3 billion from Macquarie for solar projects; £6 billion of new money for data centres, on top of the £10 billion recently committed by Blackstone and £8 billion from Amazon; £1 billion for DP World's London Gateway, and £200 million for a new freight ferry terminal at the Port of Immingham; more than £300 million for Holtec's advanced engineering plant in South Yorkshire; £500 million from BMW Group for battery energy storage; more than £2 billion for rail and air projects from Network Rail and Manchester Airports Group respectively; and £400 million for life sciences and healthcare innovation. Moreover, our fantastic Imperial College London will put £150 million into a new R&D campus.

On top of these transformational investments, we have proved our credentials as a pro-business Government. Thanks to the Chancellor's announcement that the UK Infrastructure Bank would be turned into the national wealth fund, we are catalysing tens of billions of pounds of private investment into the UK's clean energy and growth industries, including green hydrogen, carbon capture and gigafactories. We are establishing an industrial

strategy advisory council, led by Clare Barclay, to help deliver the pro-business environment on which our industrial strategy will depend. We are creating a British growth fund that will fuse pension investments and venture capital markets. We are expanding the Office for Investment to ensure that international investors receive the information and guidance they need to invest in Britain, and we are cutting red tape to remove redundant reporting requirements, while making it easier for companies to re-domicile themselves in the UK—and all this within 100 days of our taking office.

From more rights for a more productive workforce, to a pioneering industrial strategy for our sectors of the future, to scores of investments worth tens of billions of pounds, this Government are delivering change. The last Government's scattergun approach to growth left our country starved of investment, economically divided and struggling to maintain our competitive edge in the global economy. Growth was anaemic; wage growth flatlined on their watch. Productivity was down; the gap between France, Germany and the United States doubled since 2008. We saw the lowest investment share as a percentage of GDP in the G7, and we ranked 27th out of 30 in the OECD last year. That is on top of the state of the public finances that the Conservatives left us, with public services starved of investment, millions of days of work lost to strike action, and rocketing debt.

However, in just 100 days this Government have already laid down the blueprint for 10 years of growth through our biggest and most innovative sectors; secured £63 billion in new investments that underline our potential as a world leader in renewable energy, life sciences, technology and clean growth; and brought forward a raft of reforms to create a happier, more secure and more productive workforce.

Adam Jodge (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Minister is making a very interesting and important speech, and she has set out exactly what this Government are doing to benefit my constituents. Could she find some time to meet me so that we can discuss how together we can ensure that the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire more widely can benefit from the investment secured at the summit this week?

Sarah Jones: I am always happy to meet and to talk about what more we can do in our next 100 days, and indeed—we hope—our next five to 10 years in government.

Some Conservative Members have questioned whether some of these investments were teed up under the last Government. They know perfectly well that business confidence can rapidly change investment decisions. All the announcements included are of new, firm commitments being made by companies to invest in the UK either when final investment decisions have been taken or when announcements have been accelerated or unlocked because of actions taken and support provided by this Government.

I am sure that Conservative Members will have seen the letter, published in *The Times* at the start of the week, from five of the world's biggest banks, joined by private equity firms, insurers and tech giants, saying that it was

“time to invest in Britain”,

and that Britain's "greater stability" had increased its attractiveness to investment, which was of course a reference to Labour's decisions when we took office. They concluded:

"We are optimistic about the future of the economy, and believe it is time to invest in Britain."

The fact that scores of investors attended our summit on Monday, with tens of billions of pounds being firmly committed to new projects, shows that under this Labour Government, business and investors have a great deal of confidence in our growth mission.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister is talking about confidence, but if confidence is rising, can she explain why the Institute of Directors has stated that confidence has gone from plus 30 in June to minus 7 today?

Sarah Jones: The shadow Minister knows that we are working very closely with businesses, business organisations and others to ensure that the changes we bring in grow our economy. We have huge confidence from a raft of people. For every quote the hon. Gentleman can find, I can find 10 that say the opposite. He can pick on one if he wants to, but I suggest that £63 billion does not lie. Let us not forget that our summit on Monday was organised in a matter of weeks. The Conservative party had two years between their investment summits, yet we secured double the amount of investment compared with its summit last year.

To respond to a couple of other points, the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), rightly mentioned business rates. We are looking at that and will deliver on the commitments in our manifesto. She was right to raise skills, which are a huge challenge for us. We see huge opportunities for growth across the entire country but we must ensure that we have the skills landscape, which is why we are setting up Skills England. She also talked about the national wealth fund and its ability to crowd in funding for the green sector and green technologies; it absolutely will do that.

To summarise, across the House we are united in the belief that Britain needs to facilitate growth. Let us face it, we have been severely starved of it. Only through growth can we keep taxes lower for working people, invest in our public services and create secure, well-paid, high-skilled jobs. Of course, this is against a backdrop of the poor economic inheritance left by the Conservative party, who lurched repeatedly from Prime Minister to Prime Minister, gave us seven growth plans in 14 years, made millions of people pay the price of a Trussonomics Budget and saddled the people of Britain with a low-growth, low-productivity, low-investment economy. The steps that this Labour Government have taken in just 100 days show that we are overturning the Conservatives' legacy of inaction, stagnation and deterioration, and creating a country of stability, innovation and prosperity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International Investment Summit.

Telegraph Poles: Planning Permission

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

3.17 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I know that a number of colleagues have experienced similar problems in their constituencies to those I will be raising, and I will try to accommodate interventions.

I welcome the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), to his place. I am sure hon. Members from all parties welcomed his statement in July:

"We fully understand people's concerns about the excessive deployment of telegraph poles, and are urgently considering options to address this."

As time is short, I will focus on the current absence of a requirement to consult residents under the legislative and regulatory regime that Ministers have inherited. This is not about being against telegraph poles, nor is it about being against the roll-out of fast broadband. New infrastructure is vital in a society that is increasingly dependent on fast and reliable internet services. However, surely it is wrong that when poles are sited inappropriately, recourse for residents is advisory only, and, in many cases, completely lacking in practice.

Official statistics suggest that in my Birmingham Northfield constituency, almost 99% of residents have access to superfast broadband. I know that Ministers have some scepticism about the accuracy of those figures, but it is undeniable that broadband coverage is better than in neighbouring rural areas, yet urban areas are the current focus for the roll-out. The case for the changes in 2013 that established the current permitted development regime focused almost exclusively on the need to extend superfast broadband to rural areas and new-build estates. Little to no consideration appears to have been given to how the legislation would impact already built-up, urban areas. The consequences are now being seen in south Birmingham, as some residents are left to accommodate poles that are unwanted, unneeded and obtrusive.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab) *rose—*

Laurence Turner: I will give way first to my near neighbour.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and it is much needed. As he said, many of our constituents already have excellent broadband, so telegraph poles should be strategically prioritised in rural areas. In one of my streets alone, there are five poles. I have previously asked the Government how many poles they think is acceptable. Does he agree that this is not the way that providers should behave?

Laurence Turner: I know that my hon. Friend has been doing extensive work on this issue. There are similar problems in my Birmingham Northfield constituency, and I would be sympathetic to having different approaches in rural, semi-rural and built-up urban areas, precisely because of the issues she raises.

Alex Ballinger: I thank my hon. Friend for organising this excellent debate. Telegraph poles are a key issue in my Halesowen constituency. My constituents support the roll-out of high-speed broadband, but they are concerned about the installation of telegraph poles in areas that did not previously have them. Community engagement has not been done well—I give the example of the Squirrels estate in my constituency, where a recent campaign, which I supported, was successful in stopping a company rolling out telegraph poles in an area that did not have them. The residents' major concern was about the use of underground ducting. Does my hon. Friend agree that if there is accessible infrastructure underground already, broadband providers should use that? The Government should change the regulations so that providers are able to share the infrastructure, even if they are competitors.

Laurence Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. He highlights issues that are common across the wider region and, I suspect, the country. I will come on to some of the regulatory changes that could be made, but it is important to recognise that there was a requirement for companies to share infrastructure wherever possible. However, I will discuss some of the cases in my constituency where that clearly is not happening.

I want to draw attention to some of the problems in my constituency. I recently attended a residents' meeting in a street in Birmingham Northfield called Pineview, a quiet cul-de-sac that is set back from a busy road. The community is close-knit, and over the years, the residents have invested their time and a considerable amount of money to ensure the upkeep of the area. They have lived with underground telecommunications infrastructure, which serves different operators, and they have experienced a positive service. However, residents report that four telegraph poles were installed on the road last year, starting early in the day and finishing late at night, with intrusive spotlights to facilitate the work. There was very limited community engagement, despite the residents taking up the company Brsk's suggestion that a petition be collected. That was done, but to no effect.

I also draw attention to Lovell Close in Weoley. It is another small cul-de-sac, with only half a dozen houses and narrow pavements, but activities by two competing companies are now causing obstruction for residents and users of an adjoining public park. The hope that the infrastructure would be shared is not being observed in practice, and there are ongoing problems with pavement parking across south Birmingham. I know that Transport Ministers are looking separately at this issue, but the fact is that the combination of pavement parking and the loss of pavement space to poles has created obstructions and pinch points. This is a particular problem for those with prams and mobility scooters.

There are also problems in the Bournville conservation area, which I discussed recently with the Bournville Village Trust. I place on record my thanks for the local representations that have been made to me in advance of this debate by Councillors Esther Rai, Miranda Perks and Jamie Tennant in my constituency, and Liz Clements and Fred Grindrod in the neighbouring ward of Bournville and Cotteridge. I also want to mention the work done on this issue by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston

(Preet Kaur Gill)—as she said, she is addressing the same problems in her constituency—and my other constituency neighbour, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). As a Front Bencher, he is unable to speak in this debate, but I know that he is addressing the same problems and has written to Ofcom on this matter.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): In Stourbridge in the west midlands, we face similar problems with the same company, which is causing havoc. As my hon. Friend rightly says, the legislation was passed in 2013, yet in 2024, we are still waiting for the full roll-out of ultrafast broadband. Although I appreciate what he says about our current adequate speeds, they could be much faster. When I was recently in Ukraine, I experienced far better internet connectivity than I do in central London or Stourbridge town centre. Our European neighbours are enjoying much faster broadband while we languish behind, and Stourbridge residents have been left at the mercy of these third-party companies—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady might like to sit while I am standing. I have previously told Members that interventions should be short and spontaneous. It is not an opportunity to read out a pre-prepared speech. If she wanted to speak in this debate, she could have asked permission from both the Minister and the Member in charge, and that would have been acceptable.

Laurence Turner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles).

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) about engagement. I am holding a letter that residents received from my predecessor, containing the promise from the company involved in rolling out these poles in Inkberrow that the work would initially be done underground. Lo and behold, a couple of weeks later, poles appeared and work was carried out late into the night. Re-establishing co-operation and engagement with the community is vital to regaining trust.

Laurence Turner: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes his case well. This is not about saying that there can never be telegraph poles, as there are some areas where they are clearly the right solution. However, there must be a proper process, and companies cannot be left to mark their own homework. He highlights well the issues in his constituency.

One of the few requirements placed on network operators is to provide 28 days' notice in writing to the local planning authority when they propose to put up a pole. That is a very low bar. Without commenting on an active investigation, it should be noted that Ofcom is currently investigating Brsk for an alleged failure to notify Birmingham city council 28 days prior to installing poles. It is important that the investigation is concluded quickly.

I understand that the industry body, the Internet Service Providers Association, which I thank for providing a briefing ahead of the debate, is working on a potential revision to the cabinet and pole siting code of practice.

I hope we will hear something encouraging from the Minister but, as long as the code remains voluntary, it will always be circumvented in some cases.

The code of practice merely states that, following advice for engaging and consulting residents, the code operator should place a site notice in

“as close proximity as possible... If an appropriate place to site a notice is not available, another means of informing residents may be discussed and agreed upon.”

In seeking to address these concerns, a number of residents in my constituency have, individually and collectively, attempted to follow the steps set out in the code of practice, including the complaints process. However, the code of practice, in its current form, fails to provide sufficient redress. It states that a complaints procedure should be in place, but it fails to go further than a company providing written responses detailing why a complaint is accepted or rejected. Frankly, that is not good enough. We must focus on preventing poor practice, as well as encouraging the best.

I thank the Minister for his engagement with hon. Members across the House on this issue. Does he agree that, in pursuit of the Government's welcome manifesto commitment to a renewed push for full gigabit coverage by 2030, a better code of practice is needed? Does he agree that there is a natural conflict of interest in allowing broadband companies to be the sole arbiters of their own practice? And does he further agree that there should be a role for Ofcom in upholding the code?

I thank the Minister for his attention, and I look forward to hearing how he proposes to engage with Members across the House on this important issue. I am sure we will all hear more about this problem throughout the course of this Parliament.

3.29 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): As this is the first time that I have seen you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I say how glad I am that you were elected? I voted for you, so there. [*Laughter.*] It is a secret ballot, so you can't check.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) on his election; it is good to see him in his place. I think I am right in saying that King's Norton is part of his patch, but he may not be aware that one of the shields on the wall of this Chamber is for a former Member for King's Norton who was killed in the second world war: a very brave man who fought for his country and who died making it possible for everybody to evacuate. Ronnie Cartland was his name; he was a Conservative, but his first rebellion was when he was angry that the Government were not doing enough for distressed areas, including in my constituency in south Wales. I feel I have an affinity with my hon. Friend's constituency, although I hope I have not prompted him to rebel instantly.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to have this debate. I will be very clear: the vast majority of companies operating in this sphere are doing so entirely responsibly. They are doing a great favour for the nation in rolling out broadband of the kind of speed that everybody wants. I note the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) made about other countries in Europe; of course we aspire to that coverage for everybody across the UK.

The vast majority of companies are operating responsibly but, frankly, a few are behaving like cowboys. As a Government and as a Parliament, I think we sometimes need to say to cowboys that they are drinking in the last chance saloon. I have made that abundantly clear to some of the operators. I know that some operators are striving to co-operate with one another and with BT Openreach to ensure that no unnecessary street furniture suddenly appears and that there is full consultation with the local community before a road is dug up for a new duct or a new pole appears. Companies that are abiding by the code of conduct and fulfilling their obligations are almost as fed up as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield and other hon. Friends; indeed, I am sure we could fill the whole Chamber with hon. Members who are equally fed up with the few companies that are bringing the whole system into disrepute.

That matters, because in the end the most important thing is that the wider strategy is right. We want to deliver good-value, very high-speed, more than ultrafast, gigabit-capable broadband based on fibre to the whole UK as fast as possible without having to provide vast amounts of taxpayers' money. We therefore need to do so on the basis of commercial roll-out. Of course it is right that that should not be on the basis of monopoly and that competition, where possible, should drive choice for consumers and cheaper prices. That part of the strategy is absolutely right.

The part of the strategy that the previous Government were a bit more relaxed about—in fact, Ministers used to say categorically that they were completely relaxed about it—was overbuild. That has meant several companies digging up the road one after another, as has happened in some parts of the country. It has also meant several companies deciding that they need their own set of poles, or poles appearing in an area that had never previously had poles and in which ducts had been laid out but not used.

I am not completely relaxed about overbuild. I am concerned about it, because I know that a lot of constituents up and down the land are concerned. However, I want to make sure that commercial operators that are abiding by the rules and the code of conduct have every opportunity to continue to do so, in order that their commercial investments are not disrupted unnecessarily and we can deliver the infrastructure that we need across the whole United Kingdom. In the end, I want the cheapest possible prices for people and the highest possible capacity across the network for every property in the land. I would issue one slight corrective in this debate. Sometimes people say that this is a battle between urban and rural, but in fact some of the issues in urban areas are completely different from those in rural areas, and some are identical. I am not sure whether that dichotomy is fair.

My preference is for ducts wherever possible. That is not always possible, for a whole series of different logistical reasons in different areas. It is an undeniable fact that providing connectivity via poles is likely to be something like 10 times cheaper than doing it via ducts, so I fully understand why commercial operators want to install poles. I understand that that could mean that there will be poles in areas that have never had them before, and, in some areas, that is something that we will have to live with.

Laurence Turner: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I agree with almost everything that he has said. I also wish to reflect on the moving tribute that he made to a predecessor Member for King's Norton.

I understand the case that my hon. Friend has made, and I welcome his comments. Does he accept that, when the price of poles is already cheap, there is a risk that some companies will undercut each other on consumer service to reach lower margins? That is at the heart of the issue that we are debating today. It is about those operators and local cases in which standards have not been followed. Good network providers should have nothing to fear from the changes that have been suggested tonight.

Chris Bryant: Yes, I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has just said. He put it extremely well. He probably ought to be the Minister, and perhaps he will be soon. He is right. I also want to say that we should have shared infrastructure wherever that is possible. Legislation already makes provision for some of that to happen. In speaking to the operators, I have laid it down quite firmly that we need to enhance that infrastructure. I can perfectly understand why a commercial operator might say, "Well, I am not sure that I really want to share with my competitor". That is why a new code of conduct has taken a while. I hope that new code of conduct, which I have discussed with the operators, will be laid out very soon. There is urgency about this, because the roll-out is happening this week, next week and the week after. We need to tackle these issues in short measure, not wait a long period of time.

At the very latest, this code of conduct will be published in the early new year, and I encourage everybody in the sector to abide by the code. I encourage competitors to tell the two or three companies that are not playing by the rules that they are bringing all of them into disrepute. The single most important issue for most of these operators is how they will drive take-up. It is about not just roll-out—that is their investment—but take-up. When we talk about 100 megabits per second—or about gigabits per second—many people have no idea what we are talking about. The truth is that all of our homes and businesses will need much greater broadband capacity in the near future, so we do have to roll this out. We have to make sure that people understand why they need it. The danger is that, if this whole process undermines confidence in the roll-out, it will affect take-up. It is in the commercial interests of everybody to make sure that we come to a better set of solutions in this area.

Let me go through a couple of the specific points that my hon. Friend raised. As he knows, the cabinet siting and pole siting code of practice was issued in November 2016. It sets out guidance on best practice

relating to deployment, encouraging operators to site apparatus responsibly and engage proactively with both local authorities and the local community, and he laid out some of the specifics that follow on from that—the 28 days' notice that needs to be given to local councils and so on.

There are some operators—not the ones my hon. Friend is talking about, but for instance, IX Wireless, which I had in my office earlier this afternoon—that are operating a different model, and a different set of issues relates specifically to them. There, too, I have tried to make it clear what Government expectations are. As I say, following a meeting with the operators, the industry has committed to revising the code of practice, which I think will be much tougher, and the guidance should be published in the new year. However, I am absolutely clear that if voluntary adherence does not work, we reserve the right to change the law. We are in earnest about that, because we are aware of the concerns people have expressed.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that Ofcom has stated that it would investigate any cases where poles are sited in a way that is not consistent with the requirements and guidelines in place, including where they block residents' drives or where operators systematically fail to engage with local planning authorities' suggestions. As my hon. Friend has already referred to, Ofcom has opened an investigation into whether Brsk has failed to comply with its obligations. I am keen to have a meeting with Brsk, and I hope that will happen in the next few weeks. I do not want to interfere in the process that Ofcom is engaged in; that is a matter for Ofcom and I would not seek to undermine what is effectively a quasi-judicial operation. However, I want to make sure that Brsk fully understands the concerns not only of many Birmingham MPs—I noted the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) earlier—but of the Government in this field.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield for getting the debate so early in his time as a Member of Parliament. He is obviously going to be a doughty defender of the rights of his constituents. Madam Deputy Speaker, I noticed that you were nodding along—I know you are not really allowed to do that. You are shaking your head as well—you are not allowed to do that either. None the less, I think you broadly agreed with the thrust of what I was saying, so I feel as if I have united the House. On that note, I bid you farewell.

Question put and agreed to.

3.42 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 October 2024

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Hongkongers in the UK: Visas, Security and Services

1.30 pm

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered visas, security and access to services for Hong Kongers living in the UK.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. As a new Member of Parliament, I am happy to say that this is my first Westminster Hall debate, and I am delighted to have secured it on such an important set of issues.

Support for Hongkongers is a priority of mine for two main reasons. First, my constituency is home to a large diaspora of Hongkongers. We take great pride that so many have chosen our community as the place to rebuild their lives, having fled from tyranny and oppression. Secondly, the Labour party has a proud history and record of standing up for human rights, from Northern Ireland to Kosovo, and of supporting those who have come to our country having fled authoritarian rule. I am confident that our new Government will uphold that fine heritage. If they are to do so, however, support for Hongkongers is essential, as I am sure the Minister will agree.

There has never been a more important moment to stand with Hongkongers than now. We all know about the tragic erosion of democracy and human rights that has occurred in Hong Kong since the imposition of the national security law in 2020 with more than 10,000 arrests of those protesting for freedom, 900 journalists losing their livelihoods simply for speaking the truth and a rapid growth in the number of political prisoners, matched only by the rapid decline in due process as authoritarianism continues to spread. With the article 23 legislation now set to make the situation even worse, these are worrying times for Hongkongers wherever they are in the world. Given the increasing need for Hongkongers to leave Hong Kong and come to the UK, it is important to take this moment to consider the future of the British national overseas visa scheme.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I genuinely congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this early opportunity to ventilate the issue. He talks about those who flee persecution, and he is right, but the truth of the matter is that even when Hongkongers are in this country, they are not beyond the reach of the Chinese Communist party. We have seen instances of illegal police stations operated by the Chinese and of persecution on campuses around the country. Does he agree that our responsibility to Hongkongers coming to this country does not end when they arrive at Heathrow? That is simply when it starts.

Mr Rand: Yes, absolutely. I thank the right hon. Member for making that important point, which I will come on to later in my remarks.

On the BNO visa scheme, for the sake of fairness, I should start my remarks by giving credit where it is due: the scheme is one of the best things that the Conservative party did in its 14 years of government. Even though it is top of what I might consider a vanishingly small list of achievements, that should not distract from what a resounding success it has been. About 150,000 Hongkongers have been able to flee tyranny because of the scheme. Our country should be deeply proud of that. I will be grateful if, when the Minister responds, she could spell out that this Government's commitment to the scheme matches that of the previous Government.

I also want the Government to consider the loopholes within the BNO visa scheme. We know that the scheme was initially designed for Hongkongers who, as adults, had applied for BNO status prior to the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. In 2022, the scheme was expanded to allow younger Hongkongers born after the 1997 handover, who never had the chance to apply for that status themselves, to come to the UK as part of the visa. However, there is a group in the middle.

Thousands of Hongkongers born between 1979 and 1997 are caught by a loophole as they are not old enough to have applied for BNO status before the handover, but not young enough to qualify under the 2022 expansion. I encourage the Minister to engage on this issue with Hong Kong Watch, which has proposed practical ways to close the loophole and open up the path to escaping oppression for thousands of Hongkongers, allowing family reunions that would mean so much to those living in the United Kingdom.

On the subject of design flaws with the visa scheme, I also encourage the Minister to look at visa and asylum applications that have been refused on the grounds of the applicant having a criminal record. Although that may be perfectly reasonable in other circumstances, we know that some pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong are getting criminal records, and that in and of itself should not be a reason to deny them safe passage to the United Kingdom, as I am sure all colleagues would agree.

Although the visa scheme is important, it is also vital, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned, that we ensure Hongkongers living in the United Kingdom can live happy, safe and prosperous lives. The point on safety is particularly crucial. Members will be aware of the long arm of the Chinese state, which is a daily source of fear and anxiety for many Hongkongers, including those in my constituency—both for themselves and for the fate of loved ones they have left behind.

Each act of Chinese aggression—political interference in this place, sanctions against parliamentarians, or outright acts of espionage, as we have seen—heightens the fear of Hongkongers that they might be next. In July and December, under the Hong Kong national security policy, arrest warrants with £100,000 bounties were issued for six exiled Hong Kong activists living in the United Kingdom. Closer to home, we had the incident at the Chinese consulate in Manchester. I hope that the Minister will reassure Hongkongers in my

[Mr Rand]

constituency today by setting out the measures the Home Office has in place to ensure their safety, given the unique threats they face.

As well as guaranteeing the safety of Hongkongers in the United Kingdom, we must work to ensure that their lives can be as happy and prosperous as possible. I will briefly touch on two related points before wrapping up. The first is the issue of accessing retirement savings. The Mandatory Provident Fund is a compulsory retirement scheme for the people of Hong Kong, which, for most Hongkongers, is their main pension pot. In theory, they should be able to withdraw it in full even if they choose to leave Hong Kong; in practice, vindictive policies stop them doing so, and have made it almost impossible for Hongkongers who have fled their homeland to access vital money for rebuilding their new lives. It is estimated by Hong Kong Watch that Hongkongers who have fled to the UK are being denied access to £3 billion in savings. Would the Minister be willing to have a conversation with colleagues in the Treasury about what more can be done to tackle this grave injustice?

I also encourage the Minister to have conversations with colleagues in the Department for Education on the issue of tuition fees. For many Hongkongers in England and Wales, higher education is rendered unaffordable by the requirement to pay the international rate of tuition fees, which stands in contrast with students who have come to the UK on other humanitarian pathways, such as those from Ukraine and Afghanistan, who have home fee status. This feels like an unfair discrepancy, and if we want Hongkongers to thrive in the UK, it is something that we should seriously look at.

I know that I have several asks of the Minister today, and that many of my colleagues will no doubt have done the same about various other important causes, at a time when, I know, asks of the Home Office are extremely significant, but we must not lose sight of Hong Kong. It cannot be forgotten about or pushed to the margins. That is not just because of what supporting Hongkongers says about our country's commitment to the fundamental value of freedom, but because I know, from my own constituency, that if those who arrive from Hong Kong are given the support that they need, they can make an immense contribution to the communities that they now call home.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. To allow Mr Rand two minutes at the end to wind up, I will be calling the Front Benchers from 2.28 pm. If Members could limit their contribution to five minutes, I will have no need to impose a time limit.

1.41 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The context of this debate is that since the Chinese Government's national security law was imposed and since the 2019 Hong Kong protests in support of democracy and human rights, 10,000 people have been arrested and 2,300 charged, and 150,000 Hongkongers have fled to Britain under the British national overseas visa scheme. To be clear, the scheme allows individuals to come and live in the UK, but does not grant formal refugee status. That is a point that I will return to shortly.

I want to pay tribute to the Hongkongers in my constituency of Bolton West, many of whom live in Westhoughton and in Horwich. In the most difficult of circumstances, they have moved thousands of miles away from their homeland in search of a better life. Yet all too often, Hongkongers tell me about their concerns for themselves and their families, loved ones, and friend—both those here in the UK and those still in Hong Kong. Let us not forget why we are having this debate today.

With that in mind, I wish to touch on a couple of points raised by my constituents. First, the BNO visa scheme, which was expanded in November 2022, allows individuals born after the handover of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997 to apply for the scheme independently of their BNO passport-holding parents. What that expanded scheme failed to address, as my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) has already mentioned, was that Hongkongers under the age of 18 on the day of the handover were unable to apply for BNO status themselves. Therefore Hongkongers born between 1 July 1979 and 30 June 1997 are currently stuck in a loophole, neither old enough to have applied for BNO status before the 1997 handover nor young enough to qualify under the November 2022 visa scheme expansion. My view is clear: Hongkongers within that age bracket should be able to access the BNO scheme to allow them to flee political persecution and join family members here in the UK. I ask the Government to look afresh at the operation of the scheme.

That takes me to my second point: many Hongkongers who hold BNO status are unable to access university education in the UK without student finance, because they are not eligible for home fee status. Some young Hongkongers find themselves in a position where they fled persecution but are having to pay up to £50,000 a year in university tuition fees. That not only prices them out of courses but denies them the opportunity to pursue professional careers. Whether that is because the BNO visa scheme does not grant refugee status is unclear to me, but I hope that the Government will be able to rectify the issue so that young Hongkongers who have fled persecution can proceed with their university studies.

Finally, I want to touch on repression. British citizen Jimmy Lai has been in prison in Hong Kong for over 1,500 days in solitary confinement. I take comfort from the Prime Minister's comments earlier this week that securing his release "is a priority", and we must urgently see that release happen.

Closer to home, I know from conversations with my own Hongkonger constituents that many continue to live in fear for their security, even here in the UK, and there has been a worrying pattern of behaviour over recent years. We have seen the Hong Kong national security police issue bounties for exiled Hongkongers now living in the UK, and we all remember the shocking and frankly unacceptable event in October 2022, when a BNO visa holder who was peacefully protesting outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester was assaulted by masked men, having been dragged into the grounds of the consulate. Those actions are unacceptable, constitute an assault on human rights and must be condemned in the strongest terms. I welcome the continued support that the Government provide to Hongkongers in the UK and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West for securing this important debate.

1.45 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) for securing this important debate. It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. Hongkongers live across the UK and in my constituency of Farnham and Bordon, including in Haslemere and Liphook. I declare an interest—this is also a plug—in that I am a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China. If any Member in this room wishes to join, I encourage them to do so. We are not favoured by the Chinese Communist party, I can tell you that.

Among the many wise and important decisions that the Conservative Administration made over the last 14 years, one of the most important was launching a special immigration route in June 2020, in response to the escalating political situation and the Chinese Communist Government's implementation of the dangerous and oppressive national security law. The visa has welcomed Hong Kong residents who hold British national overseas status, and their immediate families, to live, work and study in the UK, away from restrictions on their freedoms and political rights. Since the launch of the scheme in 2021, as has been mentioned, more than 150,000 Hongkongers have moved to Britain using that bespoke immigration pathway, with more than 26,000 emigrating over the past year. For many people, the scheme has not only been a lifeline, but has ensured their families' survival and their own. We have seen many cases, including those mentioned today, involving brave political and democratic prisoners such as Jimmy Lai, Joshua Wong and Benny Tai.

First, I will address the important role that Hongkongers have played in key sectors, such as healthcare, which is my own background. My work in the health and social care system means I have seen the impact that BNO visas have had on the core institutions in this country, such as the NHS. As of June 2023, more than 700 Hongkongers are working in the NHS, with Asian people being the second largest nationality, next to British, working in our healthcare system. Access to services such as the NHS is available to anyone who resides in the UK, and BNO visa holders pay the immigration health surcharge during the application process. If they contribute to our system through their employment, it is only right that they benefit in their times of need.

My second point is about our security and defence policy. Alongside its allies Iran and Russia, the Chinese Communist party—the Government of China—is the single greatest threat to democracy, peace and freedom here in the United Kingdom and across the western world. As has been mentioned, that is evidenced by the crackdown on political and freedom of speech, as happened with Jimmy Lai, and its integration into international universities and education systems. We saw that specifically in the UK with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, which was shelved by the Education Secretary over British universities' desire to protect their operations against authoritarian states such as China. The protection granted to the Chinese state amid crackdowns on freedom is disastrous for not only British students, but for Hongkongers in the UK, and it creates problems with security. China does not believe in the dual national status of descendants, so they will continue to be recognised as Chinese nationals and therefore denied UK consular access, as in the case of

Jimmy Lai. Only yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition reiterated Mr Lai's case, and the Prime Minister agreed with the Opposition that his imprisonment was a breach of the 1984 treaty. In his party's manifesto, the Prime Minister committed to continuing the Conservative-instated BNO visas.

However, the repression of democracy is not exclusive to the mainland and Hong Kong. As has been mentioned, we saw it here in the UK in the attacks on Hong Kong protesters in Chinatown in London, a 20-minute walk away from here, and outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester a year later. As a result, and for the protection of those to whom we issue BNO visas, it is essential to gauge a better understanding of the transnational threat that BNO holders face in the UK. I call on the Foreign Secretary, when he meets the Chinese Government, to raise these issues and absolutely confirm the new UK Government's commitment to standing up for Hongkongers and against the Chinese Communist party. I have submitted questions over this to the Home Office about naturalisation and British citizenship protections.

Finally, in the 20 seconds left to me, I want to reiterate my earlier point about freedom. China is a country where dissent is stifled and free speech tightly controlled. The internet, a tool of liberation and information in many parts of the world, is censored. Citizens who speak out against the Government or challenge the state's narrative can face imprisonment or worse. We must not let the plight of Hongkongers in Hong Kong or in Britain be ignored or put to the side, so I ask this of the Minister. We must stand up for them, and I welcome the commitment that I hope she will give in a moment to that cause.

1.51 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand), who will clearly be a massive asset on this issue. I thank the many organisations that have chipped in on it, but I want to speak to three points raised primarily by constituents who are directly affected as BNO Hongkongers on their practical experience here.

The first point is to reiterate what has been said about university and non-home fees. Many BNO Hongkongers are simply priced out of higher education in the UK, despite the reason why they are here—persecution in Hong Kong. They already have to pay the health surcharge. There are higher fees for being here to begin with, before even looking at paying the overseas student fee rate, which is not applicable to others. This is a doubly egregious issue, because residents from almost all British overseas territories have been eligible for home fee status at UK universities since 2007, but BNOs are not eligible, because they had their rights stripped away in 1997. I hope that the Minister will commit today to at least examining the restoration of those rights, to allow more Hongkongers to benefit from reduced rates.

There is, of course, the parallel with those who are granted leave under other schemes; those for Ukrainians have already been mentioned. I would like to see that generosity extended to those who make a permanent home in my Southwark, London constituency, as well as other constituencies that have been mentioned.

[Neil Coyle]

Time is tight, so apologies if I am rattling through this rather fast, but the Mandatory Provident Fund is also of significant concern. Hongkongers are being denied the £3 billion of compulsory retirement savings that has been mentioned, despite proof that they have resettled abroad. The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority released a statement in March 2021 saying that because the BNO passport was no longer recognised by the Hong Kong Government as a valid travel or identity document, those trying to withdraw funds could not use the BNO system. That has led to funds being frozen, in contradiction to what representatives of some of the firms involved have told our colleagues in the Canadian Parliament. I hope to hear from the Minister that the collapse in Sino-British relations will not prevent Ministers from probing the companies directly involved about delivering on their legal obligations.

No one should be prevented from accessing their funds just because they hold a BNO passport or visa, but there are already examples of that happening in the UK, including to a Hongkonger single mother who was unable to afford a heater for her son. She was denied £57,000-worth of her MPF, and a family of five were unable to afford a wheelchair-accessible property for their disabled child because their MPF was withheld. I think that the Minister is probing some of the companies. Just to give an example, HSBC oversees five MPF schemes and manages approximately 29% of the total MPF market. This should not be ignored. Although I welcome the audit, we cannot wait for the end of it to look at some of the interplaying issues and relationships. We need action on this, and perhaps it would be useful to call in some of these companies to examine how they are supporting BNO Hongkongers now. Hongkongers have asked for documents that they can present to the MPF holder, representing a formalised commitment to apply for British citizenship. I hope that the Minister will look at that.

My final point is on security. We have heard about Manchester, and there are examples in Surrey and in my own constituency of cyber-security issues, as well as physical harassment and intimidation, following, the disruption of meetings and the prevention of the booking of meetings at venues. Those are simple things that are being done to try to deny people the right to rebuild and live a normal life here in the UK. Transnational repression is completely unacceptable. Some of those responsible have been shown to work for the Hong Kong Economic Trade Office here in the UK. Why does it still have diplomatic status? I have asked Ministers about that. Again, the audit is one area that might look at that in the longer term, but we could look at it now. The US has sanctioned 49 Hong Kong representatives. We are yet to move in the same way, and Ministers should look at that now.

Will the Minister give us a steer on protective measures that could come forward sooner? We have the Community Security Trust to protect synagogues and the protective security for mosques scheme. Something similar that specialises in the situation that Hong Kong BNO holders face, as well as training and support for the police authorities involved, would be incredibly useful. I have written to the Security Minister on that specific issue and I hope to hear from him soon that that offer of

security will be afforded, because we cannot let those who have fled communist persecution abroad be subject to communist persecution here in the UK.

1.55 pm

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on securing this debate. I associate myself with his comments about how the previous Government should be congratulated on honouring the BNO scheme in the first place.

My borough of Sutton is home to more than 5,000 people on the BNO scheme. I represent the eastern half of the borough in Carshalton and Wallington, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) will talk about the west side in Sutton and Cheam later. We have had lots of constituents coming to us to share their concerns, some of which have been aired already. The one that came up most on the doorstep and in the events that I hosted was about access to jobs, and qualifications not being recognised. More specifically, in our area it was about social work. There seem to be quite a lot of Hongkonger social workers in my area. Their qualifications were not being recognised because they had not had the required conversion courses or because an unco-operative Hong Kong Government were holding back proof of their careers and qualifications.

I am also a local councillor and I was aware that Sutton council desperately needed social workers, so I reached out to my local council and asked whether there was anything we could do. I am pleased to say that next month we will be launching an innovative internship programme where we have linked up with a local university, Kingston University, which has been providing formal study for Hong Kong social workers that we have identified. They will also get the opportunity to get some in-the-field experience with social workers who are already employed by Sutton council. We hope that that will result in the necessary recognition of their qualifications by Social Work England.

I am sure that that problem is widespread across the UK and perhaps in other professions, too. I know that there are some debates about what constitutes formal study, but I would really like to work with the Minister to see whether we can find a way of scaling up this kind of initiative across the country so that we can get a lot more of these qualified Hongkongers recognised and into the work that they are skilled at.

I have a statistic that I want to share. Somebody told me that up to 98% of the Hongkongers that have arrived in recent years have a degree. They have the skills and we need those skills, so let us make sure that they can put them to good use. My next point around university admissions has already been raised a couple of times. It has been a frequent complaint that despite the fact that all the arrivals are extremely well qualified academically, as demonstrated by the figure that I just mentioned, they are worried about their children not being able to access the same level of education because of the scale of fees that international students face. They tell me that they have British national status, but that it does not feel that way when applying for university, so that is something we need to fix.

Finally, the point about security has been well made already. It is critical that Hongkongers feel safe in the United Kingdom. We all know why they fled, but they

are still living in fear of surveillance and persecution here. I have mentioned the Hong Kong Government holding back qualifications so that Hongkongers cannot get the work that they need here, and there is evidence of other records that they need access to being destroyed. They have been holding on to criminal records for things that we should not recognise in this country, such as taking part in protests. Pension entitlements, which I think have already been mentioned, are also being held back.

Closer to home, for a long time there were widespread reports of some sort of secret Chinese police station operating out of Croydon, around the corner from me. I have to put it on record that the Met found no evidence out of that, but that demonstrates the fear among the Hong Kong community. We have also heard repeated concerns about Confucius institutes at universities, which have called for lecturers and others to be sacked and intimidated Hongkongers so that they feel they need to be silent.

The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) mentioned cyber-harassment. My borough council experienced that when an event we put on to welcome Hongkongers was subject to a series of threatening posts telling people that they should not attend and making up all sorts of reasons why it should not go ahead.

As a local MP, I will always stand up for my constituents' rights. As a country, we have a duty to ensure that all our citizens feel this is a democratic, free country, full of opportunity for them. I hope we can deliver that for Hongkongers.

2 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on securing this debate.

Before I was elected, I worked with dissidents, democrats and human rights defenders, including many in the territory of the People's Republic of China. Earlier this week, along with the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean), I was elected to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong, and like the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) I am a member of IPAC. These issues have always been of political interest to me, but since my election they have also become constituency issues. As with many other Members, many of the 144,000 Hongkongers who have come to join us in this country have decided to settle in my constituency of East Renfrewshire, and in particular in Newton Mearns. They always say three things: first and foremost, that they are delighted to be here; secondly, that they wish the weather were better in Scotland—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): So do we!

Blair McDougall: We do.

Thirdly, those Hongkongers say that, although they are now living in a free country, they are not living free from fear. It is little wonder, given that in Glasgow we had a similar story to the one the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington recounted: there were reports

of a secret police station being run in the basement of the Loon Fung Chinese restaurant. Like the previous Government, this Government have made it clear on many occasions that such oppression on British soil is not acceptable, but I would be interested to hear what more can be done and whether we can keep under review the diplomatic privileges given to organisations such as the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office to ensure they are not used as organs of transnational repression.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) asked what extra support can be given to make diaspora groups serving Hongkongers in the UK more resilient to that repression. In addition, can work be done to come up with an accepted definition of “transnational oppression”? This debate is about Hongkongers, but autocrats are increasingly reaching beyond their own borders, so this issue affects many other diaspora groups.

Other Members mentioned Jimmy Lai, and his case rests on all our consciences. He is a 77-year-old man whose health is failing, and he is in solitary confinement in a Hong Kong jail, in the baking heat. He has been denied independent medical access and consular access, and is facing a life sentence after a trial without a jury. That case rests heavily on the minds of Hongkongers, who are unsure whether they will be able to access consular assistance if something goes wrong. I urge the Minister to address that and assure Hongkongers, including BNOs, that by default they will be treated as British nationals for the purpose of consular assistance.

I echo the concerns other Members have mentioned about electronic travel authorisation. The assumption that if someone has had a custodial sentence of more than 12 months they would be refused such an authorisation particularly worries Hongkongers, because if someone has been a political prisoner—or they are one of the more than 1,000 political prisoners still in Hong Kong—the average sentence is far longer than 12 months. It would make it far harder for them to flee here if they needed to.

What I and other hon. Members are asking the Minister today is about the principle that Hongkongers are British, and because they are British they deserve the same protections, privileges and opportunities as any British citizen. That has a wider symbolic importance for us, as well. We are engaged in a global struggle between autocrats and liberal democracies. The people of Hong Kong stood up and said what side of that battle they were on. For all the brutality and repression they face, we have to show that we as a country will continue to stand beside them, and that we have clearly chosen a side in that global struggle.

2.6 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second or third time this week, Mr Vickers. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on setting the scene so well. By pursuing this debate he has given us all an opportunity to make a contribution in support of his thoughts. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), and I look forward to many more debates together.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I have long been an advocate for the people of Hong Kong, and for their right to live in Hong Kong without bowing the knee to China. The outrageous actions by the Chinese Government have ripped through the Sino-British joint declaration. I say this with great respect, but I believe that our lack of fulsome responses embolden the Chinese, as has been exemplified by the fact that the Chinese continue to break international treaties. I still believe that diplomatic action should be taken, but that is not the focus of today's debate.

I welcomed and supported the Conservative Government's approach, and I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), in his place. He, I and others in this Chamber supported the BNO visa, and have welcomed the 150,000 Hongkongers who have used it, some of who came to my constituency. I welcome the Minister to her place; she and I have been friends for many years on the Back Benches where we warmed the seats regularly. She is now a Minister and I wish her well; I look forward to her answers to the points we will make.

The visa for the Hongkongers allows them to come to our shores and live a life free from oppressions. They have indefinite leave to remain and qualify for permanent residency after five years, and British citizenship after six years. It is right and proper that we offer them a way of escape, and that is exactly what it is. It is a chance for some freedom and liberty.

I want to put on record, as the Library briefing outlines, that a single adult can apply for a five-year BNO visa and would pay £250 application fee and an immigration health surcharge of £5,175. The visa gives people permission to come and live in the UK with few restrictions, and it also gives them access to most benefits, tax credits and housing assistance paid by the state. I put that on record because it is my opinion that this is the bare minimum, and that we must enhance their ability to apply for help with, for example, home fee status or student finance in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, for which their third level students are currently ineligible. I ask the Minister whether we can review that. I know that she is eager to help, and I am sure she will do her best to come back with something positive.

Security concerns remain for Hongkongers living in the UK. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) is not here, but he made that point clearly in his intervention. Reports of police service stations have been made. I have been contacted by some constituents about their safety in Northern Ireland, and I have made the police in my constituency of Strangford aware of that. People from other constituencies in Northern Ireland have contacted me to say that their phones are being tapped. My constituent came with all the evidence, and the PSNI became involved.

People have concerns about their family back home in Hong Kong, and because they have family they are conscious that whatever they do or say, the Chinese authorities—or whoever it may be—are keeping a tab on them. They believe that this is operating in Belfast, and the evidence seems to prove that. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and I will give another example of an incident that happened this year. Statements that the APPG put out were hacked. I do not understand technology and

am very old school—pens and pencils are my method—but they reworded articles that asked questions about the actions of the Chinese, and turned them into favourable pieces on the APPG website. We took the necessary action to knock that on the head.

That shows that there is an evidential base for Chinese intrusion into every bit of life, for anybody that happens to have a different opinion or expresses it in a different way. Those who believe themselves to be under scrutiny most likely are.

I fully support the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West prioritising this issue in his role as an MP. I support the calls for greater support for those people who understandably feel, and which has been evidentially proved, that they have been abandoned and left at the mercy of the Chinese. We can all say with great honesty that mercy and the Chinese Communist party are two alien concepts—they do not usually go together. We must do more. I look to the Minister to begin to do more today and I say to her that we are here to support her in those efforts.

2.11 pm

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) for securing a really important debate today. Over the last 18 months and during the election campaign, I had the privilege of meeting Hongkongers in Leeds. Listening to their experiences shed much more light on the ongoing denial of human rights and democratic values in Hong Kong. They told me of the important work they were doing across Yorkshire, including supporting the estimated 4,000 people who have settled in Leeds since 2020. Around one third of those live in my constituency of Leeds South West and Morley. This is an issue that is both very important to me and very close to me.

More than 10,000 people have been arrested in the protest-related cases since the start of the pro-democracy movement in 2019. That includes, as has been referenced today by many Members, the British citizen Jimmy Lai, who has been behind bars for years. He faces life imprisonment under the national security law for, quite simply, telling the truth.

Given that we recognise why Hongkongers are leaving their country, it is essential that we consider security and access to services for those who come to the UK. Because of the time constraints in this debate, I will focus on one specific aspect of security—transnational repression.

Many British national overseas visa holders remain concerned about the threat of transnational repression against both them and their families back in Hong Kong. Some 97% of respondents to a survey conducted by Hongkongers in Leeds supported the strengthening of action against transnational repression. Worryingly, more than half of those that responded to that survey agreed that they themselves would not speak up against the injustices in Hong Kong, due to their fear that their families still in Hong Kong would face consequences. They also questioned whether they would ever be able to return to Hong Kong should they criticise the Chinese Government.

Members of the Hong Kong community in Leeds, including those in Leeds South West and Morley, have reported facing ongoing intimidation and harassment,

which is something that I would like to share with hon. Members today. At several events organised by Hongkongers in Leeds, individuals were seen photographing attendees without their consent. Some attendees were even threatened with claims that the photos taken of them would be shared with the authorities in Hong Kong to prevent them from ever being allowed to return home. Threats have also occurred on social media in Leeds, with the Leeds Hong Kong community Facebook page being shared in far-right circles, in an attempt to cause agitation. Worse still, the personal information of prominent activists in the Hong Kong community in Leeds—phone numbers and personal addresses—has been shared publicly, in an attempt to humiliate and endanger them.

The experiences, threats and intimidation that the people of Hong Kong and the Hongkongers based in Leeds face today are concerns that are continuously raised with me as the constituency MP, and were raised prior to that, when I was the candidate for the constituency. We know that this behaviour is being encouraged by the Chinese Government—we know that. In the survey of Leeds Hongkongers, which was carried out prior to the general election, only 18% of respondents agreed that the UK Government provide a safe environment for them from the Chinese Government. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to take a proactive approach to countering the most acute forms of state-directed threats to individuals.

I encourage the Minister to consider additional provisions in the state threats aggravating factor to cover criminal actions aimed at individuals who are identified by a foreign power as a dissident. Doing so would be a recognition that the naming of individuals is a form of state threat behaviour, too, even if the state does not issue a directive to harm the individual in question.

We must work continually to support Hongkongers to live freely, both in Hong Kong and the UK—free from threats, free from intimidation, free from repression. It is crucial for our democracy and the values we espouse to keep all our citizens safe.

2.15 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) for setting up this important debate. For me, this debate is freighted with some emotion for very personal reasons. When I was a student many years ago—this will give away my age somewhat—I helped to organise for Martin Lee to speak at my university. I remember how hard campaigners like him fought to establish a vibrant democracy in Hong Kong. I remember the hope we had for the future. It is heartbreaking to see how the situation has unfolded: with China's promises turning to ash; with the repression that my hon. Friends have talked about; with publications like Apple Daily being shut down; and with British citizens such as Jimmy Lai resting in prison, denied their basic rights.

China, as the Prime Minister said, has clearly broken its agreement with Britain, but far more importantly, it has breached its covenant with the people of Hong Kong to respect their rights and freedoms and to allow them to live in the way that they were promised. In so doing, it has struck at the very heart of what makes Hong Kong so special.

Jim Shannon: At last week's business questions, I brought attention to Jimmy Lai and the fact that he was denied his religious liberty. He was denied the Eucharist as a devout, practising Roman Catholic. That is how far China is prepared to go. There is an example of what the hon. Gentleman is talking about—he is absolutely right.

David Pinto-Duschinsky: I thank the hon. Member for his point. Absolutely—Mr Lai's treatment is appalling. I welcome the Prime Minister's words yesterday in the Chamber about the way he will hold China accountable for that, alongside engagement.

I am also incredibly proud of the way in which my community in Hendon and communities across the UK have welcomed new arrivals from Hong Kong. In Hendon, we have a large and growing Hong Kong population, particularly in Colindale. It adds so much to the life of our community, but those people have some serious concerns, as many others have expressed. I shall not echo in great detail the points that others have excellently made, but many of my constituents face great difficulty in accessing their savings and their futures through the MPF, and local financial institutions are not doing enough to help.

Similarly, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) made an incredibly important point about the recognition of qualifications; that is a real challenge for people in Hendon. We have also talked about access to public services, which includes everything from getting a national insurance number to finding schools, and about BNO status and ETAs.

The point I would like to rest on is that of transnational repression. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned overseas police stations, one of which was allegedly identified in my constituency. It is completely unacceptable that people in this country face surveillance, repression and threat simply for exercising their democratic rights—and that extends to the treatment of Members of this place.

Time is tight, so I will finish by echoing the points already made and by urging the Government to do what China has not: renew our covenant with the people of Hong Kong. I thank the Minister for her work on this issue.

2.19 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on securing this important debate. Political and socioeconomic affairs in Hong Kong remain so important to us here because of our history, and like everyone, I welcomed the clear cross-party support for reintroducing the BNO visa for Hongkongers. I am very pleased to represent the constituency of Rushcliffe in the south of Nottinghamshire, which has become home to many members of the Hong Kong community over the past three years. There are now over 1,000 Hongkongers living in my constituency and it has been a genuine privilege to meet and get to know them at recent events.

I want to take this opportunity to highlight the great work locally of East Midlands Councils, which hosts our regional welcome hub. As part of the Hong Kong welcome programme, EMC has provided a range of resources, events and services for our Hong Kong community. As a council leader between 2022 and 2024,

[James Naish]

I saw at first hand the positive impact of that programme. I am therefore very pleased that funding for the welcome programme was renewed in March. Long may that programme and the BNO visa scheme continue. We should also applaud the outstanding work and extra effort of all councils to ensure that Hongkongers have been welcomed. I would like to encourage the Government to consider a number of measures—some of which have already been mentioned—to ensure that members of my local Hong Kong community can continue to play a vibrant role in helping our economy to grow.

The first point I want to make is that many 18-years-olds in Rushcliffe and across our country started university this autumn, but thousands of young BNO Hongkongers in the UK simply did not have that option, as they are not currently eligible for student finance or home fee status. That is a generation of talented young Hongkongers who are waiting to access our higher education system, despite having top grades in their A-levels and having so much to offer this country as doctors, teachers, scientists or in other skilled professions. It is my sincere hope that colleagues can work across parties to resolve that issue.

Secondly, some of my constituents have told me that they are struggling to access the Mandatory Provident Fund savings. I welcome the Government raising this issue directly with the appropriate organisations, and I encourage Ministers to continue to urge for early drawdown of those funds. That is straightforward for other Hong Kong residents who move overseas permanently; the discrimination against BNOs is unacceptable.

Thirdly, on a very practical level, I know that my constituents would value greater control over the provision of English language teaching. I understand that funding is not always provided up front, meaning that the incentives for colleges to support English language tuition can be limited. The Hong Kong community groups local to me have said that they would welcome the ability to lead on those courses themselves with fewer funding constraints.

Fourthly, I am aware of members of the Hong Kong community having issues accessing the equivalent of Disclosure and Barring Service checks and facing challenges translating qualifications from one system to another, as was alluded to earlier. When we have known shortages in this country of GPs, teachers, nurses and other professionals, I encourage Ministers to look afresh at how to expedite the transition of Hongkongers into higher value, more productive jobs in this country, which will in turn benefit our wider community.

Fifthly, it is worth remembering that there are some asylum seekers from Hong Kong in our community, as well as those who have come under the formal scheme.

Finally, I know that this Government have sensibly committed to a China audit. My constituents really welcome that initiative and would like to see it brought forward as soon as is practically possible. I hope it will look carefully at key policy areas such as security, technology, trade, education and human rights, reflecting the concerns raised with me when engaging with this important and welcomed part of my local community.

2.24 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) for securing this important debate. I also thank the

Minister for Migration and Citizenship for hearing from us all today. This week I had the opportunity to engage with the Hong Kong Democracy Council and Hong Kong Watch, and to attend a meeting with the all-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong. These discussions provided valuable insights into the key topics surrounding the current debate, with headline concerns around transnational repression, access to the £3 billion held hostage in mandatory provident funds in UK banks, eligibility gaps in the BNO scheme, and access to home fees at UK universities for BNO visa holders.

Hongkongers are an integral part of the community in my constituency of Sutton and Cheam. I am proud to represent thousands of residents originally from Hong Kong. Our area, known for its proximity to central London, family-friendly atmosphere and outstanding schools, is a welcoming place for those looking to make a new start. My constituency is a mosaic of multicultural communities that enrich modern London. From Hongkongers to Ukrainians and Afghans to Tamils, I take immense pride in representing an area that stands as a crucial sanctuary for those fleeing persecution abroad. In Sutton and Cheam, we embrace the unique backgrounds of every resident in a community where diversity is valued and celebrated.

Tragically, however, because of the actions of an overseas state, many of my constituents are afraid to show their faces at demonstrations here in London advocating for democracy in Hong Kong. How can it be acceptable that they feel it necessary to wear face coverings and masks to conceal their identity, to avoid repercussions for themselves, their families and their friends? Many of the residents I represent live in fear of being photographed on the street by those acting on behalf of the Chinese Communist party, worried that these images could be used to target and persecute their families back in Hong Kong. Such a fear tactic has no place in our democracy. I am deeply appalled that it is happening right here under our noses. With the Chinese Government expanding their embassy operations with the volunteer recruitment scheme designed to surveil dissent against the CCP, the anxiety is likely only to escalate among my and many others' constituents.

This kind of transnational repression is not just happening at major protests in central London. Just last year, former Hong Kong Chief Executive, Leung Chun-ying, took to social media to criticise the promotion of a children's day camp put on by Hongkongers in Sutton in my constituency; that was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean). The day camp celebrated a series of books titled "Sheep Village", which aim to teach children about justice, civil liberties and human rights, informing a new generation of the context behind Hongkongers' struggles against CCP influence.

The event illustrates the extensive surveillance the Hong Kong special administrative region—HKSAR—can exercise in our capital. A seemingly small community book event at a local church in my constituency could be swiftly reported to CCP officials in Hong Kong, exposing my constituents to potentially life-changing consequences. This reality not only raises serious concerns about personal safety, but also highlights the chilling effect on freedom of expression in my constituency. It should simply go without saying that no one on UK soil should ever feel threatened by another country for

standing up for their freedom. If we are to continue to be a beacon of light and hope for those fleeing oppression, we cannot stand for such blatant disregard for the values of openness and freedom that we cherish in Britain.

I must also draw attention to a critical oversight in the British national overseas visa scheme. Since its launch in 2021 under the previous Government—I again congratulate and thank them for their action—more than 160,000 Hongkongers have utilised the pathway to seek refuge in the UK, but a troubling loophole exists, as has been mentioned. Individuals aged between 27 and 45 are unable to access this vital lifeline unless they came to Britain as part of a family unit. That has meant that many young Hongkongers who want to take up the offer are unable to do so. The needless exclusion leaves many vulnerable to the increasingly oppressive regime of the Chinese Communist party back in Hong Kong. Why should an uncontrollable variable such as age determine an individual's ability to escape oppression?

We recognise that the scheme has evolved and developed as the situation in Hong Kong has changed, but we encourage the Government to take action. As we have all identified today, this mistake needs to be corrected. Taking action to plug the gap in the BNO visa scheme is plainly the right thing to do, so can we please expand it to ensure that Hongkongers of all ages can live in Britain with their families?

The Liberal Democrats stand firmly behind the people of Hong Kong and their democratic freedoms, both abroad and in Britain. The CCP is exerting transnational oppression right here on our doorsteps. Inaction is not the answer—not if we are to meet our obligations and continue to be a moral leader and champion of democracy around the world. Britain and Hong Kong's stories are intermingled. Our colonial history has made that so. It leaves us today with a profound imperative to not abandon the people of that great city wherever they now reside, and to ensure the flame of freedom that they have never shrunk from carrying with them is not extinguished. We urge the Minister to ensure that the Foreign Secretary raises the concerns highlighted in this debate with the Chinese and Hong Kong Governments at every opportunity.

Just metres from this place, a statue of Millicent Fawcett stands in Parliament Square. Inscribed on it are the words:

“Courage calls to courage everywhere”.

The people of Hong Kong are showing their courage, and it is calling out to us. Let us answer that call.

2.31 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a privilege to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on securing the debate. I responded to a debate he spoke in earlier this week, and he is typically courteous and cares deeply about his constituency. He will be a really good voice in this House over the next five years, particularly on issues such as this.

The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West mentioned the large diaspora of Hongkongers in his constituency. He also rightly outlined the challenges in this country's relationship with China and the many loopholes within the scheme set up by the previous

Government. However, I thank him for giving credit to the previous Government for instigating the scheme. The fact that he put the credit in the right place shows that he has excellent judgment, and we look forward to that excellent judgment being shown during his career in this House.

The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) mentioned Jimmy Lai. As His Majesty's Official Opposition, we absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments welcoming the Prime Minister's remarks in the House yesterday. We stand with those remarks and look forward to seeing the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister challenge the Chinese in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) was right to mention the previous Government's commitment to ensuring that we welcomed many Hongkongers, including in my constituency of Hamble Valley. I know that through his activism he will encourage the new Government to challenge the Chinese Government in the meetings that the Foreign Secretary is shortly to hold.

I thank Members from all parties for their contributions today, which struck the right tone. I am heartened by the continued support for BNO visa holders who come to this country, where they can rely on the rule of law, developed and protected institutions and a stable democratic system regardless of which party is in charge. Since the introduction of the BNO visa scheme in January 2021, we have witnessed a remarkable response, with more than 210,843 individuals seeking to live, work and study in the UK. This visa route, which is available to those with British national overseas status and their eligible family members, has provided a lifeline for many fleeing the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, a place once known for its vibrant democracy but now facing unprecedented challenges.

The number of applicants illustrates the urgent desire of Hongkongers to find safety and stability. However, with that influx comes responsibility. We must ensure that our support systems are prepared to meet the needs of these new residents, enabling them to integrate fully into our society. Although the BNO visa allows holders to work in nearly any capacity and study in the UK, it does not grant access to public funds. That exclusion can create significant challenges for individuals who might find themselves in precarious financial situations on arrival. For example, many BNO visa holders have reported difficulties in securing employment that matches their skills and experience.

A survey conducted by the Welcoming Committee for Hong Kongers revealed that 40% of respondents felt that their financial health had worsened since arriving in the UK, with rising living costs further complicating their integration. Moreover, although a large majority of respondents—90%—reported having established connections with local communities, language barriers continue to pose a significant hurdle. More than a third of BNO holders rated their English skills as poor, which hinders their ability to find suitable employment and to participate fully in society.

The ongoing need for language support underscores the importance of the Hong Kong BNO welcome programme, which aims to assist such individuals as they navigate their new lives. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West was right to raise the case of

[Paul Holmes]

those with criminal records who were refused under the scheme under the previous Government. Can the Minister outline the line that the new Government will take that?

Another pressing issue that has arisen is the difficulty many Hongkongers face in accessing their pension funds, which remain trapped in the Mandatory Provident Fund system in Hong Kong. Under the regulations, those emigrating on the BNO passport cannot access their retirement savings until the age of 65. That situation poses a significant financial burden, especially for those who have relocated permanently and are now struggling to establish their lives in the UK. Reports have surfaced of individuals who, due to their involvement in the pro-democracy protests, left Hong Kong with their life savings inaccessible, jeopardising their financial stability within the United Kingdom.

The welcome programme launched in April 2021 represents a crucial step towards successful integration. It includes demand-led funding for local authorities to provide English-language and destitution support, an online welcome pack for newcomers, and a network of welcome hubs across the United Kingdom. Such initiatives are vital in supporting BNO holders to settle into their communities. For the upcoming financial year, I welcome the fact that the Government have announced that £1 million is being targeted on employability and mental health support for BNO visa holders, highlighting the Government's recognition of the unique challenges faced by this community.

As we look to the future, however, it is clear that we need to do more. The new Government have made a commitment to a strategic approach to managing our relationship with China. That must also encompass a firm stance on the rights of those who have chosen to make the UK their home and must include addressing the complex dynamics of our bilateral relationship while standing in solidarity with Hongkongers who have fled oppression. The Government must continue to push for action under the Sino-British agreement of 1984, which is being breached consistently by the Chinese Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon outlined.

The Government have acknowledged such challenges, stating that they are working with the Hong Kong authorities to address the barriers preventing BNO visa holders from withdrawing their funds. Not only is the issue of access to funds a bureaucratic hurdle, but it directly impacts on the ability of Hongkongers to secure housing, support their families and build a future within the United Kingdom.

In conclusion, let us reaffirm our commitment to supporting Hongkongers in the United Kingdom. We must ensure that our visa routes are not merely a means of entry, but a genuine pathway to integration and opportunity, which I think we can say has happened with the Hong Kong community. That includes providing adequate resources to help individuals adjust to life in the United Kingdom, ensuring access to essential services and advocating for fair treatment regarding their financial assets. It is our duty as a House as well as the duty of the Government and the Opposition to ensure that the promises made to Hongkongers are honoured, reflecting the values of compassion and justice that define our nation.

2.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) on securing the debate, which has given rise to powerful speeches by hon. Members from all parties.

Members have spoken up for their constituents and about their experiences and I will try to address as many of the points made as possible. Many issues were covered, whether that was the BNO visa route, security issues at home and in Hong Kong, pensions, home university fees, democratic freedoms, police stations and more.

I also thank the Front-Bench speakers, the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor) and for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), for their contributions. The issue has had cross-party support in the past, and I am sure we will continue to work in that spirit in support of Hongkongers in the UK and those who may come here in the future.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West will recognise that I may not be able to address all the issues raised today. Some of these complex matters need cross-departmental work, whether that is with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government or the DFE. I hope that I will cover most of the issues in my comments today, but I assure all hon. and right hon. Members that we will look at all the issues raised. I also pay tribute to the work of Hong Kong Watch and others in sharing their experience and research.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West will be aware, the Government are deeply committed to supporting members of the Hong Kong community who have relocated to the UK. I think I speak for all of us when I say that Hongkongers have become an integral part of our economy and local communities, and make fantastic contributions to our national life.

I will speak first about the Hong Kong BNO visa route. The route was established in 2021 in response to the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong, which significantly impacts the rights and freedoms of people in Hong Kong. The BNO route reflects the UK's historic and moral responsibility for and commitment to the people of Hong Kong. Since its launch, more than 209,000 people have been granted a BNO visa, of whom more than 150,000 have arrived in the UK. Those Hongkongers are free to live, work and study in virtually any capacity on a pathway to British citizenship. I am sure we will welcome many more Hongkongers to the UK in future so that they can also build a new life for themselves here.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution, I asked about students across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and here in England, as well—the Minister may be coming to it, but if she is not, I hope she will. I underlined that there is a clear issue relating to students from Hong Kong having the same opportunities as those who are born here. I urge the Minister to give us an answer on that.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and will come on to that point.

I will deal first with questions around the expansion of the BNO route, in particular to people born between 1979 and 1997. A number of Members have suggested that the BNO route should be expanded to include those who were children at the point of Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997 but whose parents did not register them for BNO status. The BNO route reflects the UK's historic commitment to those who chose to retain their ties to the UK by taking up BNO status, and we continue to uphold those commitments. Those not eligible for the BNO route need to consider other available UK immigration routes, for example as a student, graduate or skilled worker. I am sure that Members will understand that I am unable to make any policy commitments in this forum, but I want to give assurances that I will take their comments away and consider the points that have been raised today.

I will also address the point about criminality. The standard immigration rules on criminality and other adverse behaviours apply to applications through the BNO route. However, all applications are carefully assessed against the latest country information, and guidance for caseworkers provides flexibility to ensure that overseas convictions for offences—particularly those not recognised in the UK—do not result in the automatic refusal of an application. I am aware of the concerns of those applying through the BNO route, and of the risk of their being refused on suitability grounds because of a conviction for what I think we can describe as politically motivated or trumped-up criminal charges in Hong Kong. I assure hon. Members that I am keeping the issue under review.

On the question of access to services, I thank hon. Members for their comments about the Government's welcome programme, which we have remained committed to and which is now entering its fourth year of funding. That very important programme enables Hongkongers to access support on a range of issues, including employment, education, housing and the English language. It helps them seek employment, build skills and learn more about life in the UK so they can play a bigger part in their local communities.

As the shadow Minister said, there is currently £1 million of funding for voluntary and community-sector organisations to deliver projects focused on employability and mental health and wellbeing. The Growth Company has been funded to deliver the Jobs for Hongkongers initiative, which will help BNOs in England find employment. I am aware of other good examples. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) talked about a scheme, and I would be interested to hear more about how those local initiatives are working.

International fees are a concern for those on the BNO route, who can study and work in virtually any capacity. Generally, to be eligible for student support, home fee status and fee caps, a student must have settled status in the UK, and ordinarily they must have been resident in the UK for three years prior to the start of their course. The majority of BNO status holders will be able to qualify for home fee status and student finance once they have obtained settlement in the UK, subject to meeting the normal eligibility requirements.

The eligibility criteria apply to all students, except persons granted international protection by the Home Office, but I have heard what hon. Members have said today.

On the Mandatory Provident Fund, hon. Members raised the very serious matter of the estimated £3 billion of funds alleged to have been frozen. We know that individuals who have chosen to take up the BNO visa route have difficulty drawing down early their pensions held in the Hong Kong Mandatory Provident Fund. Although documentary requirements for withdrawing funds early are a matter for the Hong Kong authorities, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has raised the issue directly with the Hong Kong Government and the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority. We have urged them to facilitate the early drawdown of funds, as is the case for other Hong Kong residents who move overseas permanently, and we have made it clear that such discrimination against BNOs is unacceptable. I will certainly keep that under review.

On security, we take the protection of Hongkongers' rights, freedoms and safety in the UK very seriously, and we continue to assess potential threats in the UK. We work closely across Government, as well as with the relevant agencies and law enforcement bodies, to protect persons identified as being at risk and ensure the UK is a safe and welcoming place for those who choose to settle here. I want to be clear that attempts by foreign Governments to coerce, intimidate or harm critics overseas are unacceptable. Freedom of speech and the other fundamental rights of all people in the UK are protected under domestic law, regardless of nationality. We will challenge where we must to protect our national security and values. We are also working to improve the UK's capability to understand and respond to the challenges and opportunities that China poses through an audit of the UK's relationship with China as a bilateral and global actor.

It is also worth saying in response to the cyber-security issues that have been raised that the National Security Act 2023 gives the police new powers to protect the public from these malign threats, including those actions that amount to transnational repression—I take the point about the need for a clear definition. The Act brings together vital new measures to protect the UK's national security, creating a whole suite of measures to enable our law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies to deter, detect and disrupt the full range of modern state threats.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I am conscious of time and I want to make a couple of final points before wrapping up.

A concern was raised about whether there were plans to shut down the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office, but its status is enshrined in primary legislation and there are no plans to change that framework.

On Jimmy Lai, we continue to call on Hong Kong authorities to immediately release British national Jimmy Lai. Mr Lai's case, as has been mentioned by the Prime Minister this week, is a priority for the Government. The Foreign Secretary raised Jimmy Lai's case in his first meeting with China's Foreign Minister at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in July. We continue to raise his case. UK diplomats from our consulate general in Hong Kong continue to attend his

[Seema Malhotra]

court proceedings on a regular basis and will continue to do so when the trial resumes in November. We are deeply concerned about the allegations about his treatment in prison and have sought reassurances on appropriate medical treatment.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West for securing the debate, and all hon. Members for their contributions. It has been an incredibly important, thoughtful and well-informed debate. It is important that we take this opportunity to reaffirm this Government's commitment to the people of Hong Kong and to the BNO route, which provides long-term safety and stability for Hongkongers in the UK.

2.52 pm

Mr Rand: I thank everyone for their contributions today. It is really encouraging to see the level of cross-party support on this vital issue. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), for his kind words about me, and for his contribution. I thank the Minister very much for her strong words in support of Hong Kong and her constructive engagement with the points raised in the debate.

We had some immensely powerful contributions from Members today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for being the first to raise the case of Jimmy Lai and I thank others who have spoken about that case. It was really encouraging to hear the Prime Minister's strong words on that case earlier in the week and to hear the Minister reaffirm those today.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall) for speaking so powerfully, as always, about the plight of those in Hong Kong. He brings an immense amount of experience to this debate and the discussion. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, for talking so powerfully about our fundamental values of freedom, the right to protest and the right to self-expression.

What unites us all is a belief in the importance of standing with Hongkongers, both at home and abroad, and that this country continues to offer Hongkongers a route out of oppression, to ensure that Hongkongers living in the UK feel secure and have an opportunity to build a better life here. I know that the Minister is personally committed to those aims, as are the Government. I am sure that those in the Hong Kong community following today's debate, including constituents of mine in Altrincham and Sale West, will be really encouraged by the contributions and the positive response of the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered visas, security and access to services for Hong Kongers living in the UK.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business Property Relief and Agricultural Property Relief

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Business Property Relief and Agricultural Property Relief.

I rise today to address a pressing issue affecting not only my constituents in Gordon and Buchan but rural communities and family-run businesses across the entirety of the United Kingdom. As we approach the autumn Budget, there is growing anxiety, yet to be put to bed, among farmers and family business owners about the potential changes to agricultural and business property reliefs. APR and BPR play a crucial role in securing the longevity of farming and family businesses. Without inheritance tax reliefs, the value of an individual's business assets will be chargeable at a full 40%. The rate of inheritance tax in the UK kicks in at a relatively low value in relation to the value of farming assets, even for a small farm, particularly when compared with that of other countries. There is speculation in the media, coupled with Government silence, on the future of these reliefs, which is causing profound problems.

In a meeting with the Country Land and Business Association just yesterday, I heard how some of their members are already taking rash and rushed decisions because of this matter, which will impact their businesses, tax position and operations for years to come. Its members—our constituents—fear the worst in terms of changes to APR and BPR in the Budget and the profound impact that may have on their businesses, which, in many cases, provide employment for their families and wider communities, and have done so for generations.

APR and BPR are not, as some would have us believe, just tax loopholes for the wealthy. Viewing those reliefs as fair game in a Budget shows a complete lack of understanding of their importance and function. APR and BPR are lifelines for hard-working family farms and entrepreneurs, who form the backbone of our rural communities and local economies the length of the country. These are same businesses that we MPs are always too delighted to be seen to visit and champion as pillars of our communities and for their hard-working, entrepreneurial spirit; it is now time that we put those words into actions. Many of these businesses would not survive a succession event without APR or BPR—it is that simple. There is a reason why the reliefs have been in place for almost 50 years, which is that they work and are needed. Without them, farming and family businesses would change, and the UK's rural business landscape would be unrecognisable.

Agricultural businesses are vital for not only economic activity but food production and security, land stewardship and environmental management. As farmers face ever-tighter margins from increased environmental obligations, spiking input costs and global market pressures, there is already considerable strain on farming profitability. It is important to understand that although farms have high asset values, they are often cash poor. In 2022-23, across all types of farms, 17% were failing to make a profit and 59% were taking home less than £50,000.

Even where a profit is made, it is usually directly reinvested back into the farm—the business—in order to increase efficiency, develop or adapt. Cash does not simply sit idly; it is usually invested into assets needed to grow the farm and allow it to function, be it via land, buildings or kit.

APR is also vital for ensuring that farms can be passed to the next generation without a crippling inheritance tax bill. The continuity of family farms is necessary for the maintenance of our cultural heritage and expertise and, crucially, generational stewardship of our countryside and responsibility for food production. Without APR, many families would be forced to sell their land or buildings or even split up the farm in order to pay inheritance tax bills, which, even for the most modest of farms, could be hundreds of thousands of pounds, if not in the millions. That would mean selling the very assets and losing the scale needed to operate and produce food, fundamentally undermining the viability of those businesses.

It is important to appreciate that farms do not operate in isolation; they typically engage with multiple businesses in close proximity to their holdings. In my recent meeting with the National Farmers Union Scotland, I was told about a farm in north-east Scotland that engages with no fewer than 92 separate businesses within a radius of just a few miles; those businesses all benefit from that one farm. The closure of a single farm will have a ripple effect throughout any local economy.

The average age of a farmer in the UK is 59, and 35% of farmers are aged over 65. We all know that it is common to see farmers still managing their holdings well into their seventh or eighth decades, but that means that, on family farms, a succession event—planned or otherwise—can hit very suddenly. Without the reliefs, we risk losing a generation of farmers, threatening the future of British agriculture. Many family businesses will simply cease to exist if they are removed. The impact will extend not just to landowners, but far beyond, to tenancies and the wider rural economy.

In a recent poll by the CLA of over 500 landowners and farmers, 86% said they were likely to have to sell some or all of their land upon a death if inheritance tax reliefs were scrapped, and 90% said that the UK's food security would be damaged in the long run. I find that really hard to disagree with. The potential loss of productive agricultural land and farmland has serious implications for our national food security, and I remind the Minister of the line in the Labour manifesto, that “food security is national security.”

Let us also consider the alternative: if large areas of land were sold to cover an IHT bill, who would be likely to buy that land? Would it be another farmer, who would also have to manage their own capital in light of their own family's IHT bill down the line, or a large corporate company, where boardrooms and bottom lines dictate the approach to environmental management, room for nature and food production? I do not think that that is the ownership and business structure of rural Britain that this Government, or indeed any of us, are striving for.

We must also consider the impact on tenants as well as landowning farmers. Any changes to APR that make it less appealing for a tenancy to be created will have a detrimental impact on tenants, the tenancy sector and the next generation of farmers.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I might have this wrong, but I understand that the Tenant Farmers Association has suggested that there could be scope for reforming these taxes in a way that is of benefit to long-term tenancies. What is the hon. Member's view on whether such reforms would be worthwhile?

Harriet Cross: I would obviously I have to see what the TFA suggested, but I think that we need to look at the agricultural sector as a whole. If land is being taken out of farming for any purpose, it is not going to be available for tenants, so if landowners are feeling compelled to sell their land because they have to cover an IHT bill, it does not matter what happens with reforms down the line; that land will not be available for tenants to access. I fully support the tenanted sector—it is a vital part of our farming sector—but, on its own, it will not be enough to keep land in production.

BPR is important for every family business the length and breadth of the country, and therefore in all of our constituencies. Family-owned businesses are the beating heart of the British economy. Across the UK, there are approximately 5.3 million family businesses, employing over 14 million people and contributing £225 billion per annum to the Treasury. BPR is especially vital for small family businesses—including many in my constituency of Gordon and Buchan—which form the backbone of our local economies, providing much needed local employment, stability and resilience in the face of economic and environmental challenges.

Businesses that rely on BPR to survive a succession event are often significant local employers, and their failure would have a knock-on effect on local services and on business rates, which are vital for local authorities. Other models of business ownership, such as plcs and those backed by private equity, do not face a tax charge on the change of ownership, so BPR is a vital mechanism to ensure that family businesses—85,000 of which are passed to the next generation each year—are at least on a level playing field.

About 77% of family small and medium-sized enterprises are first-generation businesses. Without BPR, these family firms would lose the opportunity to grow and transition into successful next-generation businesses. If, following a succession event, businesses effectively have to take a 40% hit on their finances or asset base to cover an IHT bill, what chance is there for them to secure longevity and flourish in the future? As we approach the Budget, I hope the Minister and his Government will take on board that APR and BPR are vital to the long-term planning and investment of rural areas and family businesses. It is not an overstatement to say that the future of rural communities and our food security depend on it.

In particular, the Government should focus on four things: providing clarity and reassurance on their intentions regarding APR and BPR; committing to maintaining those reliefs in their current form for at least the duration of this Parliament; commissioning an independent review on the wider economic and social impact of those reliefs beyond just the direct cost to the Treasury; and engaging meaningfully with rural communities, farmers and family business owners before pursuing any future changes.

[*Harriet Cross*]

APR and BPR are not mere tax reliefs; they are the foundation of a thriving, sustainable and entrepreneurial United Kingdom. They support our farmers and family businesses, pillars of our communities that have been there for generations. They ensure that businesses can continue to operate following a succession event and allow for the long-term planning necessary for farms and family businesses to develop and thrive. I look forward to hearing Members' contributions.

3.12 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (*Harriet Cross*) on securing this debate. We have already spoken briefly in an all-party parliamentary group meeting about the similarities between our constituencies. She and I both know the importance of a thriving agricultural sector, the jobs it provides, and the almost undefinable contribution it makes to the character of the constituency and to a community.

I am concerned because farmers in my constituency have told me that they have been dealing with the chaos of the economy for the last 14 years. They have been dealing with crashing consumer confidence and an international trading situation in this country that simply is not conducive to the long-term success of the agricultural sector. For example, the Australia and New Zealand trade deal was a betrayal of the sheep farmers in my constituency in particular and has threatened their long-term business prospects. I hope that the Minister not only responds to the points made in this debate but talks about how we can make sure that the economy is stable, secure and on firm foundations, and that we never again see our farmers sold down the river as they once were.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the Canadian deal has not been signed in the last 18 months in order to take account of the agricultural sector's concerns in particular? The pressing, immediate concern for which the Minister must provide a resolution today is how this Government are disposed towards agricultural property relief and business property relief. That is their concern now. The hon. Gentleman is making a political point—whatever happened previously, we have to focus on his Government's responsibility in the coming two weeks.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I have just been reminded by the Clerk that it is very unusual for a shadow Cabinet member to speak in a Westminster Hall debate as a Back Bencher. I will allow Joe Morris to respond, but apparently that is not the done thing.

John Glen: I sought advice on the matter from our Chief Whip prior to coming here, Dr Huq.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): It is not the Opposition Chief Whip's decision; it lies with the Chairman of Ways and Means. Our rule book says that it is highly unusual. I will allow Joe Morris to respond, but hopefully there will not be a back and forth between the shadow Cabinet and Back Benchers.

Joe Morris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his highly unusual intervention. I will make a brief university point and say that it is highly unusual to have a Mansfield College MP intervene on a Mansfield College MP; it is probably the first time that has happened in this Parliament.

John Glen: It certainly is.

Joe Morris: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point. I am glad that the last Government learned some of the lessons of the Australia trade deal and implemented them. It is important that we get an answer on APR and BPR. I am making a slightly political point, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman will humour me for it, but it is important that we maintain that international trade is an ongoing piece and the agricultural sector does not exist in isolation. None of these reliefs exist in isolation. Farming, more than anything, is an industry with concerns that sit between the Treasury, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Business and Trade. More than almost any other industry, it is reliant on good cross-party and cross-departmental working, and we need to ensure that the Government do that. I hope that we do not consider these things just in isolation but overall and together, and we must ensure that the Government are working towards securing them.

One of the main concerns that I picked up from my constituency is the inability of consumers to distinguish between British and foreign produce when it is badged up the wrong way. I hope the Treasury will listen to representations on how we can combat that kind of false advertising when foreign produce is repackaged as UK produce. How we keep the family farm going, and how we ensure that small farms are able to continue to produce in the Tyne valley, is deeply concerning to me. I have spoken to a lot of local farmers about land loss and about large corporations buying up prime agricultural land and using it to—I think it is fair to say—greenwash. That is genuinely a national issue that requires cross-party cohesion and cross-party solutions. My own hackneyed political point scoring is not going to help in that, but in the long term and in this Parliament, I would always welcome working to address that. However, I urge the Minister to remember that farms are businesses and they need long-term consumer confidence. They need an overall business climate that rewards investment and entrepreneurialism, but not one that is not built on sand. They need one that is built on secure, stable foundations and that is open to serious cross-party working.

When we look at how we get the rural economy growing, it is really important that both land-owning farms and tenant farms in particular can continue to employ people and that there is money going out of those farms into the local economy. I have spoken to my constituents: they have had to take certain crops out of production to grow those that need less manpower. They would have employed people to work those fields or work that livestock, but they have been forced to change by often badly designed initiatives from DEFRA, and we need to work cross-party to ensure that those initiatives are better designed in future. They have been forced into those measures that, over the course of many years, slowly bring their workforce down and lead to less money coming into the local economy. In his

response, I hope the Minister can ensure that the Treasury hears the pleas of rural communities. This issue is genuinely a concern across parties, and my constituents are very concerned about the ongoing removal of prime agricultural land from food production.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to make a speech. We will then calculate whether we need a time limit.

3.17 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) on securing a very timely debate. She has provided us with what is definitely my favourite euphemism, the “succession event”, and I think we know what that means in most cases.

This is a timely debate because we have had a lot of speculation in the media in recent weeks about the possibility of changes coming in the Budget very soon. There is very little that is certain in politics these days, but I am as near certain as anybody can be that, when the Minister comes to reply, he will say that he is not going to tell us anything about the Budget. I understand the reasons for that, which are essentially sound, long-standing and respected by all, but it illustrates the inadequacy of this as a way of effecting meaningful change. Without the ability to have a proper debate involving the Treasury, change will inevitably come in a haphazard and chaotic way, and it will bring with it many unintended consequences that will have an effect on not just farmers but the wider rural community. I should have said right at the start that I have my own interests in agriculture, which are in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and I remind the House of those.

There may be a case for reform, but this really is not the way to go about it. The hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan was right to say that farming is a capital-rich and revenue-poor industry. Of course, any changes in farming will have consequences that spread beyond agricultural businesses. What affects farmers will affect vets, agricultural merchants, local shops and post offices in some of the most economically fragile communities to be found anywhere in the country. My concern has long been—it is not exclusive to this Government—that the Treasury does not quite understand the way the rural economy works. It is a cliché, but true, to say that farming underpins just about everything in rural communities and the rural economy, whether environmentally—through the way in which land is managed, which has consequences for nature—or financially.

The Tenant Farmers Association provided a briefing for this debate, which said that it is already seeing consequences among its members:

“We are already seeing, first hand, concerns about how Inheritance Tax charges change the way that traditional estates have thought about the management of their agricultural land, and that is before there is any change to the Inheritance Tax regime. Rural estates with significant residential and mineral interests will want to ensure that they have sufficient business activity elsewhere on their estates to be able to qualify for BPR from Inheritance Tax across the whole of their estates. If APR was abolished this will make things hugely much more difficult for farm tenants.”

That important point gets right to the heart of the matter. That is why I am pleased that the hon. Lady, in framing this debate, covered APR and BPR, which work in an interlinked way. It also shows the responsibility we in politics have when we set hares running.

North of the border, for the last few years we have had an active and often welcome debate about land reform, but one of the consequences of that debate is that many agricultural land owners, instead of moving out and putting in tenants, have moved into grass lets. A lot of the larger landowners’ estates, in particular, have replaced the secure agricultural tenancies for which they had been known for generations with a much less secure system of tenure.

As the TFA says, there might be a case for reform. It suggests ways to reward longer tenancies of 10-plus years and more secure tenancies. We have to have that debate, but we cannot effect that in a meaningful way that looks at agricultural spending in the round once the decision has been announced in a Budget. There are many other influences at play. For example, in recent years we have had the reform of agricultural support payments in England and Wales, and that is now coming through in Scotland.

For decades, farmers have been told that they have to diversify—diversify, diversify, diversify—so they have renovated farm cottages and turned them into furnished holiday lets, and now they are being told that they are responsible for the housing crisis in the country and are being hit with furnished holiday let reform, which this Government appear to have inherited from the previous one.

Inheritance tax can be avoided by intra vires transfers, but the way they work can often be arbitrary. They can also have some difficult personal consequences when it comes to the transfer from one generation to the other, as the family interaction can be difficult.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan. I hope that when the Chancellor delivers the Budget next week, if this issue is under the Treasury’s active consideration, we will see the Government’s direction of travel and the overall picture that they want to achieve, rather than just one quick hit, because that could have serious consequences for family farms and rural communities across the country.

3.24 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) for securing this debate on agricultural property relief and business property relief. Like her, I represent a constituency with a large rural community of many farms and agricultural businesses, so I am acutely aware of just how important the relief is for the long-term viability of farming and the wider implications for UK food security.

There is already a recruitment crisis in the sector, which is heavily reliant on families to work in farming into the future. While I would, of course, encourage young people to look into agricultural and land-based courses such as the ones offered at the excellent Reaseheath College in my constituency, it is fair to say that farming is often in the blood, with the skills and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. If the

[*Aphra Brandreth*]

physical means to farm, the land and the property, are not passed down to the next generation, then we risk losing the people, knowledge and skills that we desperately need to keep the sector viable.

I have spoken to farmers, who are clear that changes to agricultural property relief would mean that land would have to be sold to cover the cost of subsequent tax bills. I know that that is the case across the country. According to a large CLA poll, 86% of farmers said that all or part of their land would need to be sold when they passed away, if agricultural property relief was removed. Farmers have already been through a challenging time. Rising costs for energy and fertiliser, inflation, and adverse weather are just some of the issues that farmers have faced in recent years. The Government need to stand by farmers and support them, not restrict and punish them as the removal of APR would do.

Across the House, we rightly say that food security is national security. Farmers need land to produce food. If the Government remove protections that are in place to exempt farm land from inheritance tax, it will be yet another step to putting our food security at greater risk. This is a very real problem that is pertinent to all of us, whether we are farmers or not, because all of us rely on food that is grown to feed our nation. Many farmers across Chester South and Eddisbury provide jobs directly and indirectly—for instance, through food production or hospitality—that rely on local produce. Farmers are also essential for land management and maintaining our environment.

This policy threatens the future of the countryside. I remind the Minister that he stood on a manifesto that committed to not raising taxes on working people. I would respectfully suggest that any change in the current rules and rates of agricultural property relief would be contradictory to that promise. Farmers are working people. They work incredibly hard, often without the recognition they deserve, and they must be supported, not penalised.

3.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure, as always, Dr Huq, to serve under your chairship. It has probably been more than once this week but, none the less, it is lovely to see you in your place. I thank the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) for setting the scene so well and giving us all an opportunity to make a contribution on an important issue. It is an honour to speak on a subject that is not just a matter of fiscal policy, but is of vital importance to the very backbone of the United Kingdom. I declare an interest as a farmer, landowner and member of the Ulster Farmers Union for some 40 years. I joined the Ulster Farmers Union not because it was in Northern Ireland, but because the insurance premiums were very cheap. They are maybe not quite as cheap now, but then no insurance is as cheap now as it is used to be, and that is a fact.

I can attest to the importance of agricultural property relief in ensuring the sustainability and longevity of farming enterprises across our great nation. In my constituency of Strangford, farming is not just an industry, but much more—it is a way of life. It is about generations

of families working the land, providing food, maintaining the landscape and contributing to the rural economy. More than that, it is about stewardship, which the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan referred to in her introduction. It is really important that we focus on that. Farmers are custodians of the countryside, caring for the environment while ensuring food production to feed the nation. That means everyone; not just the farmers, but everyone who lives in this great nation. Agricultural property relief plays a critical role in maintaining that balance, allowing farming families to pass on their land and business without crippling tax burdens.

Agricultural property relief is one of the key supports for farming families across the United Kingdom, and in Strangford it is essential. In Northern Ireland, agriculture is responsible for some £501 million in income, as of 2021—a substantial 8.3% increase from 2020. It is no exaggeration to say that agriculture is at the heart of our economy, and everyone has said it. Agriculture is critical to everyone. Not a person who has spoken so far has not said that about our rural community.

My constituency of Strangford is home to a vibrant agrifood sector that employs thousands of people through major employers such as Willowbrook Foods, Lakeland Dairies and Mash Direct. Those companies are household names. They are family businesses that started as farms and then diversified—something that the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred to. They have ensured the sustainability of our rural community. Without APR, those family-run enterprises could be forced to sell land and assets just to meet inheritance tax liabilities, potentially dismantling businesses that have been built up over generations. This issue is critical to the future of my constituency's farming community, and to those businesses.

Agriculture is not just a business; it is the fabric of rural life. We often talk about food security, environmental stewardship and rural economies, and yet without the right fiscal support, those pillars of our country are put at risk. That is why this debate is so important. APR helps farmers to plan for the future, ensuring that the next generation can take over the family farm without being forced into financial hardship. It allows them to focus on what they do best: producing high-quality food, maintaining biodiversity and contributing significantly to local economies.

We have a rich agricultural tradition. Our dairy farmers, sheep farmers, pig farmers and vegetable growers are among the best in the world and take immense pride in their work. Lakeland Dairies, which employs more than 250 people in my constituency, and Mash Direct, which employs more than 230, have been the cornerstones of our agrifood economy.

Let us not forget the Comber early, a potato with protected geographical indication status, which means it is recognised across Europe for its unique quality. It is grown right there in the fields of Strangford. Those enterprises are not just businesses; they are a way of life. It is about not just tradition, but innovation. Innovation is part of what farmers do. They are not just the boys who plough the fields and scatter the seed—that is almost like the hymn “We plough the fields and scatter”.

Let us take Mash Direct, for example. A family-run business that began in a kitchen 20 years ago now supplies some of the largest retailers in the United

Kingdom, including Asda and Spar. The business is forward-thinking. It has installed solar panels and invested in sustainable practices, all while providing hearty, healthy food at affordable prices. Lakeland Dairies, meanwhile, exports its milk products across the world and contributes to the economy. These are family businesses that started off in a very small way and have grown and created jobs. They are success stories, and we must ensure that the tax system supports their continued growth and does not hamper them.

This is why I am calling on the Government to ensure that agricultural property relief remains intact and that it is not reduced or removed as part of any future tax policy. We must give farmers the confidence to invest in their businesses, to innovate and to continue producing high quality food for our nation. The very last thing we need is for farms to be sold off piecemeal because families cannot afford the tax burden. Let us be clear. APR is not a loophole for the wealthy; it is a lifeline for farming families who are working hard day in and day out to maintain their land and their livelihoods.

In Strangford, where agriculture is not just a part of our economy but a part of our identity—it is who we are—support is vital. As we look to the future of UK farming post Brexit, with new trade deals, changing subsidy regimes and heightened environmental targets, we must ensure that the fiscal framework surrounding agriculture is robust and supportive. APR is a crucial part of that framework, allowing farmers to pass on their businesses, invest in new technologies and ensure that rural communities remain vibrant and sustainable.

Farmers in Strangford and across the United Kingdom are already taking steps to reduce emissions, embrace low-emission technology and promote biodiversity. However, those efforts cannot come at the cost of financial viability. Many of the improvements needed to reduce emissions, such as upgrading farm infrastructure, require significant investment, as the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan said. She set the scene very clearly. The money that is made must go back into the farms so that they can move forward.

APR helps to ensure that farmers have the financial security to make those investments. Without it, we risk failing not only our farming communities but our environmental goals. I say this to the Minister kindly—he knows that I do not criticise or give people a hard time, but I do make a point. The Secretary of State for the Environment has made it clear that Labour is committed to achieving environmental goals. The farmers whom I and others here represent are also committed to achieving those goals, but that can only happen if the money comes through for that purpose.

I want to mention the need for better protection of farmland from schemes such as solar farms and pylons, which can remove valuable agricultural land from production. While we must embrace renewable energy, we must also ensure that food production remains central to our land-use framework. There has to be a balance, as Members of both the previous and the current Government will understand. We need to strike the right balance between energy production and food security. Farmers should not be forced to choose between their livelihoods and environmental progress. Both things can, and must, go hand in hand.

I have spoken fairly quickly, and I think I have got more words in than anyone has ever done. Farming is at the heart of our nation, and agricultural property relief is at the heart of farming. Without APR, many of our farming families—those in Strangford and across this great nation—would face insurmountable challenges. The loss of that vital relief would be a blow not just to rural communities, but to our food security, economy and environment. Each of those is critical, so let us continue to back our farmers, protect our rural communities and safeguard our food security by maintaining agricultural property relief. I urge the Government to make that commitment and recognise that the future of farming in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland depends on it.

3.36 pm

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I join in the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) for securing this important debate. Like many Members, I am motivated to engage in it because I represent a rural constituency that is made up of many small and large farm holdings.

Without making this sound like my maiden speech, Suffolk is a beautiful rural constituency with a stunning landscape. It is known for its contribution to our food system, and it is home to many market towns where family-owned butchers, bakers and grocers source their produce from local farms. Even breweries do so. Adnams Southwold is in the next-door constituency, but it sources all the ingredients for its famous beers and other products from farms in the local area. One in seven jobs in Suffolk have some relationship to the food production industry. One only has to go to the Suffolk Show to see the importance of farms, farming and agriculture to our local economy. As a result, we have to take seriously the livelihood and financial sustainability of our farms.

It is worth remembering that farms are, as many Members have said, small businesses with tight margins and high capital costs. One way we could greatly threaten the long-term financial sustainability of farms, which are so integral to our economy and community, is to threaten the owners with a tax if they pass the family farm down to the next generation.

Let me explain why that is a bad idea. First, as with the taxation of many forms of capital, liquidity is being demanded from a resource that is fundamentally illiquid. As we have heard, the Government will fundamentally force many farms to sell off parcels of land, and when farm owners realise that it is hard to sell off small parcels of land, they will be forced to sell their whole holding. Don't believe me? Eighty-six per cent. of respondents to a poll of farmers conducted by the Country Land and Business Association said that they would have to sell some or all of their land if they were faced with a new IHT obligation.

Secondly, those who can shoulder the cost of a new tax on their farm and business will simply have to reallocate a lot of their capital away from more productive sources of investment, such as cattle, machinery and labour. That has grossly negative economic and social consequences. My next-door neighbour is a relatively well-heeled farmer who also uses his land to provide a

[Patrick Spencer]

wedding venue and rental properties—that is something we have heard about. If we place farmers under more financial stress, they will simply have to close down those businesses. Let us not forget that many of those businesses provide really important jobs and incomes and, fundamentally, pay tax in our economy. We are taxing one half of the equation only to take away from the other.

Thirdly, the proposal will yield an irrelevant amount of money in the long run. We have all read the report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that says that agricultural relief costs the Exchequer £400 million a year. To put it bluntly, I know that many people in the Treasury and Labour Members see landowners as rich rent seekers who invest in property to avoid IHT. But let us look at the contribution that people such as James Dyson have made to our food production industry by incorporating technology and environmental standards into the sector, or at the incredible impact of the Grosvenor group in restoring peatland and moorlands in parts of Cheshire and Lancashire. That will have a hugely positive impact on wildlife numbers and carbon emissions.

If the Treasury genuinely believes that we should tax farmers in the hope that they will release land to housing and property developers—trust me, we are not going to solve the housing crisis by building houses on farmland in Suffolk. It will be solved by investing in units in towns and cities, where young people really want to live and where footfall already exists. Such an argument ignores all the positive impact that many farmers have made, and it completely neglects the thousands of small families who are not rich and who may be forced to sell their farm despite having tended to the land for generations. The imposition of a new tax on inherited land will have a sad impact on family-owned farms, of which there are too many in my constituency to name. Many have spoken in recent years of the increasing difficulty of running their farms in the current economic climate. They have to negotiate a labyrinth of new environmental regulations, a new post-Brexit payment system, an energy crisis that has pushed their costs through the roof, higher interest rates and increasing competition from abroad.

To remove agricultural and business relief from these small family-owned farms could push many over the edge. What a loss that would be to our economy, to our communities and to the many families who have owned, farmed and maintained their land for generations, and who will continue to do so for generations to come.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the first Front-Bench spokesperson: Will Forster for the Liberal Democrats.

3.42 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Wanting to leave your children something is a natural part of being a parent. Right now, inheritance tax is quite unfair. Families face a tax rate that is very high by international standards. Tax-free allowances have been frozen for some time, while house prices and inflation have gone up significantly. It is understandable that people I have met on the doorstep in Woking over the years have said that they are worried about their family being caught by that tax, even though they are by no means wealthy. Meanwhile,

economists and policy experts have expressed concerns about the ways in which inheritance tax reliefs can be used. The aim of business property relief is to make sure that family businesses can pass from one generation to the next. I hope everyone here would agree that that is a worthwhile aim.

Woking is a town teeming with family businesses. We all have family businesses in our constituencies that are near and dear to our constituents and that enrich our areas not only economically but culturally, making them unique. We need to ensure that those family businesses are genuinely protected by new rules, so that they can continue from one generation to the next, and we need to ensure that they are genuinely sustainable so that the stewardship of the history and heritage of our local areas is maintained.

Experts point out that certain provisions within business property relief are not particularly well targeted at local family businesses or small businesses, which are usually the ones in most need of support. For example, it has been noted that 100% relief applies in the same degree to businesses of all sizes, from large corporations worth several billion to micro and small family shops or farms. There are also questions about accountancy practices that can give certain financial portfolios the same treatment as a local family-owned shop, pub or manufacturing business. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on these issues and on how the Government envisage supporting cherished family-owned companies that champion the heritage and local economy in my constituency and elsewhere.

It is equally important that family-owned farming businesses, which have been the focus of most contributions to this debate, be preserved and protected. Farming is vital to our rural communities, providing the foundation for our whole economy and our food security. We need to have the raw materials and to guarantee safety; as we live in a more dangerous world, we need to be able to feed ourselves. I would like to hear the Minister's views on how we can continue to support agricultural businesses, ensuring that they continue to operate as family businesses, creating jobs and adding value to their area. I also urge him to recognise the contribution of our farmers practically by accelerating the roll-out of the new environmental land management scheme, properly funding it with an extra £1 billion a year to support profitable, sustainable and nature-friendly farming.

After years of Conservative chaos and neglect, there is no doubt that our NHS and social care, our schools, our local authorities and our other public services desperately need more investment, so I can understand why the Government may look at different options for raising revenue. Our GPs are overstretched, our hospitals are overcrowded and our school buildings are crumbling, but at the same time families and pensioners are struggling with the rising cost of living.

The Conservatives put up their taxes by freezing tax thresholds for years. It would be wrong to ask residents to pay again to clear up the Conservative mess. The Liberal Democrats would therefore focus tax changes on making the system fairer, such as by reversing the Conservative party's tax cuts for big banks and imposing a proper windfall tax on the super-profits of oil and gas companies. Responsible public finances are essential to the stability, certainty and confidence that drive economic growth, and to getting mortgage rates under control.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): For His Majesty's loyal Opposition, I call Nigel Huddleston.

3.47 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) on securing this important debate. I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions: I was particularly entertained to hear everybody's friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) say that he does not give anybody a hard time. I warn the Minister that he can expect persistent, relentless and vigorous but polite nudging; it may not be defined as a hard time, but it certainly sometimes feels like that. It is very polite, I have to say.

A few other points were raised today, but I will not delve into all the issues. Under different circumstances, I would be happy to have a debate with the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) about international trade. Having negotiated some of the trade deals, I can reassure him that the NFU and others had a very strong voice and that we listened to them very carefully. Their opinions, views and points were very often made. We tried to put safeguards in place; that has not always been acknowledged, but that is a debate for another day. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster), raised a bunch of other issues—again, a debate for another day.

Just two weeks before the Government deliver the Budget, I am aware that the Minister will be unwilling—and, to be fair, unable—to comment in detail on the issues that have been raised today. Nevertheless, I think it important that he and the Treasury team hear and reflect on the concerns and fears that Members have expressed on behalf of their constituents and other stakeholders who could be considerably affected by any changes to inheritance tax relief and particularly to business property relief and agricultural property relief.

My party supports wealth creation, which is important and which helps to pay for our public services, but we also understand the importance of ensuring that wealthy individuals make a fair contribution and pay tax appropriately. Earlier this year, the Minister and I had a debate about the broader issues of inheritance tax in which we recognised that we do not have a wealth tax in this country, but that there are taxes on wealth. Inheritance tax is an important such tax: it brought in something like £7.6 billion last year.

We have a progressive tax system. The top 1% of income taxpayers pay 28% of all income tax, so they contribute a huge amount. The vast majority of estates do not pay inheritance tax: only about 5% do so, because there are so many exemptions and reliefs. It is important to recognise those reliefs as legitimate. There is abuse in the tax system—there are loopholes that need closing, and HM Revenue and Customs, the Treasury and others spend a lot of time closing them—but let us not forget that the reliefs are there for a reason. Business property relief and agricultural property relief are perfectly legitimate reliefs. Without them, many businesses, including farms, would cease to exist or would be broken up on the passing of their owner. The reliefs form a critical part of overall business planning and especially of succession planning.

Many businesses, particularly small businesses, have expressed anxiety about the prospect of changes to or the abolition of business property relief. Currently, business relief is applied at either 50% or 100% on qualifying businesses when working out how much inheritance tax should be paid. That allows businesses and business assets or shares to be passed on to the next generation without the need to jeopardise the viability or even existence of vital businesses. Without that relief, many more family-owned businesses would have to be sold or broken up to pay a big inheritance tax bill. Prior to the election, many businesses and business bodies, including the Federation of Small Businesses, believed that they had heard and received commitments and assurances on inheritance tax and BPR from the Labour party. Many small businesses in my constituency and across the country seek the reiteration of those assurances.

BPR also plays an important part in attracting and retaining certain investments, for example in the alternative investment market. According to some analysts, the removal of BPR from the alternative investment market could result in a loss of between £14 billion and £21 billion in value to UK shareholders and would permanently damage the AIM. Given the importance of inheritance tax relief to the AIM, they are also looking for the Government to confirm its continuation. Uncertainty and speculation around its continuation may already be jeopardising investment.

Many hon. Members' speeches have focused on agricultural property relief, because it is vital to the continuation of our rural way of life and our countryside. The NFU, the Country Land and Business Association and others are concerned about the renewed uncertainty and the impact on farming, including on tenant farmers. Some fear that APR may be removed and that some form of BPR may be kept, but even that could deter landowners from letting their land to tenants; the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) spoke about some of the further considerations and concerns for tenant farmers in particular.

As many colleagues have said, many farms would simply not survive the imposition of inheritance tax. Families who have farmed the land for generations could be forced to give up their businesses, their farms and their homes, which could jeopardise the sustainability of the rural economy, as well as undermining efforts towards greater self-sufficiency in food production and compromising environmental goals broadly agreed by both the former Government and the current Government.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs confirmed last year, when he was the shadow Secretary of State, that the Labour party had no plans to change inheritance tax, including APR, if Labour won the election. Sadly, speculation has since arisen, and I do not believe that further assurances have been given by the Secretary of State or the Treasury. If the Minister can provide any certainty or even an indication to provide additional confidence, I and many of my constituents will welcome it, as will many other hon. Members' constituents, many farmers, many investors and many business owners across the country.

Labour did not mention APR or BPR in its manifesto, nor did it make statements about them during the election campaign, but it clearly stated that it would not increase taxes on working people. As we have heard today, farmers and family business owners are very

[Nigel Huddleston]

clearly working people; my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) made that point very well.

Given all the comments we have heard from the Labour party, I hope the Minister agrees that it is perfectly reasonable to assume that there are no plans, and should be no plans, to change the inheritance tax relief system, especially because those reliefs play such an important part in investment decisions and business planning. I therefore look forward to the Minister's speech providing at least some of the reassurances that we seek today.

3.55 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dr Huq. Let me join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) on securing the debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions—including the advice from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), on what to expect in my new role from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

As many Members have rightly highlighted, there has been a great deal of speculation in recent weeks about potential changes to taxation in the Budget, including to the reliefs that we are debating today. Hon. Members will understand—indeed, many of them acknowledged in their speeches that they understand—that I cannot add to that speculation. The Budget is on 30 October, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will set out any changes to the tax system then, in the normal way. However, ahead of that, I welcome this opportunity to hear Members' views on this matter.

Let me start by briefly setting out the context for this Budget. Following the spending audit in July, the Chancellor has been clear that difficult decisions lie ahead on spending, welfare and taxation to address the £22 billion black hole that we inherited from the previous Government. Decisions on how to address that will be taken at the Budget in the round. It is crucial that we get the public finances back on a firm footing so that we can restore economic stability. On those foundations, we will boost investment, increase growth across the UK and improve public services. That is the prize ahead and how we will make people across Britain better off.

Let me turn to how inheritance tax operates in the UK tax system. Inheritance tax, as other Members have said, is a wealth transfer tax and applies to the estate of the deceased. Transfers made in the seven years before death are also taken into account. The estates of all individuals benefit from a £325,000 nil-rate band. The residence nil-rate band is a further £175,000 and is available to those passing on a qualifying residence on death to their direct descendants, such as children or grandchildren. That means that, altogether, qualifying estates can pass on up to £500,000. Furthermore, the qualifying estate of a surviving spouse or civil partner can pass on up to £1 million without an inheritance tax liability, because any unused nil-rate band or residence nil-rate band is transferable to the surviving spouse or civil partner.

Above those thresholds, the headline rate of inheritance tax is 40%, but it is important to remember that that rate is charged only on the part of the estate that is above the threshold, and after the application of reliefs. That is obviously the subject of today's debate, so let me turn first to business property relief. That relief is a long-standing part of the inheritance tax system. It is designed to ensure that businesses need not be broken up or sold on the death of an owner in order to pay an inheritance tax liability. That reflects concerns that there may not always be enough liquid assets in the business to pay the tax. Subject to certain qualifying conditions, the relief generally applies to unquoted shares and interests in a business. It also applies to shares designated as "not listed" on a "recognised stock exchange", such as shares that are quoted on AIM, as mentioned by the shadow Minister. The rate of business property relief is usually 100%, but can be 50% in some circumstances. Until March 1992, the maximum rate of the relief was 50% and there was a lower rate of 30% alongside that. Hon. Members may be interested to know that the cost of the relief has risen from £685 million in 2019-20 to a forecast £1.3 billion in 2023-24.

Agricultural property relief is also a long-standing part of the system. It has a similar purpose to business property relief, although the main benefit is to ensure that relief is available when land is let to tenant farmers, as we heard from various hon. Members today. This is largely because owner-occupiers of agricultural land also qualify for business property relief. Again, the rate of agricultural property relief is usually 100%, but can be 50% in some circumstances, and as with business property relief, lower rates existed before 1992. The cost of this relief has risen from £320 million in 2019-20 to a forecast £365 million in 2023-24.

There are many different views on these reliefs. Stakeholders, including Family Business UK and the Country Land and Business Association, have argued strongly against any prospect of the reliefs being abolished. Other organisations are in favour of changes to the reliefs, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggesting that a cap on such reliefs could allow those passing on small farms or businesses to be taken out of inheritance tax, while preventing agricultural and business investments from being used to avoid it. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), whom I thank for his contribution, said that there may be a case for certain reforms to agricultural property relief. Of course, the previous Government had views on these reliefs. I understand from reports in the *Telegraph* that the previous Government considered abolishing these reliefs as part of reforms to the system.

I welcome the opportunity today to hear from Members on their views, particularly on agricultural property relief, but also on issues relating to farmers and their constituents more widely. The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) rightly highlighted the importance of food security for this Government and its importance in our policy making. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—in nudging me gently, to quote the shadow Minister—spoke eloquently about the importance of farming in his constituency and in the economy of Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) spoke of some of the wider challenges facing the farming community in recent years, not least energy

bills. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) is proving to be a very effective constituency MP already, raising a number of important issues on behalf of those he represents, as well as drawing attention to the wider significance of having economic stability and security for farmers and everyone in his constituency.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister reminds us—it is our fault for doing this—that we have focused very much on the family farm as the unit of concern, because that is what concerns most of our constituents. However, a lot of agricultural land is, in fact, owned by bodies such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, of which I am a member. The RSPB is never going to have a succession event, to join the hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) in using that expression. The consequence of abolition could be that two farms right next door to each other—one owned by a charity or an institution of that sort, and the other owned by a family—would be left having to farm in very different economic circumstances. Is that really fair?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point, although he presupposes he knows what will happen to agricultural property relief, which, as I set out earlier, I cannot comment on further. He will have to wait a couple of weeks, perhaps, to have further conversations about what the Government will do in this space. I thank him and all hon. Members for their comments today, because it has been an interesting debate. As we have heard, the issue generates some strong views among many of our constituents and the Members present, who represent them.

I understand that there are many different views on what the Government should do, and the debate has allowed me to hear them. As always, the Government welcome all opinions and keep all taxes under review. However, I return to my earlier point: the Chancellor will, of course, announce changes to the tax system at the Budget. There is not long to wait.

4.3 pm

Harriet Cross: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up this debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions and the Minister for his closing remarks. A constant theme of today's debate has been the importance of family businesses and family farms and the vital role they play in our rural economy. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) rightly said and, of course, knows well from his ultra-rural island constituency and communities, the interconnection between farms and other local businesses cannot be denied. Any impact on farming impacts everything else, whether that is marts, vets or suppliers—the knock-on effects are endless.

I fully agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), and echo her words about the Government's commitment to not increase taxes on working people. If farmers and family businesses are not the pure definition of “working people”, I really do not know what is. Similarly, I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) about the need for cross-party working on this issue; as we all strive to secure a stable rural environment for the economy and employment, that is really important. We should absolutely work on a cross-party basis as we go forward.

Farms and businesses must adapt and innovate to survive across generations. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) correctly identified, the ability of farms and family businesses to do so will be severely hampered by changes to APR and BPR—they must be able to survive across generations, as well as during single generations. Put very simply, people need cash in order to pay a tax bill, and they need a lot of cash to pay a very large tax bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) put it so succinctly, asking many farmers and family businesses to pay a tax bill from an illiquid asset is very difficult: they do not have liquid to play with.

As I said, I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that we are less than two weeks out from the Budget, and therefore he is completely unable to confirm or deny rumours, but I hope the concerns that have been raised today have been heard and will be considered in good faith, because they are not just the concerns of people in this Chamber. They are the concerns of our constituents—of farmers and small and family businesses the length and breadth of the country. The Minister pointed out that the cost of BPR has risen to £1.3 billion, but that compares very favourably with the £225 billion of tax income that family businesses contribute to the Exchequer each year.

I will conclude by reiterating my calls for clarity on this matter, maintenance of these reliefs, and meaningful engagement with affected communities on any such matters going forward. Today's contributions have strengthened the case for action in this area: our rural communities, family businesses, food security and stewardship of our countryside all depend on the certainty that those reliefs provide. I thank all Members for their contributions to today's important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Business Property Relief and Agricultural Property Relief.

4.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Thursday 17 October 2024

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Infrastructure Planning Application: North Lincolnshire

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by North Lincolnshire Green Energy Park Ltd for development consent for the construction and operation of a combined heat and power enabled energy generating development, with an electrical output of up to 95 megawatts, incorporating carbon capture, associated district heat and private wire networks, hydrogen production, ash treatment, and other associated developments on land at Flixborough industrial estate, Scunthorpe.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Planning Act 2008 to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the North Lincolnshire green energy park application is 18 October 2024.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 14 March 2025 for deciding this application. This is to ensure there is sufficient time for the Department to consider and consult interested parties on a residual waste infrastructure capacity note that officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs intend to publish by the end of 2024.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS144]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 17 October 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	974	CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Access to Places of Worship.....	976	Filming Locations: Scottish Highlands.....	961
Communication with Diocese Leaders	982	Gambling: Harmful Effects	967
Former Church Sites.....	975	Grassroots and Non-league Football.....	963
Independent Safeguarding Board Review	976	Grassroots Athletics Clubs	966
Interfaith Understanding.....	977	Multi-sport Grassroots Facilities	962
Ordination of Women: 30th Anniversary	978	Secondary Ticketing and Dynamic Pricing.....	969
Recognition of Positive Impact	977	Topical Questions	970
Restoration Funding.....	979	Visitor Levies	961
Small Rural Communities.....	974	Youth Services	964
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	961	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	980
Creative Industries: Artificial Intelligence.....	965	Access to Period Products	980
English Football: Financial Sustainability.....	967	Restoration and Renewal.....	981

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 17 October 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>
ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO	55WS
Energy Infrastructure Planning Application:	
North Lincolnshire	55WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 24 October 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 17 October 2024

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 961] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission

Business of the House [Col. 983]

Statement—(Leader of the House)

Criminal Justice System: Capacity [Col. 1005]

Statement—(Shabana Mahmood)

Government's Childcare Expansion [Col. 1016]

Statement—(Stephen Morgan)

International Investment Summit [Col. 1026]

General debate

Telegraph Poles: Planning Permission [Col. 1066]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Hongkongers in the UK: Visas, Security and Services [Col. 379WH]
Business Property Relief and Agricultural Property Relief [Col. 402WH]
General Debates

Written Statement [Col. 55WS]
